

The Biblical Doctrine of Hell

I. Introduction

- A. The Current Controversy: For most of 2000 years of church history men of faith have held to the teaching of the eternal punishment of the wicked. Currently, among evangelical Christians, some scholars of renown are espousing the position known as annihilationism. This is the belief that the wicked ultimately cease to exist, i.e. punishment is not eternal. These men are Clark Pinnock, John R. Stott, Phillip E. Hughes (now deceased), and John Wenham. This view is also held by Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The World-wide Church of God (Armstrongism).
- B. Main Questions associated with the teaching of Eternal Punishment, i.e. Hell:
1. Is hell a reality? Can educated people in this day and age really believe in a literal hell?
 2. How can a loving God confine people to such punishment?
 3. Is hell a literal physical place, or does it exist only in the spiritual dimension?
 4. Is hell forever? Or, are its victims ultimately destroyed?
 5. Will people in hell ever have a second chance?
 6. Are there degrees of punishment in hell?
 7. What is hell like?

II. Main Passages of Scripture (NIV). Emphasis ours.

Isa. 66:24. ...*of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.*

Dan. 12:2. *Multitude who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.*

Matt. 3:7. ...*Who warned you to flee the coming wrath?*

Matt. 3:10. ...every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matt. 3:12. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.

Matt. 5:22. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement. Again, anyone who says, 'Raca,' is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matt. 5:29. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (Repeated in vs. 30.).

Matt. 7:13. Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction...

Matt. 8:12. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Matt. 8:29. What do you want with us, Son of God? they shouted. Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?

Matt. 10:15. I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgement than for that town. (Note this may be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.) See also Luke 10:14.

Matt. 10:28. 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 soul and body in hell.

Matt. 11:22. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgement than for you. (This and verse 23 may also be a reference to 70 A.D.).

Matt. 12:32. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or the age to come.

Matt. 12:36,37. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgement for every careless word they spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

Matt. 13:30c, 40. ...*At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned. ...As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.*

Matt. 13: 47c-50. *Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad fish away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. See also Luke 13:28.*

Matt. 18:8,9. ...*It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell.*

Matt. 22:13. *Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'*

Matt. 23:33. *You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?*

Matt. 25:30. *And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Matt. 25:41. *Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*

Matt. 25:46. *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*

Mark 9:43-48. *If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.*

Mark 14:21. *The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born. See also Matt. 18:6; 26:24; and Luke 17:2.*

Luke 16:22b,23a. *The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment,*

John 3:16. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

John 3:18. *Whoever believes in him is not condemned... .*

John 3:36. *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*

John 5:28,29. *Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out--those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.*

Acts 1:25b. *[W]hich Judas left to go where he belongs.*

Rom. 2:5,6. *But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's Wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done.*

Rom. 2:8,9b. *But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil:... See also vs. 12 and 16.*

Rom. 9:22. *...vessels of His wrath---prepared for destruction.*

I Cor. 1:18. *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are Perishing...*

II Cor. 5:10. *For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

II Thess. 1:9. *They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord...*

Heb. 6:2. *...instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgement.*

Heb. 9:27. *Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face the judgement,... .*

Heb. 10:26,27. *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*

Heb. 10:29b, 30.31. *How much severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot... . For we know him who said, It is mine to avenge; I will repay, and again, The Lord will judge his people. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Heb. 10:39. *But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.*

Heb. 12:29. *...for our God is a consuming fire.*

II Pet. 2:6-9. *...if he condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly...if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement, while continuing their punishment.*

Jude 7. *In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.*

Rev. 14:9-11. *If anyone worships the beast the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength in the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. See also 19:3.*

Rev. 20:10. *And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of fire of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*

Rev. 20:14,15. *Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

III. The Duration of Hell

A. Annihilationism (also called *Conditional Immortality*)

1. Variations (three types)

- a. The unsaved cease to exist at physical death. Immortality is not a characteristic of humans. It is only acquired at conversion.
- b. The unsaved are resurrected for the Last Judgement, receive their sentence, and then are condemned to eternal death, which means that they pass out of existence.
- c. The unsaved are resurrected for the Last Judgement, sentenced to hell, which is of limited duration depending on the sins in this life. At the end of the penalty, the wicked are annihilated. This view reasons that the sins of this life are of a finite nature, therefore the penalty is also finite.

