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## THE DARK SIDE OF ETERNITY: HELL AS ETERNAL CONSCIOUS PUNISHMENT

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### SYNOPSIS

Eternal conscious punishment (also called traditionalism) holds that the wicked will suffer in hell forever. Annihilationism (or conditionalism) holds that the final punishment of the wicked is their extinction of being. This extinction is irreversible, and the annihilationist definition of eternal punishment is extermination without remedy.

I reject annihilationism and believe in endless punishment for three main reasons. First, traditionalism is the historic view of the Christian church. Second, endless punishment fits better than annihilationism with other scriptural teachings. Third, and most importantly, five biblical passages constrain my belief in eternal conscious punishment: Matthew 25:41, 46; Mark 9:42–48; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; Revelation 14:9–11; and Revelation 20:10, 14–15.

Jesus declares in Matthew 25:41 that the destiny of the unsaved is “the eternal fire prepared for the devil.” Matthew 25:46 uses the same adjective, eternal, to describe the fates of the lost and saved: “eternal punishment” and “eternal life.” Jesus depicts “hell” as a place “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:47–48). Paul’s reference to “eternal destruction” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, indicates a figurative devastation that the damned will experience forever in hell, separated from the Lord’s royal presence. Revelation 14:10, where we read that the impenitent “will be tormented with burning sulfur,” depicts the hellfire imagery as agony, not annihilation. John speaks of everlasting torment when he adds, “and the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever” (v. 11). John’s description of Satan’s fate in Revelation 20:10 as being placed in “the lake of fire and sulfur” and being “tormented day and night for ever and ever” signifies everlasting pain, a fate that lost human beings share (Rev. 20:15).

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Hell is at the end of the day the darkness outside; dense like a black hole, it is the place of cosmic waste. Who, indeed, is sufficient for these things? The question is surely

rhetorical. None of us is sufficient. But our sufficiency is to be found in Christ, the Savior, the perfect Man, the Redeemer, the Judge. We must constantly remind ourselves that it is the Savior who spoke clearly of the dark side of eternity. To be faithful to him, so must we.<sup>1</sup>

Sinclair Ferguson is right on several counts. Hell is too awful for words. Only Christ enables us to endure the thought of unsaved persons suffering forever. We, too, must act as witnesses to its reality because He clearly taught the truth of hell. Here I will define terms, explore the reasons why I believe certain things, and present the reasons why I believe in endless punishment rather than annihilationism.

## **DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

Eternal conscious punishment is the view that the wicked will suffer the pains of hell forever. It is also called traditionalism because it is the church's traditional view. Annihilationism, by contrast, is the view that God will exterminate the wicked in hell. Conditional immortality—conditionalism for short—is the view that God does not give immortality to all human beings, but only to believers, and that He will resurrect unbelievers, who lack the gift of immortality, to face ultimate annihilation. Because annihilationism and conditionalism reach the same conclusion—the lost finally will be eliminated—I will use the two terms interchangeably.

Evangelical annihilationists teach the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the last judgment with conscious punishment according to sins committed. The last stroke for the wicked is the extinction of their being. This extinction is irreversible; thus annihilationists define eternal punishment as extermination without remedy.

## **FOUNDATIONS FOR BELIEF**

There are several reasons why I believe in various Christian doctrines including hell. These involve respect for the consensus of the church through history, for the systematic consistency of doctrinal teachings throughout Scripture, and most of all, for the very witness of Scripture itself.

### **The Testimony of Church History**

I previously wrote of 11 figures who share the consensus that the wicked will suffer endless punishment—Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Edwards, Wesley, Francis Pieper, Louis Berkhof, Lewis Sperry Chafer, and Millard Erickson:

The figures...hail from various countries, inhabit diverse periods in church history, and represent major branches of the Church. It is significant, then, that in spite of their great diversity, these theologians agree on the subject of hell's duration. This consensus leads us to ask an important question: Is it possible that these eleven figures are wrong on the topic of hell? It is possible, but highly unlikely! In fact, I cannot think of even one doctrinal issue in which they all are in error. It is not that they agree on every detail of

theology; they differ in their understanding of baptism and of the millennium, to choose two examples. But on basic aspects of the Christian faith they are united – and one of those aspects is eternal punishment.<sup>2</sup>

This then places the burden of proof on those who break with Church tradition and espouse conditionalism. The testimony of historical theology, however, is not the fundamental reason why I believe in endless punishment.

