

A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF ANNIHILATIONISM

by

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
KEY ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF ANNIHILATIONISM	3
The Scriptures teach final destruction not endless torment	3
How could a loving God ...?	7
Humans are not inherently immortal	10
HELL IS A PLACE OF ETERNAL TORMENT	12
Hell is Eternal	12
Hell is Conscious Torment	18
Concluding Thoughts	21
BIBLIOGRAPHY	22

INTRODUCTION

The nature of hell has been the subject of much discourse, speculation, and even outright fantasy. The traditional view describes hell as a place where Satan, demons, and the wicked spend an eternity in suffering and torment. Yet, the view of our modern culture is best depicted in the music of the popular rock group, AC-DC: “Ain’t nothing I would rather do, going down, party time, my friends are gonna be there too ... I’m on a highway to hell.” The idea of unending torture is rarely believed or portrayed because such a view seems to defy human sensibility or the actions of a compassionate God in the eyes of our modern culture. This “softening” of the severity of hell crept into the church even in the time of Origen (3rd century A.D.) who believed the goal of divine punishment was remedial and that eventually all would make it into heaven.¹ In recent days, several evangelical scholars have expressed their opinion that there is no such place where God would eternally torment human souls. The key issue is whether or not this is biblical.

One may question the importance of understanding the true nature of hell. Yet, Christ Himself frequently presented the prospect of serving out an eternity in painful punishment in order to deter wicked behavior and emphasize the importance of turning to the Lord (Matt 13:40-43; 18:7-9; Jn 3:16). A right view of hell is also provides understanding into who God is and what He desires. Clark Pinnock says

¹ Harold O. J. Brown, “Will the Lost Suffer Forever,” *Criswell Theological Review* 4/2 (1990): 269; Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Publishing, 1995), 101.

How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by ordinary moral standards, and by the gospel itself ... Surely the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is no fiend; torturing people without end is not what our God does.²

Everlasting torment is intolerable from a moral point of view because it makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die.³

These are serious charges. If Pinnock is wrong (which he is) and hell is, in fact, a place of everlasting torment (which it is), then he has accused God of being a bloodthirsty monster, a torturous fiend—acting more like Hitler or Satan. His statements are then blasphemous accusations. While other annihilationists (those who view that unbelievers will be destroyed rather than suffer eternally) may not be as extreme, the fact remains that one's understanding of God will affect how one views the nature of hell.

It is the intent of this paper to present the most common arguments used by annihilationists and then provide the biblical evidence which refutes those arguments. In addition, a brief argument will be presented affirming the Scriptural view that hell is a place of eternal torment.⁴

² Clark Pinnock, "The Destruction of the Finally Impenitent." *Criswell Theological Review* 4/2 (1990): 247.

³ Pinnock, "Destruction," 253.

⁴ It is understood that, technically, the lake of fire is the final place of everlasting torment (Rev 20:10). However, given the current cultural usage of the term "hell," this paper will use the latter term rather than the former; see Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy: A Comprehensive Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 304.

KEY ARGUMENTS IN SUPPORT OF ANNIHILATIONISM

Arnobius (early 4th century A.D.) is believed to be the first in Christian literature to espouse the idea of the wicked being annihilated after a time of punishment instead of experiencing *eternal* torment in hell.⁵ Since his time there have been many voices who find the idea of unending pain inflicted by God to be repugnant. The range of beliefs in Annihilationism can be subdivided into the following three views: (1) only believers will be given immortal bodies while unbelievers will cease to exist at death (conditional immortality); (2) unbelievers will be punished for a time and will gradually fade away; (3) unbelievers will be punished for a time and then be destroyed.⁶ Most annihilationists do not hold to universalism (the idea that all will end up in heaven) nor that unbelievers will not experience *any* punishment—only that their punishment is not eternal. This section will address biblically the most prominently held view that unbelievers will be punished and then destroyed.

