

STAND FIRM AGAINST ANNIHILATIONISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

A **medieval Italian preacher** warned his congregation of the horrors of hell this way: “Fire, fire! That is the recompense for your perversity, your hardened sinners. Fire, fire, the fires of hell! Fire in your eyes, fire in your mouth, fire in your guts, fire in your throat, fire in your nostrils, fire inside and fire outside, fire beneath and fire above, fire in every part. Ah, miserable folk! You will be like rags burning in the middle of this fire.”

This is what the church has always believed.

But you don't hear many preachers preaching like this these days.

Athanasian Creed (fourth-fifth centuries): 43. “And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into eternal fire.”

Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-1646): Chapter 32: Of the state of men after death, and of the resurrection of the dead. 1) The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Beside these two places, for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none. Chapter 33: Of the Last Judgment. 1) ... For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fullness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord; but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.

The New Hampshire Baptist Confession of 1833: “We believe... that the wicked will be adjudged to endless punishment, and the righteous to endless joy; and that this judgment will fix forever the final state of men in heaven or hell, on principles of righteousness.”

This view of hell is under attack.

It has been under attack for over 200 years.

It’s under attack on two fronts.

It’s under attack by atheists who question how we can believe in a God who would send people to an eternal hell. This is one reason they claim to not believe in God.

Richard Dawkins said, “I am persuaded that 'child abuse' is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like...eternal hell.”

Richard Dawkins said, “Who will say with confidence that sexual abuse is more permanently damaging to children than threatening them with the eternal and unquenchable fires of hell?”

The traditional doctrine of hell is also under attack by Christians who have rejected the traditional teaching of the church.

In 1935 **George Buttrick** was a popular preacher who wrote, “A God who punishes men with fire and brimstone through all eternity would hardly be Godlike; he would be almost as Satanic in cruelty, like a child in imagination, like a nasty little boy pulling off the wings of a fly. The Christian faith is that God here and hereafter is like Christ.”

The late liberal theologian, **Clark Pinnock**, said, "I consider the concept of hell as endless torment of body and mind an outrageous doctrine. 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 God."

If some Christians deny the doctrine of eternal punishment, then what is the alternative?

II. THE ALTERNATIVES TO ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

1. Universalism.

What is universalism? Theologian **Cornelis Venema** wrote, "Universalism is the teaching that, in the end, all human beings will be saved. No human being will ultimately fail to enjoy the fullness of salvation, by whatever means that salvation is obtained."

There are different views of universalism.

Some believe that those who have never heard the gospel will have an opportunity after death to hear the gospel and accept Christ.

Others believe in purgatory, where those people who are not fit for heaven immediately after death will spend time suffering and purging until they are ready for heaven.

But this position is easily dismissed if you believe the Bible.

Matthew 25:46 says, "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

This is one of many verses that clearly show that not all will be saved. Some will inherit eternal life, and some will inherit eternal punishment.

2. Annihilationism.

Annihilationism presents a more difficult challenge to orthodox Christianity because its arguments are biblically based. That is, advocates for annihilationism use the Bible to support their view. But once you look at their arguments more closely, you will see that they are very weak.

What is annihilationism? **Cornelis P. Venema** said, “Annihilationism is the view that while those who are saved enjoy everlasting life in God’s presence in the life to come, all those who are lost will ultimately be annihilated. Those who are lost will not suffer unending torment in hell. Rather, the punishment of the wicked will take its final form in their extinction. The punishment of the wicked is eternal in the sense of result, but not in the sense of experience.”

There are many different forms of annihilationism.

The most popular view is called **conditional immortality**, which is the belief that people are not created to be immortal. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, God gives them the gift of immortality, and after death they live forever with God in heaven. But those who do not believe in Christ are not given the gift of immortality and therefore after death they are annihilated, or cease to exist.

Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, believe that after death unbelievers will simply cease to exist. And this forever-annihilation is the definition of eternal punishment. It is not an eternal punishment of experience, but of result.

Another group, **Seventh-day Adventists**, believe something different. In their view, after death an unbeliever does go to hell, but not forever. After a period of time in heaven, which is based on their sins on earth, then they will eventually be destroyed and cease to exist. This is the most popular form of annihilationism today.

III. ARGUMENTS AGAINST ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Why do some people, even those who claim to believe the Bible and follow Christ, reject the traditional doctrine of eternal punishment? Let's look at the arguments that are used against eternal punishment.

1. The word "destruction" means annihilation.

Matthew 10:28 says, "Don't fear those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul; rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell."

The argument is that when we use the word destroy, it usually means annihilation, or ceasing to exist. Therefore, what this verse means is that when unbelievers die, they will be destroyed, ceasing to exist, rather than suffering for eternity in hell.