### **The Consistency of Theological Doctrine**

As a systematic theologian, I am more convinced now than when I began teaching seminary 27 years ago that although I believe that the Bible does not contain a complete system of truth, its doctrines cohere. The teachings do not contradict one another, which makes systematic consistency one test of biblical truth. In view of that, I argue that endless punishment better and more consistently comports with a biblical understanding of other doctrines than does annihilationism. In *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*, which I wrote with fellow evangelical Christian Edward William Fudge, I argued that traditionalism “fits” better than annihilationism does with scriptural teaching on the intermediate state,<sup>3</sup> Christology and the inseparability of Christ’s two natures, and the personal eschatology or nature of final punishment.

**The Intermediate State.** Fudge argues for ultimate annihilationism (in Rev. 20:14 and Jude 7) on the basis of his view that death means extinction of being rather than separation of soul from body. Because physical death means extinction of being, the second death means final extinction of the resurrected unsaved.

But this is an error. I say this because seven passages teach the survival of the soul after the death of the body (2 Cor. 5:8; Luke 23:46, 43; Phil. 1:23; Rev. 6:9; Heb. 12:23; Luke 16:19–31). Study of these texts should give annihilationists pause. And further theological reflection should do the same. The intermediate state/resurrection view demonstrates the continuity of personal identity. The same person who dies, lives on without the body, and will one day be reunited in body and soul in the resurrection of the dead. The extinction/re-creation view, however, encounters serious difficulties in maintaining personal identity at the resurrection. In what sense is a human being who dies and ceases to exist the same person as the one who is re-created by God at the resurrection?<sup>4</sup>

**Christology.** “Fudge, therefore, seeks to strengthen his case for annihilationism by arguing that Jesus endured final punishment by being annihilated on the cross. The systematic implications of such a view are enormous. Nothing less than orthodox Christology is at stake.”<sup>5</sup>

The Word of God declares that as a result of the incarnation Jesus Christ is both truly God and truly man. He is one person with two natures, one divine and one human. These natures are not mixed together and are not separable....if Fudge is right, and Jesus was annihilated, then Chalcedon is wrong and Christ’s natures were separated.<sup>6</sup>

**Personal Eschatology.** Fudge accepts the traditional eschatological scenario, right up to the point of eternal destinies. He affirms suffering for the unsaved in hell and thus upholds the biblical principle that there will be degrees of punishment in hell. But when he makes annihilation the caboose, he derails the whole train. For in spite of his claim [that cessation of being is the worst possible punishment, it, to the contrary,] would bring an end to punishment. The wicked would be delivered from their terrible suffering and would experience the pains of hell no more.<sup>7</sup>

I am persuaded, then, that endless punishment meets the test of systematic consistency better than conditionalism. That still is not the primary reason why I believe in endless punishment, however.

### **The Witness of Holy Scripture**

I respect historical theology and systematics, but Scripture is what ultimately constrains my belief. I have a spectrum of beliefs ranging from truths that are essential to salvation to loosely held beliefs about unimportant things, and I believe many things in between, including endless punishment. I would include endless punishment under the category of things not necessary for salvation, but things important.

In two books, I adduce ten passages of Scripture that I maintain teach endless punishment.<sup>8</sup> I still believe that my exegesis of those ten passages is sound and I here point to five of those passages that most clearly teach endless punishment.

Matthew 25:41, 46. The returning Son of Man says to the wicked, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).<sup>9</sup> Jesus here consigns unsaved or cursed human beings to “eternal fire,” stating that they will suffer the same fate as Satan. John says in Revelation 20:10 (see below) that the Devil “will be tormented...for ever and ever.” The conclusion of “Depart from me... into the eternal fire” in Matthew 25:41, then, is incontestable: unsaved human beings, along with the Devil and his angels, will endure endless punishment.

Our Lord also affirms endless punishment in Matthew 25:46. Concerning goats and sheep, respectively, He says, “Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” Jesus contrasts the fates of punishment and life and modifies them both by the same adjective: “eternal.”