The Scriptures teach final destruction not endless torment

Pinnock's main biblical argument is the language used in Scripture when addressing the fate of the wicked is "death, destruction, ruin, perish."⁷ Wenham adds that

⁵ Chris Morgan, *Jonathan Edwards & Hell* (Glasgow, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 29; Peterson, *Hell on Trial*, 104.

⁶ Morgan, *Edwards*, 25-28.

⁷ Pinnock, "Destruction," 250.

in his survey of 264 references of the fate of the lost in the New Testament, “There is not one word about unending torment and very many of them in their natural sense refer to destruction.”⁸ Some texts used to prove their case are:

- fear Him who is able to *destroy* both soul and body in hell⁹ (Matt 10:28)
- whoever believes in Him shall not *perish*, but have eternal life (Jn 3:16)
- these will pay the penalty of eternal *destruction* (2 Thess 1:9)
- kept for day of judgment and *destruction* of ungodly men (2 Pet 3:7)
- and I give eternal life to them, and they will never *perish* (Jn 10:28)

The word used for “perish” and “destroy” in these texts is *apollumi* (ἀπόλλυμι) which means loss or the state of being lost (Lk 15:4); to kill, destroy (Mt 2:13; 27:20) or to perish (Mk 4:38; Mt 26:52).¹⁰ In reference to Matthew 10:28, Stott claims, “If to kill is to deprive the body of life, hell would seem to be the deprivation of both physical and spiritual life, that is, an extinction of being.”¹¹

⁸ John Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 174.

⁹ All Scripture translations from the New American Standard Bible Updated (La Mirada, Calif.: Lockman Foundation, 1995), unless otherwise noted.

¹⁰ “The noun *apoleia* has in most instances the intransitive meaning of ruin, destruction (Matt. 7:13; Rom 9:22; Phil 1:28; 2 Pet 2:1; Rev 17:8). But occasionally it appears in the transitive sense of waste, squandering (Mk 14:4);” H.C. Hahn, “ἀπόλεια,” *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 4 vols., ed. Colin Brown, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 1:464; hereafter *NIDNTT*.

¹¹ John Stott, “John Stott’s Response to Chapter 6,” in *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue*, ed David L. Edwards (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 315.

Yet, the lexicons disagree. Hahn notes, “Just as *soteria* (salvation) and *zoe aionios* (eternal life) connote sure and lasting salvation, so *apollymi* and *apoleia* mean ‘definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death.’”¹² In reference to hell, the perishing is not in the sense of extinction but in the sense of ruin. This can be clearly seen by examining the fate of the beast in Revelation. “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up out of the abyss and go to *destruction* ... The beast which was and is not, is himself also an eighth and is one of the seven, and he goes to *destruction*” (Rev 17:8, 11 emphasis added) Does the fact that the beast goes to destruction mean here that he is eternally destroyed? Revelation 19:20 gives the answer: “And the beast was seized, and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were *thrown alive* into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone” (emphasis added). His “destruction” does not end after the millennium. “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and *they will be tormented day and night forever and ever*” (Rev 20:10 emphasis added). There can be no ambiguity of John’s words here. “Day and night forever and ever” indicates “destruction” in hell is torment, lasting for eternity.

In contrast to ἀφῆσθαι or to ζωὴ αἰώνιος, ἀπόλλυσθαι is definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an

¹² H-C. Hahn, “ἀπώλεια,” 464.

eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death in the depiction of which such terms as ὀργή, θυμός, θλίψις and στενοχωρία are used.¹³

Annihilationists also attempt to define “death” in Scripture as a cessation of life—going into non-existence. Atkinson sees the second death as cessation of life for the punishment of sin. “Unless there the Bible gives us a definition of the second death in which it shows the term to have a special meaning, we surely have no right to read into the word anything different from its natural and normal meaning.”¹⁴ Yet, the second death is plainly defined in Scripture in the following texts

Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire (Rev 20:14).

But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death (Rev 21:8).

The second death is clearly shown as being cast into the lake of fire, which John has described as a place of “torment day and night, forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). The figurative use of “death” here is not unusual at all as seen by the metaphor of sleep (Lk 8:52-53; Jn 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 11:30) used for physical death. The terminology of destruction and death in Scripture does not support the annihilationist view.