This is a really weak argument. Why? Because the word destroy (Gk. *Apollymi*) is used a number of times in the Bible to refer to other things, and it never means annihilation, or ceasing to exist.

For example, Luke 15 tells three parables – the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost Son.

The word "lost" is the same Greek word, *apollymi*.

So here, the coin, sheep, and Son are lost, but they did not cease to exist.

Instead, the word *apollymi* in this context refers to the experience of separation. And that's what hell is. It is eternal separation from God.

One more example should suffice. Matthew 9:17 speaks of wineskins "bursting" or "ruining."

The Greek word for “bursting” is *apollymi*, the same word that is translated destroy, or perish, or destruction, or lost.

In this case you could say that the wineskins were destroyed, but they did not cease to exist.

This is another reality of hell. Just as the wineskins are ruined because do not fulfill their purpose, people who go to hell are ruined because they do not fulfill their purpose, which is to live forever in heaven with God.

So the point is that if the word *apollymi*, “destroy,” doesn’t always mean annihilation or ceasing to exist when it refers to other things, then it doesn’t have to mean annihilation when it is referring to the eternal fate of unbelievers.

2. The word “fire” means annihilation.

Hell is often described in the Bible as a place of fire; hellfire; a blazing furnace; the lake of fire.

So annihilationists say that since fire totally consumes things, then the imagery of hellfire means that unbelievers will be consumed and cease to exist.

But there are a couple of problems here.

First, it is not possible to interpret the imagery of hell with too much literalism.

For example, the Bible describes hell as a place of fire, and also a place of darkness.

How is that possible? The Bible describes hell as a place of fire, but once it consumes all the people, how does the fire keep going? What is its fuel?

The Bible describes hell as a place where the worm does not die. It is a place where not only are people being consumed by fire, but are being eaten by worms.

But if hell is a place of fire, then how does it not consume the worms? And how do the worms stay alive after they have eaten all the people?

Bible scholars have concluded that the best way to interpret the passages on hell is that the imagery of fire means that hell is going to be a place of pain and suffering; and the imagery of darkness means that hell is going to be a place of separation from the light of God's presence.

Whether there is going to be a real fire, or real darkness, or real worms, it's hard to know.

A second problem with the argument that the imagery of fire means the annihilation of the wicked is that there are actually examples in the Bible of things being on fire, but not being burned up and consumed.

For example, the book of Exodus tells the story of Moses and the burning bush. The bush was on fire, but it was not burning up.

And then in the book of Daniel we learn about the three young Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who were thrown into the fiery furnace but they did not burn up.

So if God is able to prevent the bush and the young men from being annihilated by the flames, then He is able to keep unbelievers from being annihilated by the flames of hell.

3. Eternal punishment can refer to a result and not an experience.

Matthew 25:46 says, "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Advocates of annihilationism argue that eternal punishment doesn't have to mean an eternal experience of punishment; rather, the eternal punishment can mean that a person ceases to exist for eternity.

But there are several problems with this argument.

Annihilation is not an eternal punishment. It is hardly a punishment at all, because you are unaware that you are being punished.

As well, it doesn't make sense to say that the word "punishment" means annihilation. The phrase "eternal annihilation" does not make sense. Of course annihilation is eternal.

That's similar to saying, "Yesterday I had to cut my grassy grass."

There are other verses about hell that make it very clear that hell is an eternal, conscious experience, and not just a result.

Matthew 13:42 describes hell as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth." That's obviously a description punishment, not annihilation.

Mark 9:43 calls hell "the unquenchable fire." Unquenchable is different from eternal. Unquenchable paints a picture of an ongoing experience.

Luke 16 tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

When the rich man dies, he goes to hell, or Hades, and it describes his experience.

Luke 16:23-24 says, "23 And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side. 24 'Father Abraham!' he called out, 'Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!'"

The rich man did not cease to exist; his hell was an experience of pain and torment.

But perhaps the clearest language of eternal punishment is found in the book of Revelation. Revelation 14:10-11 says, “10 he will also drink the wine of God’s wrath, which is poured full strength into the cup of his anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb, 11 and the smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or anyone who receives the mark of its name.”

Two phrases in this passage are impossible dismiss.

“And the smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever.”

“There is no rest day or night.” Hell is indeed a place of everlasting, conscience punishment.

4. Eternal punishment is incompatible with the love of God.

The last two arguments don’t attempt to reinterpret Scripture. Instead they argue from a theological perspective. In other words, regardless of how clear the Bible’s teaching on hell is, a place of eternal conscious torment cannot exist because that idea is incompatible with the love of God.