The word “eternal” (aionios) does not of itself mean everlasting in duration, but rather indicates a long period of time with limits set by the context. The limits of aionios when referring to last things, however, are set by the life of God Himself. The age to come lasts as long as He does—forever. The New Testament speaks of the eternal God (Rom. 16:26), the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14), eternal life (Rom. 5:21), eternal salvation (Heb. 5:9), eternal glory (1 Pet. 5:10), and the eternal kingdom (2 Pet. 1:11).

Matthew, as D. A. Carson notes, uses “the adjective *aionios*... only for what is eternal.”<sup>10</sup> The punishment that the lost suffer in hell is parallel to the bliss that the righteous enjoy on the new earth. Augustine draws the logical implication:

If both are “eternal,” it follows necessarily that either both are to be taken as long-lasting but finite, or both as endless and perpetual. The phrases “eternal punishment” and “eternal life” are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean: “Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end.” Hence, because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.<sup>11</sup>

The goats will experience everlasting punishment even as the sheep will experience everlasting life.<sup>12</sup>

**Mark 9:42–48.** Jesus also teaches endless punishment in a passage in which He urges His hearers to take drastic measures rather than sin, especially rather than mislead children. He warns against going “into hell, where the fire never goes out” (v. 43) and of being “thrown into hell, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched’” (vv. 47–48). Conditionalists interpret Jesus’ language (via their interpretation of Isaiah 66:24, which Jesus cites) as teaching the annihilation of the wicked. The fire of hell that never goes out, they say, is a never-ending memorial to the extinction of the wicked. The undying worm lives until it consumes its prey, and the unquenchable fire relentlessly consumes what is put into it until it exists no more.

This is not what the passage says, however. Hell is “where the fire never goes out” (v. 43) because the suffering of the wicked in hell never ends. Scripture in a number of passages uses fire imagery to depict the sufferings of the wicked, rather than their extermination, as conditionalists teach (e.g., Matt. 13:42, 49–50; 25:41; Luke 16:23–25, 28; Rev. 14:10; 20:10).

Jesus teaches that the pains of hell last forever when He says, “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’” (vv. 47–48). He points to the activity of worms and fire in this life to teach figuratively about the life to come. All maggots die when they consume their prey and exhaust their fuel. All fires go out when they run their course and exhaust their fuel. Jesus says that the worms and fires of hell, by contrast, will never run out of fuel; the worm of the wicked is undying and the fire of hell is not quenched. That is, hell knows no end.

Author Robert Yarbrough, agrees, stating in an essay on Jesus’ view of hell, “In this Marcan setting Jesus is at conspicuous pains to underscore the unending nature of hell’s affliction. He does this, first, by speaking of the ‘fire that never goes out.’ Then he does it by quoting Isaiah 66:24. This is one of at least two Old Testament passages that clearly teach ‘the notion of eternal punishment’ (cf. Dan. 12:2). In Mark 9, then, Jesus teaches that hell’s agonies are ongoing and never-ending.”<sup>13</sup>

**2 Thessalonians 1:5–10.** This is Paul’s most extensive treatment of the fate of unbelievers. He extols the justice of God who will deliver His persecuted people and punish their persecutors. “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels, He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thess. 1:7– 9). The words “everlasting destruction” from this passage have become a slogan for conditionalism. Conditionalists teach that hell will consist in the extinction of the wicked and that this extinction is everlasting in that it is final. The exterminated wicked will not live again. According to conditionalism, “everlasting destruction” means irreversible annihilation.

Is this what Paul really means? A careful study of the expression “everlasting destruction” in this passage yields a negative answer. Paul writes, “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (v. 9). If “everlasting destruction” means irreversible annihilation, then being “shut out from the presence of the Lord” means the same thing. This will not do, however, because for exclusion from the Lord’s presence to mean annihilation the Lord’s presence must be interpreted as His omnipresence. Fudge teaches this in a footnote in his book *The Fire That Consumes*: “1. God’s presence will fill all that is, in every place; 2. the wicked will not be in his presence; 3. therefore, the wicked will no longer exist.”<sup>14</sup>