¹³ Albrecht Oepke, “ἀπόλλυμι, ἀπόλεια, Ἀπολλύων,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vols. 5-9 Edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 Compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976), 1:396; hereafter *TDNT*.

¹⁴ Basil F. C. Atkinson, *Life and Immortality: An Examination of the Nature and Meaning of Life and Death as They Are Revealed in the Scriptures* (n.p.: Phoenix Press, n.d), 83.

How could a loving God ... ?

Many annihilationists are driven by the moral argument that a God of love could never create a place of eternal torment. Pinnock comments above clearly convey this attitude. Wenham adds, “The God whom I know had compassion on the crowds ... He teach us to think of him as like a good earthly father ... To any normal way of thinking [everlasting torment] depicts God as a terrible sadist, not as a loving Father.”¹⁵ Pettegrew accurately assesses their perspective when he says, “For evangelical annihilationists, however, God’s love serves as a preunderstanding to the study of hell ... it is impossible for the annihilationists to believe in eternal hell, because God’s love serves as an immovable roadblock to such a doctrine.”¹⁶ Pinnock indicates the priority of God’s love over his other attributes when he states: “Surely, the God who loves the world will always love it, even loving those who reject the gift of his love ... when humanity stands before God, they stand before a God of mercy and love.”¹⁷

Hand-in-hand with an overemphasis on God’s love to the neglect of His other attributes, annihilationists openly question how the traditional view of hell can be a just punishment. Pinnock notes, “What purpose of God would be served by the unending

¹⁵ Wenham, “Case,” 184.

¹⁶ Larry D. Pettegrew, “A Kinder, Gentler Theology of Hell?” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9/2 (1998): 207-208.

¹⁷ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1992), 170.

torture of the wicked except sheer vengeance and vindictiveness? Such a fate would spell endless and totally unredemptive suffering, punishment just for its own sake.”¹⁸ In his estimation, eternal torment is utterly pointless, having no “good” outcome. Stott says that since God will judge people according to their deeds he sees as disproportionate eternal punishment for sins done during a relatively brief earthly life.¹⁹

These sentiments betray a completely human-centered viewpoint of sin and justice. Before one can comment on whether God’s judgment is just one must first understand the heinousness of sin is an affront to a holy God. Romans 1:18-21 teaches that man’s sin causes him to refuse to honor and thank God, to reject God’s authority over him, and to fashion other gods to his liking. Sin is so repugnant to a holy God that He cannot look upon it with any favor at all (Hab 1:13). In fact, not only does God hate sin but bears a hatred of those who habitually commit it (Ps 5:5; 11:5; Prov 6:16-19; Hos 9:15). Because of man’s own depravity he is unable to fully comprehend the evil of sin. Thus, only God is in the place of determining what a just punishment for sin is. And that He has revealed in His Word as eternal torment in hell. Grudem’s response to the argument of a disproportionate response is that it “wrongly assumes that we know the extent of the evil done when sinners rebel against God.”²⁰

¹⁸ Pinnock, “Destruction,” 254.

¹⁹ Stott, *Essentials*, 318.

²⁰ Wayne, Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 1151.

One must also keep in mind that the reason that an eternal punishment is just is not only because of the monstrous offense it is to a holy, infinite God but also to the fact that the unbeliever will never repent. Rev 22:11 indicates that those who have rebelled against God continue to do so in hell. God never grants them repentance. Thus, the duration of His punishment matches the duration of the unbeliever's sin. Strong notes, "However long the sinner may be punished, he never ceases to be ill-deserving ... so long as moral creatures are opposed to God, they deserve punishment."²¹

Not only does the annihilationist view completely undermine God's holiness and sin's depravity, it also cheapens the price required to pay for sins which was the humiliation and death of a holy God. Annihilationists argue that Christ suffered only temporary pain and separation from God.²² Atkinson says, "If He bore the punishment of our sins, that punishment cannot under any circumstances be eternal conscious suffering or misery, for He never suffered this and it is impossible that He could have."²³ But, his own argument can be used to say the wicked will not be annihilated either since Christ was not annihilated but only suffered a physical death. Thus, a comparison between Christ's death on the cross and eternal punishment of the wicked is invalid. Christ was able to pay our debt because He was sinless (2 Cor 5:21). As the God-man, He bore an

²¹ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols in one (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1907), 1048.