2. Arguments

- a. The word *destruction* in Scripture means *cease to exist*. Those who hold this position say it would be strange of Scripture to speak of the *sinner's destruction* if in fact they are not destroyed.
- b. The imagery of hell as eternal fire is not to cause pain, but to secure destruction, which fire is known to do. Fire consumes what it burns.
- c. Eternal punishment would be disproportionate to sins committed in time. The appeal here is made to divine justice. Punishment that never ends does not seem fair. The punishment must match the crime.

- d. The eternal existence of the impenitent in hell would be hard to reconcile with God's promises of final victory over evil. In other words, how can Scripture say that every knee will bow and tongue confess when some (those in Hell) will not. Metaphysical evil will still be present in the universe.

B. Eternal Punishment

1. Supporting arguments

(Some of the arguments are logical; some are Scriptural)

- a. For 2000 years of Church History this has been the teaching of the church. While this is not an infallible guide to doctrine, a red flag should always be raised when a teaching disagrees with what the Holy Spirit has taught the Church throughout its history. The majority of the church's great theologians taught that the punishment of the unconverted was eternal.
- b. *Destruction* does not necessarily mean a final state of non-existence. It can also connote a state of existence, and the state is specified by language qualifying that existence. This is evident in the following passages: Matt. 10:28, and Luke 12:5. Hence *destruction* can mean *a state of ruin*.
- c. If Judas' final end was to be his soul's annihilation how is his final state worse than if he had never been born? Matt. 26:24.
- d. The argument that eternal punishment is inconsistent with God's character is contradicted by Scripture. In Rev. 20:10, at least three individuals are said to be doomed to eternal punishment (The devil, the beast, and the false prophet). These too, are finite creatures who sinned in time, and it says *they experience no rest day and night*. This language is hardly in keeping with annihilation. It also says in the same passage that the same fate awaits the unrepentent.
- e. In Matt. 25:26, the same word for *eternal* is used with both *life* and *punishment*. Our Lord is using a parallelism here, and if *life* is

unending, so is the *punishment*. Also, the Greek word used here for *punishment* (*kolasis*) never means *annihilation*.

- f. In Jn 3:36, it says *the wrath of God remains on him* (the unbeliever). The Greek tense indicates continuing action.
- g. The annihilationists fail to explain why there is an intermediate state, or why the unbeliever experiences torment in this state. This is clearly taught in Luke 16, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.
- h. Jesus' plea to cut off hands and feet rather than risk eternal punishment would not make sense if annihilation were meant. Matt. 18:8,9.
- i. How can there be weeping and gnashing of teeth in hell if annihilation were meant? The obvious suggestion is conscious pain and woe. Matt. 22:13, *et al.*
- j. It is incomprehensible how there could be degrees of punishment (see Luke 12:47-48, Matt. 11:22,24 and Rev. 20:12,13.) if annihilation takes place immediately after physical death or after the judgement.
- k. Romans 2:8,9 says there will be *wrath* and *anger*, and *trouble* and *distress* for those who do evil. It is difficult to see how these promises can harmonize with cessation of existence.
- l. I Cor. 1:18 says *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...* *Perishing* is present middle voice. The use of this tense is awkward, even misleading, if annihilation were meant.
- m. Heb. 9:27 definitely refutes the idea that annihilation occurs immediately following physical death.
- n. The annihilationist argues that *burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire* in Matt. 3:12 is not one of torment but one of consuming with a view to annihilation. But the question remains: why use the word *unquenchable*? If the chaff is instantly consumed

by the fire there would be no need for it to be unquenchable!

o. In Isa. 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 it is said that *their worm does not die*. The worms are maggots, and it is obviously a figure of speech. But why say of the unrepentent that *their worm does not die*, if annihilation is in view?

p. In Matt. 8:29 it would appear the demons believe it is conscious torment that is meant and not annihilation that awaits them.