A paraphrase of the text will help us to evaluate the conditionalist view that “the presence of the Lord” in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 means God’s omnipresence. Conditionalists hold that Paul taught that the wicked will be punished with irreversible annihilation and shut out from the omnipresence of the Lord. To the contrary, when Paul referred to the fate of the lost as “eternal destruction,” he did not mean a literal destruction, but used the words figuratively of the devastation that the damned will experience forever in hell. There they will be separated, not from the Lord’s omnipresence, but from His powerful royal presence, as Paul’s words indicate. “They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”

Douglas Moo, in the finest study of Paul’s teaching on hell of which I am aware, expresses his agreement: “We would suggest, therefore, that the ‘destruction’ of which Paul here speaks may just as likely refer to ‘ruin.’ In this sense *olethros* would mean not that the wicked simply cease to exist but that they suffer ruin: ‘an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death.’ ‘Ruin’ must be placed alongside other Pauline depictions of the state of the wicked: suffering wrath, spiritual death, tribulation, and condemnation.”<sup>15</sup>

Conditionalists claim that the whole Bible teaches their view because Scripture frequently uses the vocabulary of destruction, referring to God’s enemies as being

destroyed, perishing, and the like. This, however, is not a strong argument. First, most of the Old Testament references that they cite refer to God's visiting the wicked with premature physical death; the references do not even speak of eternal destinies. Second, there is biblical evidence that the "destruction" of God's enemies is their endless punishment. In Revelation 17:8, 11 "destruction" (apoleia) is prophesied for "the beast." Two chapters later the beast and false prophet are "thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur" (Rev. 19:20). John teaches that after Satan is cast into this lake, he, the beast, and the false prophet, "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). The beast's "destruction," therefore, is not annihilation, but eternal punishment.

Conditionalists, consequently, err when they claim that the words destruction, perish, and their synonyms signify the final extinction of the wicked. This claim cannot be established from a study of all of the judgment passages that use these words. The passages that can be made to conform to conditionalism, in fact, are ones in which the words are used as shorthand without further explanation.

**Revelation 14:9–11.** This passage pertains to final destinies, as verse 11 indicates when it speaks of the smoke of the torment of the lost rising "for ever and ever." John describes the plight of the lost in hell: they will "drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath" (v. 10). They will personally experience the holy anger of almighty God.

John uses fire imagery to describe the suffering of the impenitent in hell. Each one "will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb" (v. 10). There is no doubt as to the function of the hellfire imagery here. It depicts the agony of the damned. John extends the fire imagery in the next verse: "And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever" (v. 11).

Conditionalists claim that this means the ever-ascending smoke is a perpetual witness to the extermination by fire of the wicked. Such an interpretation is not based on a straightforward interpretation of the text. John speaks of "the smoke of their torment" forever rising. As Gregory K. Beale shows in his commentary on Revelation, "The word *basanismos* ('torment') in Rev. 14:10–11 is used nowhere in Revelation or biblical literature in the sense of annihilation of personal existence. Revelation, without exception, uses it of conscious suffering on the part of people (9:5; 11:10; 12:2; 18:7, 10, 15; 20:10)."<sup>16</sup> The link between the description of never-ending torment and the possessive pronoun "their" is noteworthy, too. The text implies everlasting conscious torment rather than annihilation<sup>17</sup> when it describes the suffering of the unsaved as "the smoke of their torment" and the smoke as one that forever rises.

The words that follow strengthen this interpretation. "And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night" for them (v. 11). If John had intended to teach conditionalism, he could have written, "The smoke of their destruction rises for ever and ever, for they were no more." John instead adds, after speaking of the smoke of the suffering of the damned perpetually rising, that the

wicked have “no rest day or night.” That is, in contrast to those “who die in the Lord,” who “rest from their labor” (v. 13), the lost will never know the sweet repose of the Lord.

