

Kingdom Report

Week of 26 September 2020

Sinners after Death: The Third Option

In this Covid era many people are wondering "What happens to sinners after death?" Traditionally two options were presented. Eternal endless excruciating torture or Universalism, eventually all are saved. There is a third option: Annihilation...the soul that sins will die!

In this terrible era of Covid-19 there is a fear of death in the air. Many people are locked down with thoughts of "what happens if I die"? I want to do a blog series for this time starting with what happens to sinners when they die. But I want to move on to what happens in Paradise, what happens in hell, what happens in the resurrection, when is the judgment, what happens to babies or young people who die before their time....what is God's plans for our transition and thereafter. But this week lets start with sinners. And here I want to introduce you to what may be a new scriptural explanation of what a loving God does for unrepentant sinners.

Annihilationism is the view that whoever and whatever cannot be redeemed by God is ultimately put out of existence. Among evangelicals this view is gaining more and more acceptance as being the best biblical explanation for the fate of the unsaved. It goes under the teaching called "conditional immortality". Meaning unless you have received the gift of eternal life through receiving the Lord Jesus as saviour you do not live forever...you perish! (when death and hell are cast into the lake of fire at the Great White Throne Judgment of God)

This topic deserves book length treatment and there is a lot to study and consider. But let me at least introduce you to the idea of "conditional immortality" or "annihilationism" if like me you are not comfortable in your spirit over the two traditional options of either endless torture of sinners or universalism, everyone goes to heaven.

Overview of the Biblical Teaching

While the Hellenistic philosophical tradition generally viewed the human soul as inherently immortal, Scripture sees immortality as something that belongs to God alone (I Tim. 6:16). God graciously offers immortality as a gift to people who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. (e.g. John 3:15–16; 10:28; 17:2; Rom. 2:7; 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:42f; 50, 54; Gal. 6:8; 1 John 5:11). Those who choose to reject God's salvation are denied this gift, following the pattern of Adam and Eve when God denied them access to "the tree of life" (Gen 3:22-24). There is no such thing as "your immortal soul"...that was bad Greek philosophy (Platonism).

Unfortunately, some (but not all) early Church fathers accepted the Greek view and consequently read into Scripture the view that the wicked suffer unending torment because they have an immortal soul. This became the dominant view of hell throughout Church history. If we read Scripture without this Hellenistic assumption,

however, we see that it teaches that God justly, and mercifully, annihilates the wicked. He doesn't subject them to endless, eternal torture.

Now, Scripture certainly teaches that the wicked are punished eternally, but not that the wicked *endure* eternal punishment. The wicked suffer “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46), “eternal judgment” (Heb 6:2) and “eternal destruction” (2 Thess 1:9) the same way the elect experience “eternal redemption” (Heb 5:9, 9:12). The elect do not undergo an eternal process of redemption. Their redemption is “eternal” in the sense that once the elect are redeemed, it is forever. So too, the damned do not undergo an eternal process of punishment or destruction. But once they are punished and destroyed, it is forever. Hell is eternal in *consequence*, not *duration*. The wicked are “destroyed forever” (Ps 92:7), but they are not forever being destroyed.

Along the same lines, Scripture's references to an “unquenchable fire” and “undying worm” refer to the finality of judgment, not its duration (Isa. 66:24, cf. 2 Kings 22:17; 1:31; 51:8; Jer. 4:4; 7:20; 21:12; Ezek. 20:47–48). If these passages are read in context, it becomes clear that the fire is unquenchable in the sense that it cannot be put out before it consumes those thrown into it. And the worm is undying in the sense that there is no hope for the condemned that it will be prevented from devouring their corpses. These passages teach that the wicked will justly suffer for their sins, but the end result will be their destruction (cf. Lk. 16:19–31; Rom. 2:8; 2 Thess. 1:6).

Annihilationism and the Old Testament

The traditional view that the wicked suffer eternally makes little use of the Old Testament. Defenders of the traditional view justify this on the grounds that Old Testament authors weren't concerned with the afterlife. Annihilationists believe that this approach is mistaken.