²² Wenham, "Case," 185.

²³ Atkinson, *Life*, 103.

infinite and righteous punishment that no man on earth could bear. It was a payment sufficient to satisfy a just and holy God (John 1:29; Heb 2:17; 1 John 1:9; 4:10).

The annihilationist view of God's love and justice falls into the anthropocentric trap that sees reality from the human perspective rather than God's. That God will send the wicked to a place of endless torment is beyond human comprehension. Yet, Scripture states that when the teachings of Scripture do not make sense, humanly speaking, one must bow to the wisdom and authority of God. When God's justice is questioned in regards to predestination, Paul reminds the reader, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (Rom 9:22) When Job questioned the events in his life and demanded an audience with God to make his case (Job 23:3-5; 31:35) God did not explain to Job the purpose of his circumstances. Rather, he called Job to submit to the wise and sovereign will of God (Job 40:2). Instead of questioning God's justice the Word of God shows God should be praised and glorified for His judgment and wrath against sinners (Pss 96:11-13; 98:7-9; Rev 11:16-18; 15:1-7; 16:5-7; 19:1-5).

Humans are not inherently immortal

Wenham presents the argument: "The belief that God created Man only potentially immortal. Immortality is a state gained by grace through faith when the believer receives eternal life and become a partaker of the divine nature, immortality being inherent in God alone."²⁴ They note that the concept of human immortality is from

²⁴ Wenham, "Case," 162.

Plato and not from Scripture, citing the biblical teaching that God “alone possesses immortality” (1 Tim 6:16) and eternal life is something God gives by His grace (1 Cor 15:51-55). It is agreed that God is the only being in this universe who is inherently immortal. He alone is self-sufficient (Acts 17:25) and exists from eternity past to eternity future (Is 44:6; Rev 22:13). What is at issue here is not whether humans are able to sustain immortality on their own for as created beings we are not. Scripture teaches that God will sustain all humans forever and, thus, in that sense we are immortal. Though arguments from Scripture are inferential and not explicit, one can make a case that the stamp of God’s image (Gen 1:26-27) and the inbreathing of God’s breath into man (Gen 2:7) indicate an imparting of the immortal spirit.²⁵

Wenham and others who hold to conditional immortality claim that God only promises eternal life to those who believe in Christ (Jn 3:16). While absolutely true, other texts show that God promises an eternal existence for unbelievers as well (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:26). Jesus said regarding the judgment of living Gentiles prior to the millennium: “These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” If we are to take eternal life here as without end then we must take punishment in the same way as well. More will be discussed on these key texts in the next section. Essentially, the immortality of man is based on the understanding of an eternal existence in either heaven or hell and not the other way around.

²⁵ Pettegrew, “Kinder,” 213; Brown, “Lost,” 275; Strong, *Systematic*, 1035.

HELL IS A PLACE OF ETERNAL TORMENT

The previous section addressed some (not all) key arguments made by annihilationists against the view of eternal torment. This section will present some key passages which teach that hell is a place of *conscious* and *eternal* torment of the wicked.

Hell is Eternal

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2).

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life (Matt 25:46).