Q. It escapes us as to just how annihilation can be conceived of as being punishment. It would seem to be a great escape!

2. Summation of Arguments

It seems clear that from the abundance of Scripture that divine judgement is certain, just, and eternal.

IV. The Justice of Eternal Punishment

A. It is a biblical principle that the penalty inflicted must be commensurate with the evil done. The annihilationists charge that eternal punishment is therefore unjust. Even if we accept this argument, annihilationism is inconsistent, because the effects of annihilation are also eternal! In our opinion, those holding to forms of annihilation do not fully grasp the righteousness and holiness of God, nor the infinite offense of sin in His perfectly created universe. The doctrine of eternal punishment we believe is consistent with God's character.

B. God is not a sadist who enjoys tormenting people. *God is not willing that any should perish* (II Pet. 3:9). The eternal death sentence is retributive in nature. God not only gives people what they deserve *but what they desire*. In the OT, the Children of Israel succumbed to the Babylonian mystery religions. God finally said: *You like Babylonian religions so much I'll send you to Babylon!* When men shut God out of their lives God simply gives what they themselves have opted for--eternity without God. Retribution means that the sinner gets what he deserves; no more no less. C.S. Lewis said *Sin is man's saying to God*

throughout life, "Go away and leave me alone." Hell is God's finally saying to man, You may have your wish. It is God's leaving man to himself, as man has chosen.

V. What is Hell Like?

A. The imagery

1. Although we cannot be certain, it seems likely that the Bible's description of hell is given in symbolic language. The writers are using the most extreme imagery possible to describe torment, i.e. fire and darkness, and both these figures are coupled with adjectives of extremity, such as *unquenchable* fire and *outer darkness*. While the description may consist of symbols one should bear in mind that the reality is far worse.
2. The hellishness of hell is something that sinful mortals can never fully comprehend. Someone once said that even a spiritual Christian has more in common with Hitler than with Jesus Christ. What exactly would a condition be like which is totally absent of God's presence? A total negation of common grace?
3. From the biblical description, I think we can conclude at least the following; Hell will be solitary confinement, a place of perfect memory recall concerning all God's revelation, and a knowledge that he is confined by his own choice. It will be a place of physical and mental torment, a place devoid of all pleasure, love, joy, beauty, sensory perception (except pain), no purpose, no light, and no hope!

B. Conclusion

We believe the doctrine of annihilationism arises from time to time as a result of human speculation as to how we wish God were rather than what His word says He is. To embrace a doctrine of annihilationism is in our opinion, a serious departure from orthodoxy. Its view of deity is clouded, and is only a step away from soteriological universalism.

When one contemplates the many biblical passages (which is why we included them earlier) on the subject of eternal punishment there will be two responses:

(1) A hatred for the biblical God, or an attempt to remake Him. (2) The response of the redeemed can only be to raise hands heavenward in praise for His unmerited grace. The redeemed know that they deserve hell; they know that God's righteous Son experienced the wrath of God in full measure in their place. To the extent that believers comprehend the grace of God and the reality of hell they will have an unending desire to praise God for all eternity, and they will have an unending compassion for the most heinous sinner.

WHERE, O DEATH IS YOUR VICTORY? WHERE, O DEATH IS YOUR STING?

VI. For Further Study

Buis, H. *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment.*

Hendricksen, William. *The Bible on the Life Hereafter.*

Hoekema, A. *The Bible and the Future.*

Morey, Robert. *Death and the Afterlife.*

Toon, Peter. *Heaven and Hell.*