Beale notes his agreement in his excellent study of the doctrine of hell in the book of Revelation:

The phrase “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” (Rev. 14:11) is not a mere reminder of past judgment, but ongoing judgment as well. It is not the smoke of a completed destruction that goes up, but “the smoke of their torment.” The nature of the torment is explained in the second part of v. 11: not to be annihilated but lack of rest. Indeed, annihilation would be a kind of rest or relief from the excruciating torment of the brief, final judgment (those who support euthanasia do so usually because they believe it is merciful to relieve people of pain by annihilating their physical life). Therefore, the smoke is metaphorical of a continued reminder of the ongoing torment of restlessness, which endures for eternity.<sup>18</sup>

**Revelation 20:10, 14–15.** It is profitable to trace the fate of the unholy triumvirate in Revelation and discover that this passage, too, affirms endless punishment. The beast, in fulfillment of the “destruction” prophesied for him in Revelation 17:8, 11, is “thrown into the lake of burning sulfur” (Rev. 19:20) with the false prophet. In the first edition of *The Fire that Consumes*, Edward Fudge states that “in the case of the beast and false prophet...the lake of fire stands for utter, absolute, irreversible annihilation.”<sup>19</sup> Consider Revelation 20:10, however: “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” John here teaches, contrary to Fudge, that after the Devil is cast into the fiery lake as well, the beast, the false prophet, and the Devil “will be tormented...for ever and ever;” the beast’s “destruction,” therefore, is not annihilation, but eternal punishment.

The words “they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” plainly admit of only one meaning—everlasting conscious torment. Annihilationists attempt to deny this by claiming that the beast and false prophet represent institutions and not persons and thus could not be tormented forever, but this is not convincing. (The best interpretation of the beast and false prophet, I believe, is that they represent various enemies of God throughout history, culminating in two individuals.<sup>20</sup> Regardless of the precise identification of these two, the Devil’s identity is transparent and there is no doubt that he is a personal being capable of suffering, and that is precisely what John teaches when he says that the Devil “will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:10).

Annihilationists try to attain their goal by arguing as well that even if Revelation 20:10 teaches that the Devil will suffer endless punishment, that text says nothing about the fate of human beings. This argument fails also because five verses later John says that human beings too are “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15; cf. 21:8). I am aware of conditionalist attempts to deny that the lake of fire means the same thing for human

beings that it does for the Devil. Those attempts miss a basic point: John has just said what “the lake of burning sulfur” signifies in verse 10—everlasting torment. He indicates no change in meaning between verse 10 and verse 15. Conditionalists teach that although the lake of fire means endless punishment for the Devil, it means annihilation for human beings. This seems forced. The lake of fire means the same thing for the Devil that it means for unsaved human beings—endless punishment.<sup>21</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS OF OUR STUDY

Although I respect the powerful witness of Christian history to traditionalism, and am impressed by arguments from systematic theology, at the end of the day, I appeal to a higher authority than history or theology. I am convinced that a straightforward exposition of these five scriptural passages (and more) confirms the thesis that the sufferings of hell consist in everlasting conscious punishment. Jesus, Paul, and John teach that the suffering of the lost in hell will know no end.

Sinclair Ferguson is right: it is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who spoke most clearly of the dark side of eternity. To be faithful to Him, we must do the same.

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## NOTES

- 1 Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Pastoral Theology: The Preacher and Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 237.
- 2 Robert A. Peterson, “The Road to Traditionalism: History,” in Edward William Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 127–28.
- 3 The intermediate state is often described as the interval between the death of the body and the last judgment, and as the condition of the soul during that interval, the nature of which some people debate.
- 4 Robert A. Peterson, “Seeing the Big Picture: Theology” in *Two Views of Hell*, 174.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 176.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 177–78.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 180–81.
- 8 See Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R Publishing, 1995), 29–94; Robert A. Peterson, “The Foundation of the House: Scripture,” in *Two Views of Hell*, 129–69.
- 9 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 10 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 528.
- 11 Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. David Knowles (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 1001–2 (21.23).
- 12 Robert W. Yarbrough agrees; see “Jesus on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire*, 75–76.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 74.
- 14 Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 2nd ed. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1994), 155, n. 31.
- 15 Douglas J. Moo, “Paul on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire*, 106.
- 16 G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 762.
- 17 Evangelical Alliance Commission on Unity and Truth among Evangelicals (ACUTE), *The Nature of Hell* (London: ACUTE/Paternoster, 2000), 83.
- 18 Gregory K. Beale, “The Revelation on Hell,” in *Hell under Fire*, 118–19.

- 19 Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1st ed. (Houston: Providential Press, 1982), 304.
- 20 D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 527.
- 21 D. A. Carson agrees; see *The Gagging of God*, 528.