These two key passages essentially say the same thing. The destiny of those who are saved is eternal life while for those who are not saved it is eternal punishment. Some annihilationists argue that the words used in Scripture for “eternity” (עוֹלָם and αἰών) don’t have to mean without end. Tomasino describes the Hebrew word, *olam*:

It does not seem to mean eternity in the philosophical sense of the word (i.e. neither unbounded time nor eternal timelessness). In reference to the past it has the idea of ancient. In regards to the future it can refer to continuously existing conditions for a limited period of time ... In reference to the future it often implies unceasingness or perpetuity.²⁶

The Greek word, *aion* (adjective is *aionios*), can mean a long period of time (2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:20), a period of unending duration (1 Tim 6:16; Mt 25:46; Mt 18:8; Mk 3:29), or

²⁶ Anthony Tomasino, “עוֹלָם,” In *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 vols., ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), 346.

a period of time without beginning or end (Rom 16:26; Heb 9:14).²⁷ Like *olam*, it can refer to “a specifically limited period of time as well as an unlimited period can be meant ... an age, epoch, era (of the world).”²⁸ Macrae sums up both *olam* and *aion* as follows:

The LXX generally translates אֵלֶּם by αἰὼν which has essentially the same range of meaning. That neither the Hebrew nor the Greek word in itself contains the idea of endlessness is shown both by the fact that they sometimes refer to events or conditions that occurred at a definite point in the past, and also by the fact that sometimes it is thought desirable to repeat the word, not merely saying “forever,” but “forever and ever.”²⁹

Since these terms do not require from their basic definition the modern idea of eternity, Wenham says that a better translation of Matthew 25:46 would be “the age to come” rather than eternal, leaving the question of duration open.³⁰ Fudge says it “means ‘forever’ but within the limits of the possibility inherent in the person or thing itself. When God is said to be ‘eternal,’ that is truly ‘forever.’ When the mountains are said to be ‘everlasting,’ that means that they last ever so long—so long as they can last.”³¹ Thus,

²⁷ William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 33; hereafter BDAG.

²⁸ J. Gurht, “αἰὼν,” *NIDNTT*, 829.

²⁹ Allan Macrae, “עֹלָם,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce Waltke (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1980), 1:672; hereafter *TWOT*.

³⁰ Wenham, “Case,” 177.

³¹ Edwin Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict Publications, 1982), 40.

the focus is on the punishment not the punishing. That is, “the adjective usually describes the issue or result of the action rather than the action itself.”³² But, in coming to this conclusion, Fudge has analyzed only six nouns of action and ignored the more than 60 others. Most notably, his evaluation did not address the meaning in “eternal life”—a critical oversight because key texts contrast eternal life with eternal death (Matt 25:46). Several scholars note that in only three of the seventy-four occurrences of *aionios* is the word used of a time period that is not unending (Rom 16:25; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 1:2).³³

Thus, the predominant use of αἰώνιος refers to eternal rather than temporal. Matthew 25:46 presents the strongest argument in favor of hell being eternal by contrasting it to eternal life (as does Dan 12:2). Gurht makes this point when he says, “One must also observe that the NT does not speak of an eternal death, because the idea of eternity is so closely connected with life that the negation of eternal life can also only be understood as the experience of ruin.”³⁴ Additionally, eternal life describes not only the quantity but the quality of life (Jn 17:3). It is a state of being while in God’s presence. Thus, “eternal punishment” here is not destruction but a state of being punished forever.

³² Fudge, *Fire*, 49.

³³ Robert L. Thomas, “Jesus’ View of Eternal Punishment,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9/2 (1998): 158; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1983), 1238; D. Edmond Hiebert, *1 & 2 Thessalonians* (Winona Lake, Ind.: BMH Books, 1996), 314; Benware, *End Times*, 306.

³⁴ J. Gurht, “αἰών,” in *NIDNTT*, 832-33.

Some annihilationists concede the meaning of eternal is in the sense of unending but say that it refers to irreversible destruction, not to endless torment.³⁵ Stott says, “What Jesus said is that both the life and the punishment would be eternal, but he did not in that passage define the nature of either.”³⁶ Fudge says that punishment only tells of a judicial sentence not the nature of the penalty. The punishment is eternal for it will be in the age to come and that it will last forever.³⁷ Yet, this belies the meaning of punishment (from κόλασις) which carries the idea of “infliction of suffering or pain in chastisement, punishment, retribution.”³⁸ Additionally, this meaning of eternal punishment is not consistent within the verse itself as Wells notes.

