

“The Reality of Hell and Everlasting Punishment”

The discussion of the reality of hell and everlasting punishment is one that can become quite passionate as people both seek to bring about a theodicy in their devotion to the Lord. It seems that there is a common accusation that each of the sides are seeking to present only a certain aspect of God’s character at the expense of another. Is the love of God the attribute that relegates all others to subservient status or is it instead the holiness of God? It is my view that it is not necessary to “divide” God’s attributes into those that are more important, prominent, or appealing, but instead to see that God’s purpose in this world is to reveal Himself through all of His attributes but with overarching intent of bringing glory to Himself. Thus, whatever God does in this world whether it is creation, redemption, judgment, graciousness, etc. it is all meant to occur in perfect harmony to bring glory to the fullness of His being (Numbers 14:21; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Romans 11:33-36). I will argue that the Scriptural evidence is overwhelming in affirming the actual existence of hell as well as its eternity.

There are variations of those that deny the above propositions. The standard arguments usually fall into some form of annihilationism or universalism. It seems quite easy for those who have a high view of the inspiration of Scripture to reject universalism when so much of biblical teaching clearly contradicts the assertion that everyone will be saved. The fact that Jesus contrasts two different paths, one leading to destruction and the other leading to life teaches us that not all will be saved (Matthew 7:13-14; 21-22). Both Jesus and Daniel make reference to the truth of the resurrection; some will be to contempt (Daniel 12:2) or condemnation (John 5:29) and others to life (Ibid.). Even showing that one person has been condemned undermines completely the idea of

universal salvation (Judas was lost, John 17:12). While some universalists deny the authenticity of Jesus' statements regarding the condemnation of unbelievers (e.g. Matt 25:41, 46), Paul Helm shows that their viewpoints ultimately cast into doubt the character of Jesus Himself and thus fail to be persuasive.¹

As it relates to annihilationism, it can be defined as that belief that does not adhere to eternal punishment, but that unbelievers will simply cease to exist at the time of their punishment. There are those who argue that there is conscious punishment, but it is not eternal, while others argue for no conscious punishment at all.² The main issue then for annihilationism is whether this punishment is eternal *and* conscious.

It is well known that the modern term *hell* is a gloss of the Hebrew word *sheol* and the Greek word *hades*. Hell has the unfortunate reputation of referring to that which burns with fire and brimstone only. On a side note it is easily understandable why some would argue with the English version of the Apostles Creed. Did Jesus die and go to hell (as in our modern understanding) or did He die and go to a place called Hades (as it was originally written in the Greek)? Richard Bauckham summarizes well the various and wide ranging uses of Hades in ancient literature. Yet he does acknowledge that during NT times, it came to be seen as the abode of the wicked dead awaiting judgment where as the righteous went immediately into the presence of God.³ It is also important to note that even though Hades was a place of torment (Luke 16:19-31), it was never meant to be permanent, but instead will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Revelation 20:13-14).

Additionally, the NT describes the final place of judgment or "hell" as a lake of fire often

¹ Helm, Paul. "Universalism and the Threat of Hell." *TrinJ* 4 NS (1983), pp. 35-43.

² Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1994), p. 1150. Grudem holds to eternal punishment, but summarizes the various annihilationism viewpoints.

³ Bauckham, Richard. "Hades." *ABD* no 3. New York : Doubleday (1992), pp. 14-15.

associated with Gehenna. This *Gehenna* is preexistent (Matt 25:41) and its fire is reserved for the destruction of the wicked (Matt 5:22; 13:42, 50; 18:9 = Mark 9:43). Its punishment is eternal (Matt 25:41, 46) and the fire will not be quenched (Mark 9:43, 48). Hades receives the soul only (Acts 2:27, 31) whereas Gehenna receives both body and soul (Matt 10:28; cf. Luke 12:5).⁴ It further can be described as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt 8:12; 13:50) and exclusion from heavenly light, rest, and happiness (8:12; 22:13).⁵ As it seems reasonable to see *Gehenna* as connected to the lake of fire, we can then add that it will be a place that burns with fire and brimstone (Rev 19:20; 20:10; 21:8) and is called the place of the second death (20:14; 21:8). It is in this place that the beast, the false prophet, the devil, death, hades, all those not written in the book of life, and the wicked will be cast into (19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8).

