

# Hell: Annihilation Or Eternal Punishment?

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Contemporary evangelical theology is plagued by several downward trends. One of the popular ones is the denial of eternal punishment. Eternal punishment is construed as *annihilation*<sup>1</sup>. A growing number of evangelicals question or express doubts about the doctrine of eternal punishment. The core belief of eternal punishment is that the damned suffer eternally in hell, conscious and aware, in a state of separation from God. The core belief of *annihilation* is that the wicked face punishment culminating in complete destruction and cessation of being (existence). Recently, the popular American actor, Kirk Cameron, who later became an evangelist, found himself in the center of controversies for his evolving theological views, particularly his support of annihilationism.

## Annihilationism

The unsaved survive death, and after judgment, face complete and irreversible destruction, ceasing to exist. God will extinguish the existence of the wicked. Extinction will occur as a result of either sin's natural effects (the corrosive effect of evil) or God's decisive action. Annihilationists soften the biblical teaching of eternal torment in hell. If hell is a reality, it lasts only a short while before the unbelievers are annihilated. Similar is the doctrine of *conditional immortality*, which states that no creature is immortal unless God grants it eternal life.

Annihilationism has been taught by Seventh-day Adventists. Jehovah's Witnesses lean more towards Conditional Immortality (existence ends with death, God will resurrect only the righteous and there is no torment in hellfire). Only a minority of liberal Protestant theologians were in the forefront of promoting the doctrine of Annihilationism in the latter part of 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 80s, Clark Pinnock defended annihilationism. But the real debate about this issue was sparked when the Anglican evangelical veteran, John Stott, expressed tentative support for annihilationism, finding eternal torment in hell difficult to reconcile with God's justice<sup>2</sup>. The Doctrine Commission of the Church of England issued a report in January 1996, entitled "The Mystery of Salvation," that declares: "Hell is not eternal torment but the final and irrevocable choosing

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<sup>1</sup>The word is from the Latin *nihil*, "nothing."

<sup>2</sup> David Edwards & John Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal Evangelical Dialogue*. Though Stott was reluctant to cause division on this matter, I believe his support for annihilationism encouraged many others in the evangelical camp to develop their own defense of this view. For a thorough review and critique of Annihilationism among evangelicals, see J. I. Packer, *Evangelical Annihilationism in Review*, the – highway.com

of that which is opposed to God so completely and absolutely that the only end is total non-being<sup>3</sup>.”

## **Biblical Doctrine of Eternal Punishment**

My purpose here is not to go through all the arguments for *annihilation*, but rather to highlight the clear teaching of the Scriptures on *eternal punishment*. Once that is established, the annihilationist’s views will have no merit and value for those who uphold the inspiration and authority of the Holy Scriptures. Views about judgment and hell should not be discussed outside the frame of the revelation given to us in the Scriptures, especially the teaching of Jesus on this matter. *Our consideration should be based more on exegetical grounds than on pastoral and emotional concerns.*

### **1. What Does “Eternal” Punishment Mean?**

In the New Testament, the word “eternal” (*aionios*) is used to describe the destiny of both the righteous and the unrighteous. “And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt.25:46)<sup>4</sup>. Here, Jesus set eternal life and eternal punishment side by side. As eternal life is unending for believers, so too will eternal punishment for the unbeliever be unending. It should be granted that *aionios* in the NT literally means belonging to the age (*aion*) to come, rather than directly expressing a chronological duration. *However, the fact that the word aionios carried the idea of duration must not be left out.* Jesus Himself emphasized this idea when speaking of one who possesses this eternal life; He used terms such as “he shall never die” (Jn.11:26) and “they shall never perish” (Jn.10:26).

Liddell and Scott define the use of the word *aionios* in classical Greek by the word “perpetual.”<sup>5</sup> They also indicate that it is similar in usage to another Greek adjective, *aidios*, which they define as meaning, “everlasting” or “eternal.” This synonymous word is used only twice in the NT, in Rom.1:20 (“His eternal power”) and Jude 6 (“And angels who did not keep their own domain... He has kept in eternal bonds...”). The meaning in these instances is obvious – *aidios* means “never-ending.” This is the meaning of the more commonly used adjective, *aionios*. Moulton and Milligan conclude that *aionios*, even in non-biblical materials, never loses the sense of *perpetuus*<sup>6</sup>. The Classical Latin Dictionary defines this word as “continuing, lasting, unbroken, uninterrupted, perpetual, forever.”

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of The Christian Faith*, 1068.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible* unless otherwise indicated. It is unfortunate that the KJV, NKJV has translated *aionios* (“eternal”) in this verse in two ways – “everlasting” and “eternal.” It is better translated consistently to avoid confusion and unnecessary conclusions.

<sup>5</sup> Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek – English Lexicon*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*, 16.