Pinnock arbitrarily claims that in the case of believers, the text is talking of eternal effects, but in the case of unbelievers, only of eternal actions. In their case, the judgment is eternal only in God’s mind and not in their experience since they do not exist; in the case of believers, ‘eternal’ means the experience of endless life. This produces two, competing meanings of ‘eternal’—all in the same verse!³⁹

Another key passage is Mark 9:43-48 which reads

⁴³ If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire,
⁴⁴ [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁵ If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having

³⁵ Pinnock, “Destruction,” 256.

³⁶ Stott, *Essentials*, 317.

³⁷ Edwin Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³⁸ BDAG, 555.

³⁹ David F. Wells, “Everlasting Punishment,” *Christianity Today* 31/3 (1987): 41.

your two feet, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁶ [where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁷ If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

The undying worm and unquenched fire describe the eternity of the one suffering in hell. Yet, Pinnock says fire and worm destroy bodies not torment them.⁴⁰ Stott adds that the worm will not die nor the fire quenched “until presumably their work of destruction is done,”⁴¹ adding an idea to the text which is simply not there. The exact point Jesus is making here, the worm will not die nor the fire quenched because that which they are consuming will never end. Christ is clearly using a metaphor here to focus attention *not on the consumers but what is being consumed*. It would be better to maim oneself and suffer some temporary pain here in this life rather than continue to commit sin in this life and suffer eternal consequences in hell. Mark 9 is an allusion to Isaiah 66:24 which describes the state of one who will be an abhorrence to those who see him. Delitzsch says

[Isaiah] is speaking of the future state, but in figures drawn from the present world. The object of his prediction is no other than the new Jerusalem of the world to come, and the eternal torment of the damned; but the way in which he pictures it, forces us to translate it out of the figures drawn from this life in to the realities of the life to come.⁴²

Second Thessalonians 1:8-9 is another key text on the eternity of hell:

⁴⁰ Pinnock, “Destruction,” 256.

⁴¹ Stott, *Essentials*, 317.

⁴² Franz Delitzsch, *Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, Commentary on the Old Testament, 10 vols., C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (reprint; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1989), 517.

⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

Annihilationists argue that “eternal destruction” here means that the state of destruction is permanent, not that an eternal punishment is being described. Fudge gives a syllogism: “(1) God’s presence will fill all that is, in every place [with reference to 1 Cor 15:27, 28]; (2) the wicked will not be in His presence (Matt 25:41, 46; 2 Thess 1:9); (3) therefore the wicked will no longer exist.”⁴³ The second assumption depends on what is meant by presence. The idea here could be that the wicked are destroyed *because* of the presence of the Lord or that they are away from acceptance or fellowship with God.⁴⁴ In either case, the text here does not mean that the wicked are out of God’s purview. Revelation 14:10 says that those who receive the mark of the beast will “be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the *presence* of the Lamb” (emphasis added). In addition, Peterson notes that being away from His presence describes a conscious existence of the wicked not cessation of existence.⁴⁵

Thus, in this text Paul is not describing not an eternal *state* but an eternal *state of being*. The wicked will forever exist in a state of ruin. Rosscup says that “Like Jesus and

⁴³ Fudge, *Fire*, 249n36.

⁴⁴ Charles, L. Quarles, “The Ἄπο of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 and the Nature of Eternal Punishment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59/2 (1997): 202; James E. Rosscup, “Paul’s Concept of Eternal Punishment,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9/2 (1998): 184.

⁴⁵ Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 94-95.

other NT writers, Paul never uses words for God's retribution that mean extinction. If they thought that the unsaved would be blotted out, they bypassed NT words that could have made that pointedly clear."⁴⁶ Some examples he gives are: ἐξαλείφω ("to smear out, to blot out"); σβέννυμι ("quench"); παύω ("cease"); οὐκ ἔστιν ἔτι ("it is no longer").