The Old Testament actually has a good deal to say about the ultimate destiny of those who resist God. Peter specifically cites the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a pattern of how God judges the wicked. The Lord turned the inhabitants of these cities “to ashes” and “condemned them to extinction” thus making “them an example of what is coming to the ungodly...” (2 Pet. 2:6). Conversely, the Lord's rescue of Lot sets a pattern for how the Lord will “rescue the godly from trial” (2 Pet. 2:9). We thus have a precedent set in the New Testament for learning about the fate of the wicked in the Old Testament. And what we learn is that they are “condemned... to extinction.”

Throughout the Old Testament the Lord threatens the wicked with annihilation. To all who refused to comply with the covenant God had established, for example, the Lord vowed to “blot out their names from under heaven” (Deut. 29:20). Indeed, he vowed to destroy them and the land “like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah... which the Lord destroyed in his fierce anger...” (Deut. 29:23). So too, through the prophet Isaiah the Lord warns that

“...rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed.
...you shall be like an oak whose leaf withers,
and like a garden without water.
The strong shall become like tinder,
and their work like a spark;

they and their work shall burn together,
with no one to quench them” (Isa. 1:28, 30–31).

Note the metaphors carefully. They all denote total annihilation.

Consider also this passage:

“...as the tongue of fire devours the stubble,
and as dry grass sinks down in the flame,
so their root will become rotten,
and their blossom go up like dust,
for they have rejected the instruction of the Lord of hosts...” (Isa. 5:24).

In Genesis we see that God breathed the breath of life into man and he became a living soul. But God warns that "the soul that sins will die". (Ezekiel 18:20) The body does not die when a man sins, people go on sinning for years. But life and consciousness reside in the soul. Man does not have an eternal soul. The wages of sin is death...the death of the soul.

The theme that the Lord will annihilate the wicked is especially prominent in the Psalms. The Psalmist says that whereas those who take delight in the Lord shall be “like trees planted by streams of water” (1:3), the wicked shall be “like chaff that the wind drives away...the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:4, 6). They shall be dashed “in pieces like a potter’s vessel” (2:9), torn into fragments (Ps. 50:22) and “blotted out of the book of the living...” (Ps. 69:28, cf. Deut. 29:20). Each metaphor depicts total annihilation.

Similarly, the Lord’s plan for “evildoers” is to “cut off the remembrance of them from the earth...evil brings death to the wicked” (Ps. 34:16, 21). The wicked shall be so thoroughly destroyed that they shall not even be remembered (Ps. 9:6; 34:16). In the powerful words of a later author, the wicked “shall be *as though they had never been*” (Obed. 16, emphasis added).

With the same force, the Psalmist proclaimed that the wicked “will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb” (Ps. 37:2). They “shall be cut off...and...will be no more; though you look diligently for their place, they will not be there” (Ps. 37:9–10). While the righteous “abide forever” (37:27), “the wicked perish...like smoke they vanish away” (Ps. 37:20); they “vanish like water that runs away; like grass [they shall] be trodden down and wither”; “like the snail that dissolves into slime; like the untimely birth that never sees the sun” (Ps. 58:7–8). And again, “...transgressors shall be altogether destroyed” (Ps. 37:38, 34). In short, the fate of the wicked is *disintegration into nothingness*.

The Psalmist’s emphasis on the total destruction of the wicked has parallels throughout the Old Testament. Daniel, for example, speaks of all who shall be crushed by the rock of God’s judgment as being “broken.” They become “like the chaff of the summer threshing floor” blown away by the wind “so that not a trace of them can be found” (Dan. 2:35). Nahum says that in the judgment the wicked “are consumed like dry straw” (Nahum 1:10). Malachi tells us that the judgment day shall

come “burning like an oven” and “all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.” The judgment thus “shall burn them up” (Mal. 4:1).

So too, Proverbs tells us that all who hate the Lord “love death” (Prov. 8:36) and that when “the tempest” of God’s judgment passes, “*the wicked are no more...*” (10:25). Again, when God’s fury rises, “the wicked are overthrown and *are no more...*” (12:7). And finally, “the evil have no future; the lamp of the wicked will go out” (24:20). It seems impossible to accept that the wicked have “no future” if in fact they shall never cease to experience an eternal future in hell. So too, it seems impossible to accept that the wicked will “be no more” and even be “as though they never were” if they shall be existing in eternal torment.