According to Thayer, this same meaning applies to the word's use in the NT<sup>7</sup>. Though there can be variety of emphasis in the word, *there is always present the concept of duration and the immeasurability of eternity*. The word is used in multiple instances to mean, "that is without end," "that which is never to cease" (Rom.16:26; Heb.5:9; Heb.9:15; 2 Tim.2:10; 2 Peter 1:11; Lu.16:9).

The word is used in the same way to qualify the destiny of the wicked in such passages as Heb.6:2; 2 Thess.1:9; Matt.25:41,46 and many others. The Old Testament doctrine of eternal punishment also supports the same ideas as in the NT. Two explicit OT statements show the diversity of destiny for the godly and ungodly - "everlasting life" and "everlasting contempt" (Dan.12:2; Isa.66:22-24).

## **2. The Language of "Destruction"**

Annihilationists argue Jesus' terms of *destruction* in Matt: 10:28 ("... fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" suggest annihilation). But destruction does not have to connote annihilation, that is, the cessation of existence. Here, as elsewhere, *apoleia* (destruction) should be understood as the ultimate "loss" or "ruin" – the tragic opposite of salvation and eternal life (see Matt.7:13; Jn17:12; Rom.9:22; 2 Pet.2:1; 3:7). In 2 Thess.1:9, Paul spoke of those who will experience "eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power." In this description of the destiny of the wicked, we see the *concept of separation, resulting in ruin*. They are shut out from the presence of the Lord who affirms exclusion and rules out the idea that destruction meant extinction.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews spoke of those who "shrink back to destruction" (Heb.10:39). Destruction here does not involve the idea of *annihilation*. The idea is, rather, that the person goes on existing in a state that can be described only in terms of absolute ruin. *Apollumi* ("destroy") and *apoleia* signify "destruction," not in the sense of extinction of physical existence, but of the hopeless destiny of the wicked in an eternal plunge into hell<sup>8</sup>. Ruin and wreck are the main ideas of the word "destruction." In 1 Cor. 5:5, Paul urges the church to excommunicate an offending believer out of their fellowship, "to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction<sup>9</sup> of his flesh." This doesn't mean the offender will be annihilated. *None of the texts on destruction support annihilation of being*.

Jesus spoke more of the sorrows of hell than of the joys of heaven. The Lord described hell as a place of *darkness* (Matt.8:12; 22:13) as a *fiery furnace* (Matt.13:42, 50) and a *place of the undying worm* (Mark 9:48). Jesus' description of hell is indescribable horror of exclusion

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek – English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Thayer, 64, states that *apollumi* figuratively means "to devote" or give over to eternal misery."

<sup>9</sup> The word *olethros* refers to destruction and death, often in connection with God's judgment against sin.

from God's presence (Matt.7:23). In hell, there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt.8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lu.13:28), which suggests the despair and hopeless plight of the lost. *Only those who exist can weep and gnash their teeth as those banished into the darkness are said to do.* In Luke 16:22-24, *fire* signifies continued existence in torment. The fire itself is eternal and unquenchable. The chilling words of Rev.14:10-11 with 19:20; 20:10 confirm this.

Linguistic and exegetical arguments cannot sustain annihilationism. J.I. Packer observes that "Nowhere in Scripture does death signify extinction; physical death is departure into another mode of being called sheol or hades... nothing in biblical usage warrants the idea... That the second death of Rev.2:11; 20:14; 21:8 means or involves cessation of being."<sup>10</sup> He further notes that "at every point the linguistic argument simply fails. To say that some texts, taken in isolation might mean annihilation proves when other texts evidently do not."<sup>11</sup>

It seems that annihilationism is driven by concerns about the moral compatibility of eternal suffering with God's character of justice and love. Allegedly, God's love cannot be harmonized with such a terrible destiny. Views about hell and eternal judgment should not be determined by emotions (emotional discomfort with hell), and other concerns about the mystery surrounding eschatological issues. When these concerns take precedence over Scripture, then we are deceived into rationalizing our faith. It is quite common today to hear outright denial of any concept of punishment for the wicked. Many believe that whatever punishment the future holds for the wicked will be remedied; ultimately, they will enjoy a state of blessing. Still others embrace the doctrines of annihilationism and universalism, because something in the mind of man revolts at the picture of eternal punishment.

## Conclusion

All the arguments of annihilationism seem to be attempts to evade the plain teaching of Scripture. "Bad exegesis may attempt to banish it from the New Testament Scriptures, but it is still there."<sup>12</sup> "The doctrine of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked is sobering and humbling, but it is the clear teaching of Christ and his prophets and apostles."<sup>13</sup>

If hell is the kind of place that is represented in the NT, how unspeakably terrible is the reality of that fate. To redeemed men and women, God has entrusted the responsibility of presenting the Gospel of redemptive love in Christ to a world lost in sin. The Great

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<sup>10</sup> *Evangelical Annihilationism in Review*, the - highway. com

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Samuel Davidson's words quoted by Joel R. Beeke & Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, Vol.4, 1083.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Commission and the spiritual condition of the lost should impel believers to minister to the unreached with holy passion.