Hell is Conscious Torment

The above passages clearly show that God's judgment is an *eternal punishment* not a permanent cessation of existence. Additionally, the Bible also describes hell as a place of conscious torment. This is shown in Christ's description of hell as a place of darkness and weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; Mt 25:30; Lk 13:28; Jude 13). Though Fudge says that weeping and gnashing are the unbeliever's reaction to judgment and not a description of suffering eternally,⁴⁷ this terminology indicates "that there will be consciousness of punishment after the final judgment."⁴⁸ Jesus clarifies this when He says the lawless will be cast "into the furnace of fire; *in that place* there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 13:42 emphasis added). Thus, their response won't be *at* the judgment but *while suffering* the judgment.

A clear description of the torment of the fires of Hades is found in Luke 16:19-31. That the rich man is conscious is seen in his ability to converse, to see, and to remember.

⁴⁶ Rosscup, "Paul's Concept," 186.

⁴⁷ Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 39-40; Atkinson, *Life*, 100.

⁴⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1148.

His torment is clear from his statement of being in “agony in this flame.” Buswell says, “That literal and intense suffering is the meaning intended cannot be denied by any reasonable method of exegesis.”⁴⁹ While some argue that this passage is irrelevant to final punishment because it deals with the intermediate state,⁵⁰ it must be remembered that Hades *and* those contained in it are thrown into the eternal lake of fire (Rev 20:13).

Revelation 14:9-11 plainly describes the eternal suffering to be experienced by those who take the mark of the beast: “[they] will be tormented . . . and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night”. Annihilationists try to say it is the smoke that ascends forever as a testimony of their final destruction not their torment. It is a moment of judgment and not an eternal state.⁵¹ However, the smoke is not the focus here, but rather the smoke of their *torment*. The fact that they have no rest day and night puts attention not on the smoke but on the one being tormented.

Another text which bears mentioning is found in Jesus’ summary of the betrayer. “The Son of Man is to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born” (Matt 26:24). This passage brings up an important question for the annihilationist: “If

⁴⁹ J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1962), 2:308.

⁵⁰ Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views*, 41; Pinnock, “Destruction,” 256; Stott, *Essentials*, 318.

⁵¹ Pinnock, “Destruction,” 257; Stott, *Essentials*, 316.

Judas' final end was to be his soul's annihilation and thus simply non-existence, how is his final state worse than the non-existent state which was prior to his birth?"⁵²

Probably the most significant and explicit text which communicates the torment to be experienced by the wicked for eternity is given in Revelation 20:10, 14-15.

¹⁰ And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever ... ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

John describes the lake of fire as a place of torment "day and night forever and ever."

There can be no mistake in the plain meaning of this phrase. Annihilationists argue that the lake of fire is a place of extinction and that the beast and false prophet are symbolic of all enmity and resistance against God which will be destroyed.⁵³ But, the plain meaning of the text is that the devil, beast, and false prophet are not symbolic but literal (as is the case throughout Revelation). Annihilationists fail to note that even if these were symbols then the object that they represent will experience torment throughout eternity. Further, even if these were symbols, there can be no mistake that verse 15 clearly says unbelievers will suffer the same fate as the devil and be thrown into the lake of fire where he or she will suffer the eternal torment described in verse 10.

⁵² Ibid., 49.

⁵³ Pinnock, "Destruction," 257; Stott, *Essentials*, 318; Wenham, "Case," 179; Atkinson, *Life*, 111.

Concluding Thoughts

The nature of hell as a place of eternal torment is hardly just an academic discussion. The implications of the annihilist position alter the Biblical view of sin, God's love, His justice, His holiness, and the magnitude of Christ's death on the cross. In addition, their view significantly waters down the severity of the need to turn to Christ to be saved. Wells summarizes the consequences of this view well in saying, "A gospel, then, that trades on a diminished view of sin, a modified notion of divine righteousness, and a restructured Atonement is not one that is more appealing ... but one that is less. *It is a gospel that has lost its nerve because it has lost its majesty*"⁵⁴ (emphasis added).

⁵⁴ Wells, "Everlasting," 42.

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