Finally, we must remember the repeated teaching of the Old Testament that while God’s anger endures for a moment, his love endures *forever* (Ps. 30:5; e.g. 2 Chr. 5:13; 7:3, 6; 20:21; Ps. 100:5; 103:9; 106:1; 107:1; Ps 118:1-4, 29; 136:10-26). How is this consistent with the traditional teaching that God’s love and anger are equally eternal?

Annihilationism in the New Testament

The teaching that the wicked will be completely destroyed is even stronger in the New Testament. As in the Old Testament, the wicked are frequently depicted as being destroyed by fire. For example, John the Baptist proclaimed that “every tree...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in the fire” (Matt. 3:10). He announced that the Messiah “will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). Jesus himself describes hell as a consuming fire several times (Matt. 7:19; 13:40; John 15:6).

The New Testament has many other ways of describing the fate of the wicked. All directly or indirectly speak of total annihilation. The wicked are sometimes depicted as being “consumed” by fire (Heb 6:8, 10:7; Jude 7, Isa 33:11). It is frequently said of the wicked that they will be “destroyed.” Jesus contrasts the wide gate that “leads to destruction” with the narrow gate that “leads to life” (Matt. 7:13). Destruction clearly contrasts with life in this passage, and this at least implies cessation of consciousness such as when a person is dead.

Along similar lines, Jesus tells his disciples not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28). The implication is that God will do to the soul of the wicked what humans do to the body when they kill it. And this implies that the soul of the wicked will not go on existing in a conscious state after it has been destroyed.

James teaches that God alone is able to both “save and destroy” (Jam. 4:12). Peter teaches that “destruction” awaits false, greedy teachers (2 Pet. 2:3). And Paul teaches that the quest for riches can plunge people into “ruin and destruction” (1 Tim. 6:9). Moreover, all who are “enemies of the cross” have “destruction” as their final end (Phil. 3:18–19, 1:28). So too, if anyone “destroys the temple of God, God will destroy that person” (1 Cor. 3:17). With the same force the apostle teaches that “sudden destruction” will come upon the wicked in the last days (1 Thess. 5:3). This day is elsewhere described as a day for “the destruction of the godless” (2 Pet. 3:7). These

passages seem to contradict the traditional view that damned souls are in fact never destroyed but rather endure endless torment.

The New Testament also frequently expresses the destiny of the wicked by depicting them as dying or perishing. John proclaims the good news that God sent Jesus so that “everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Paul utilizes this same contrast when he states that while those who proclaim the gospel are “the fragrance of life” to “those who are being saved,” they are “the smell of death” to “those who are perishing” (2 Cor. 2:15–16). So too, Paul teaches that “the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life” (Rom. 6:23) This is consistent with Jesus’ teaching that those who try to find life apart from God end up losing it (Matt. 10:39).

Along the same lines, James writes that “sin, when it is fully grown, gives birth to death” (Ja 1:15). Hence, the person who “brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner’s soul from death...” (James 5:19). So too, Christ is said to have come to “abolish death and bring life and immortality to light through the gospel” (1 Tim. 1:10). Indeed, he came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14). Life and immortality are connected with following God, death with following Satan. The contrast in these passages between “death,” losing life, and “perishing,” on the one hand, with “life,” on the other, seems quite incompatible with the contrast of eternal bliss with eternal pain that the traditional teaching on hell presupposes. “Death,” losing life, and “perishing” are not easily read as signifying another kind of life, viz. a life of eternal conscious torture.

When all the biblical evidence is assessed apart from the Hellenistic philosophical assumption that the soul is *innately* immortal, it becomes clear that the fate of the wicked is eventual annihilation, not unending torture.

Supporting Arguments

1) *Unending torture is Inconsistent with the Love of God.* The central revelation of God in the New Testament is that God is love (I Jn 4:8, 16). His anger endures for a moment, but his mercy endures forever (Ps 103:8-14). How is this consistent with the view that God’s wrath burns eternally toward the wicked? Does this seem like the sort of thing the “Abba” Father of Jesus would do? Would we call a human being good or merciful – or anything other than cruel — who retaliated on his foes with this sort of unmitigated, insatiable vengeance?