This position makes the mistake of presenting the love of God as either His supreme attribute, or His only attribute. But the Bible teaches that God is not just love; God is also holy and just. God is not just the Creator and Savior of mankind, but the supreme judge of mankind.

Out of love God extends the offer of salvation to all sinner who will repent and trust in Christ. But out of justice God must punish sinners who do not put their hope in Christ.

The Bible is very clear that God does not want anyone to go to hell.

1 Timothy 2:4 says that God “... wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord does not delay his promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.”

God does not want to punish sinners because He loves them, and He has gone to great lengths to save sinners.

But God’s justice demands that sinners repent and put their faith in shed blood of Jesus Christ; and those who do not will have to pay for their own sins.

Be sure that you do not confuse real love with modern conceptions of love.

Modern conceptions of love mean that you don’t spank your kids; you don’t correct your kids; you don’t deny your kids; you don’t tell your neighbor that they are wrong, or that their behavior is sinful. That’s not real love.

Real love is doing what is best for someone; it giving someone what they need, and not what they want.

Real love does not violate holiness and justice, but works in harmony with them. And that’s what God’s love does.

God is both loving and just. Sinners can accept His love, or they will have to face His justice.

5. Eternal punishment is incompatible with the justice of God.

It is self-evident to us that the crime must fit the punishment.

So annihilationists argue, “Okay, so let’s agree for the moment that God must punish sinners in order to retain His just nature.

But why should people have suffer for all eternity for sins that they committed in their short lifetime? Doesn’t the penalty far outweigh the crime?”

Two things need to be said in response.

First, if someone doesn’t believe their sin deserves eternal punishment, it is because they underestimate the nature of sin, and the nature of God.

God is infinite; so when a person sins against and infinite God, their punishment must be infinite.

The sinfulness of an act varies according to whom it is committed against.

Most people wouldn’t think it is a sin for me to pull the legs off of a fly.

If I pulled the wings off of a butterfly, most people would be upset, but they still wouldn’t call it a sin.

If I pulled the wings off of a blue jay, people would say that is a sin.

If I pulled the legs off of a golden retriever, most people would say that is an even worse sin.

And if I pulled the legs off of a child, people would say that that is an infinitely worse sin.

As well, people would say that the penalty for pulling the legs off of a dog should be different than the penalty for pulling the legs off of a child.

In the same way, it's one thing to sin against another person; but sinning against almighty God, creator of the universe, infinite, eternal, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent, then your sin is infinitely worse.

The Puritan **Thomas Watson** wrote, "Because sin is committed against an infinite majesty, and therefore the sin itself is infinite, the proportionally of the punishment must be infinite. Because a finite creature cannot bear infinite wrath, he must be eternally satisfying what he can never satisfy."

As well, it is important to realize that just as there are degrees of rewards in heaven, there are also degrees of punishments in hell.

Hitler will not receive the same punishment as your neighbor who is a good person but doesn't believe in Christ. They will both go to hell for eternity; but they will each receive a just reward.

2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

Hell will not be a blanket, one-size-fits-all punishment.

The Bible says that God's judgment is righteous (2 Thess 1:5-10); and that God judges impartially (1 Pet 1:17).

God will punish each person in hell in a perfectly fair and just way, according to what they deserve.

IV. THE BIBLICAL TEACHING ON HELL

So the ideas of universalism (all will be saved) and annihilationism (hell is not eternal) are clearly unbiblical.

What exactly does the Bible teach about hell?

The Bible uses two different words to describe where unbelievers go after death. The first is the word Hades. The Greek word Hades refers to the place of punishment in the intermediate state, while you wait for the final judgment. This is where departed, unbelieving spirits go right after death. It is not hell; it is a temporary place of punishment before hell. In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man didn't go to hell; he went to Hades. But the experience of Hades seems to be very similar to that of hell. The story in Luke 16 says that it is a place of torment, fire, and a place of separation from God.

The second word is Gehenna. When you read the word "hell" in your Bible, it is almost always translating the Greek word Gehenna. Where did the word Gehenna come from? Just south of Jerusalem there is a valley called the Valley of Hinnom, or in Hebrew, Ge Hinnom. Early in Israel's history it was a place of idol worship and child sacrifice; parents would sacrifice their children to the Ammonite god Molech in days of King Ahaz and King Manasseh (2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; Jer 32:35). Then came King Josiah, who led the nation back to God. King Josiah turned the place into a trash heap where all the refuse of Jerusalem was dumped. The valley was always on fire, and it became a breeding ground for worms. As well, the bodies of dead animals and criminals were thrown into the valley to rot and burn. As you can imagine, Gehenna had a horrible stench. So Jesus took the place of Gehenna and used it as a metaphor for hell, the place of eternal punishment for unbelievers.