It has been demonstrated succinctly, but Scripturally, that there does exist an actual place of punishment, called in our modern vernacular, hell. The next question to be asked is whether this place is deemed to be an eternal place where punishment continues against the conscious wicked. Again there are many scriptural admonitions that would suggest the answer is positive. Jesus, in His warnings against the dangers of entering *Gehenna*, noted that in the place the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:47-48). We are told that those who worship the beast will be judged and their torment will go up forever and ever (Rev 14:9-11). The beast, false prophet, and the devil will also be tormented in this place forever and ever (20:10). Jesus comments that at the time of the judgment, some will go off into everlasting life, while others will go into everlasting punishment (Matt 25:41, 46).

⁴ Watson, Duane F. "Gehenna." *ABD* no 2. New York: Doubleday (1992), p. 927.

⁵ Mueller, John. *Christian Dogmatics*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, (1934), pp. 635-636.

So what can we say towards those who advocate annihilationism? Although this paper is not a full-blown response to this belief, it can be said that regardless of the motives behind this position, the arguments for it are not persuasive. One could bring up the present torment of the rich man in Luke 16:19-31. Millard Erickson is correct in saying that this story does not fully reprove annihilationism in that it only shows that there is conscious torment after death, but it does not deny a latter possible ceasing of existence.⁶ Yet, the main arguments usually run along the lines that God is too loving to allow this sort of punishment. It would seem quite unfair to put time limits on the love of God as it contrasts with His holiness. What would be said of the one who lived during the time of the flood and has been in punishment now for thousands of years? That is a long time in anyone's view of punishment even though it surely doesn't compare with eternity. Yet it still somehow violates the spirit of their argument. Erickson goes on to say that the main challenge annihilationists have is the parallelism of Matthew 25:46 where some go into everlasting life while others go into everlasting punishment. The weight of this literary structure is something that even universalists must admit is persuasive, but also at the same time reject it due to their loyalties.⁷

There are others who argue that all the references to eternal punishment are trumped and more nuanced by the reference to people suffering eternal destruction. This destruction is not an eternal process of destruction, but instead a finite and complete act of destruction.⁸ Charles Quarles argues persuasively contra Fudge, "The attempt to interpret the preposition in two opposing senses at once is hermeneutically awkward. The

⁶ Erickson, Millard. "Is Hell Forever?" *BSac* Vol 152 #607 (Jul-Sep 1995), p. 272.

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 270-271.

⁸ Fudge Edward. "The Final End of the Wicked." *JETS* 27/3 (September 1984), pp. 333.

exegetical evidence clearly stands in favor of the causal view as opposed to the separative view.⁹

I will conclude by noting a few more biblical arguments in favor of eternal punishment. It should be noted that according to a premillennial eschatology there are further hints to a conscious torment of the wicked. We are told that the beast and the false prophet are captured and thrown alive into the lake of fire at Jesus' second coming (Rev 19:20). Subsequent to Jesus' 1000 year reign, Satan is released for one final attempt at rebellion, but he also is captured and subsequently thrown into the lake of fire where the beast and the false prophet are (Rev 20:10). The Greek is very clear and the context demands a continual punishment when it goes on to note that *they* (pl.) shall be tormented forever and ever. The point being is that they were tormented during the 1000 years awaiting to be joined by the Devil for a continuation of this torment. It would seem consistent as noted earlier that when the rest of those being cast into the lake of fire join them, they also will continue in eternal punishment. One final note will be mentioned as it relates to a time after the new heavens and the new earth are created. By most annihilationists accounts, the lake of fire has no need to continue beyond into the new created heavens and earth (Rev 21:1). Yet it is interesting that after the description of the new Jerusalem, we are told that even at that time there exists those who are wicked. "But outside *are* dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie" (Rev 22:15). What this says clearly is that even in God's perfect, re-created, and *eternal* paradise, there still exist those in a state of condemnation and alienated from God's presence.

⁹ Quarles, Charles L. "The $\square\pi\omicron$ of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and the Nature of Eternal Punishment." *WTJ*. V 59 (Fall 1997), p. 211.

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