Consider that in the traditional view, the wicked are not being punished to learn something. There’s nothing remedial about their torment. Rather, God keeps them in existence for the sole purpose of torturing them endlessly. And this pain is without hope of *ever* being terminated or relieved. After twenty trillion trillion years of torment, the damned are no closer to completing their dire sentence than they were their first moment of horror. Is this view really compatible with a God whose heart was expressed in Jesus’ dying prayer, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34)? If sinners get to the point where they are indeed hopelessly locked in their resistance to God, it seems more reasonable, and more biblical, to believe God would put them out of their misery.

From the annihilationist perspective, God's justice and mercy unite in condemning the wicked to extinction. He justly punishes their sin and forbids them a place within the Kingdom. And he mercifully annihilates them precisely so they will *not* endlessly endure what the traditional view says they endure.

2) *Unending Torment is Inconsistent With God's Victory.* The teaching that people and fallen angels will be tormented throughout eternity contradicts the Bible's teaching that God is altogether victorious at the end of history. How can we affirm that Christ shall be over all (Eph. 1:10, 21–22) and that God shall be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28) when a dimension of reality shall perpetually oppose God? How can we accept the Scriptural affirmation that *all* creatures in heaven and earth shall bow before the throne (Phil. 2:10–11, Rom. 14:10–11) and that *all things* will be reconciled to God (Col. 1:20, Acts 3:21) if in fact many creatures shall forever exist in hostile rebellion to God? How can we affirm the final and ultimate victory of God's joy and peace and accept that there shall be no more tears, sorrow or death (Rev. 21:4) if throughout eternity there shall be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” as multitudes suffer endless torture? If the traditional view of hell is correct, God remains non-victorious. Instead of a glorious universal Kingdom unblemished by any stain, an ugly dualism reigns throughout eternity.

Along the same lines, it's not clear how heaven could ever truly be heaven if it co-exists alongside an eternal hell. How are we to imagine enjoying heaven when we know that fellow human beings — and perhaps former loved ones — are locked in an endless nightmare from which they shall never awake? How are we to imagine God, who is perfect love, enjoying heaven while he yet keeps the damned in existence for the sole purpose of torturing them endlessly?

Responding to Objections

1) *Tormented Day and Night.* The most difficult passages for annihilationists to explain are Revelation 14:10–11 and 20:10. These passages speak of the wicked being tormented “day and night forever and ever.” However, these passages are not as decisive against the annihilationist's view as they might initially seem. The phrase “forever and ever” can be translated “for ages upon ages” which implies an indefinite, but not necessarily unending, period of time. Even more fundamentally, it's important to keep in mind that Revelation is a highly symbolic book. Its apocalyptic images shouldn't be interpreted literally. This is particularly true of the phrase “forever and ever” since similar phrases are used elsewhere in Scripture in contexts where they clearly cannot literally mean “unending” (e.g. Gen 49:26; Ex 40:15; Nu 25:13; Ps 24:7).

Perhaps the most significant example of this for our purposes is Isaiah 34:9–10, for it closely parallels the two passages in Revelation. In this passage Isaiah says that the fire that shall consume Edom shall burn “night and day” and “shall not be quenched.” Its smoke “shall go up forever” and no one shall pass through this land again “forever and ever.” Obviously, this is symbolic, for the fire and smoke of Edom's judgment isn't still ascending today. If this is true of Isaiah, we should be less inclined to interpret similar expressions in the book of Revelation literally.

2) *The Fear of Hell.* It has sometimes been argued that if annihilationism is true, the fear of hell is undermined. Two things may be said in response to this.

First, most annihilationists do not deny that the wicked will suffer, perhaps for long periods of time, prior to being annihilated. God's justice shall be severe and ought to be dreaded.

Second, it is questionable that the traditional teaching on hell generally installs fear in the hearts of unbelievers. It rather seems that this teaching often has the opposite effect. The notion of unending torture is so out of sync with people's ordinary sense of justice that it is easily rejected as preposterous. There is certainly a need to warn unbelievers of the impending judgment of God. But the warning that the annihilationist gives is both biblical and believable...."our God is a consuming fire" and it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

There is a place called hell that is a place of torment. And there is a final judgment when "death and hell shall be cast into the lake of fire" and consumed. The time to choose our destiny is now.