It is important to understand that much, if not most of what we know about hell comes from the very words of Jesus. There are 1,830 verses in the New Testament that contain the words of Jesus. Of those, 13% deal with hell. If you do a word count, Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about heaven. **John Piper** writes, "The word hell (*gehenna*) occurs in the New Testament twelve times - eleven on the lips of Jesus. It is not a myth created by dismal and angry preachers. It is a solemn warning of the Son of God who died to deliver sinners from its curse. We ignore it at great risk."¹

What did Jesus teach about hell?

¹ *Desiring God*, 58.

- He called it hellfire, or the hell of fire (Mt 5:22)
- It is a place of eternal fire (Mt 18:8)
- Hell an unquenchable fire (Mk 9:43, 48)
- It is a place of eternal punishment (Mt 25:46)
- He described hell as a place of outer darkness (Mt 8:12). **John Piper** wrote, "In other words, all the joys that we associate with light will be withdrawn, and all the fears that we associate with darkness will be multiplied. And the result will be an intensity of misery that makes a person grind his teeth in order to bear it."²
- He described hell as a blazing furnace, or a fiery furnace (Mt 13:41-42)
- He described hell as a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 13:42). In other words, extreme pain and sorrow.
- Hell was originally prepared for the devil and his angels (Mt 25:41)
- Hell is a place where their worm does not die (Mk 9:48). The imagery used here is of people in hell being eaten alive non-stop by maggots.
- God is to be feared, because He has the authority to throw a person in hell (Lk 12:4-5).
- Hell is a place of torment and agony (Lk 16:23-24).
- Hell is a place where unbelievers perish (Jn 3:16).
- Hell is the wrath of God remaining on a person (Jn 3:16).

Pastor Robert Jeffress summarized Jesus' teaching on hell like this. 1) Jesus taught the pain of hell. 2) The finality of hell. It unending and irreversible. 3) Jesus taught the justice of hell. No one is there who doesn't deserve to be there.

What do the apostles teach about hell?

- Hell is a place for those who don't know God and who don't obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus (2 Thess 1:8).
- Hell is a place of flaming fire (2 Thess 1:8).
- Hell is a penalty of eternal destruction (2 Thess 1:9).
- Hell is an eternal separation from the Lord's presence and his glorious strength (2 Thess 1:9).
- Hell is referred to as the gloom of darkness (2 Pet 2:17).
- Hell is described as a place of eternal fire where there is the blackness of darkness forever (Jude 7, 13).

² *What Jesus Demands*, p. 92.

- Hell is a place where the wrath of God is poured full strength into the cup of anger (Rev 14:10-11).
- Hell is a place where unbelievers will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb (Rev 14:10).
- In hell, the smoke of the torment of unbelievers will go up forever and ever, and there will be no rest day or night (Rev 14:11).
- Hell is will also be the eternal punishment of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet in the book of Revelation (Rev 20:10).
- Hell is called the lake of fire and the second death (Rev 20:15).
- Hell is reserved for anyone whose name is not found in the book of life (Rev 20:15).
- Hell is called the lake that burns with fire and Sulphur; it is reserved for the cowards, faithless, detestable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars (Rev 21:8).

V. THE IMPLICATIONS OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

The Bible clearly teaches the reality of hell as a place of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked. Since that is true, what are the implications for us?

1. **Since hell is real, we should be extreme in our efforts to evangelize the world.** All those who die without Christ will spend eternity in hell. One time **Jerry Fallwell** was asked on TV, “Do you really believe that people will go to hell if they don’t believe in Jesus?” Jerry said, “I’m telling you my own children will go to hell if they don’t believe in Jesus.”
2. **Since hell is real, we should urgently confirm the reality of our own salvation.** **Philippians 2:12** says, “Therefore, my dear friends, just as you have always obeyed, so now, not only in my presence but even more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

VI. CONCLUSION

Pastor **Alan Carr** preached a sermon called “The 5 Most Shocking Things in the Bible.” They are...

1. That there is a place called hell.
2. That there is a population in hell (in fact, more in hell than in heaven).
3. That there is a paradox in hell: Many who expect to make to heaven will actually end up in hell.
4. That there is a problem with hell: The problem is that you could be there today!
5. That there is a permanence to hell: Hell is eternal.

The doctrine of hell is shocking. But it is true.

Are you sure you are going to heaven?

Jesus died on the cross for your sins so you don't have to go there. His death was the payment for your sins. And God offers the gift of forgiveness and eternal life to whoever repents of their sins and believes in Jesus Christ as Savior and King. You can do that right now with a simple prayer, declaring your faith in Jesus Christ as died and risen, and asking God to save you, and committing your life to Christ.