

Chapter 41

C. What Happens When People Die

2.The Souls of Unbelievers Go Immediately to Eternal Punishment

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Scripture never encourages us to think that people will have a second chance to trust in Christ after death. In fact, the situation is quite the contrary. Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus gives no hope that people can cross from hell to heaven after they have died: though the rich man in hell called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame," Abraham replied to him, "Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and *none may cross from there to us*" (Luke 16:24–26).

The book of Hebrews connects death with the consequence of judgment in close sequence: "just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment . . ." (Heb. 9:27). Moreover, Scripture never represents the final judgment as depending on anything done after we die but only on what has happened in this life (Matt. 25:31–46; Rom. 2:5–10; cf. 2 Cor. 5:10). Some have argued for a second chance to believe in the gospel on the basis of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3:18–20 and the preaching of the gospel "even to those who are dead" in 1 Peter 4:6, but those are inadequate interpretations of the verses in question and, on closer inspection, do not support such a view.²⁵

We should also realize that the idea that there will be a second chance to accept Christ after death is based on the assumption that everyone deserves a chance to accept Christ and that eternal punishment only comes to those who consciously decide to reject him. But certainly that idea is not supported by Scripture: we all are sinners by nature and choice, and no one actually deserves any of God's grace or deserves any opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ—those come only because of God's unmerited favor. Condemnation comes not only because of a willful rejection of Christ but also because of the sins that we have committed and the rebellion against God that those sins represent (see John 3:18).

The idea that people have a second chance to accept Christ after death would also destroy most motivation for evangelism and missionary activity today. Furthermore, it is not

consistent with the intense missionary zeal that was felt by the New Testament church as a whole, as exemplified in the missionary travels of the apostle Paul.

The fact that there is eternal conscious punishment for unbelievers after they die is certainly a difficult doctrine for us to contemplate. But the passages teaching it appear so clear that it seems that we must affirm it if we are to affirm what Scripture teaches. Jesus says that at the day of final judgment he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels,” and he says that “these will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:41, 46).²⁶

These passages show that we cannot accept as faithful to Scripture the doctrine of *annihilationism*. This is a doctrine that says that unbelievers, either immediately upon death, or else after suffering for a period of time, will simply cease to exist—God will “annihilate” them and they will no longer be. Although the idea initially sounds attractive to us, and it avoids the emotional difficulty connected with affirming eternal conscious punishment for the wicked, such an idea is not explicitly affirmed in any passages of Scripture, and seems so clearly to be contradicted by those passages that connect the eternal blessing of the righteous with the eternal punishment of the wicked (Matt. 25:46) and that talk about punishment extending to the wicked day and night forever (Rev. 14:11; 20:10).²⁷

Although unbelievers pass into a state of eternal punishment immediately upon death, their bodies will not be raised until the day of final judgment. On that day, their bodies will be raised and reunited with their souls, and they will stand before God’s throne for final judgment to be pronounced upon them in the body (see Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; and Rev. 20:12, 15).²⁸

Chapter 56

G. Hell

The Final Judgement and Eternal Punishment

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It is appropriate to discuss the doctrine of hell in connection with the doctrine of final judgment. We may define hell as follows: *hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked*. Scripture teaches in several passages that there is such a place. At the end of the parable of the talents, the master says, “Cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt.

25:30). This is one among several indications that there will be consciousness of punishment after the final judgment. Similarly, at the judgment the king will say to some, “Depart from me, you cursed, into *the eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41), and Jesus says that those thus condemned “will go away into *eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46).⁸ In this text, the parallel between “eternal life” and “eternal punishment” indicates that both states will be without end.⁹

Jesus refers to hell as “the unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43) and says that hell is a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).¹⁰ The story of the rich man and Lazarus also indicates a horrible consciousness of punishment: “The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame’ ” (Luke 16:22–24). He then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his father’s house, “for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into *this place of torment*” (Luke 16:28).

When we turn to Revelation, the descriptions of this eternal punishment are also explicit:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. *And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night*, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. (Rev. 14:9–11)

This passage very clearly affirms the idea of eternal conscious punishment of unbelievers.

With respect to the judgment on the wicked city of Babylon, a large multitude in heaven cries, “Hallelujah! *The smoke from her goes up forever and ever*” (Rev. 19:3). After the final rebellion of Satan is crushed, we read, “The devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and *they will be tormented day and night forever and ever*” (Rev. 20:10). This passage is also significant in connection with Matthew 25:41, in which unbelievers are sent “into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” These verses should make us realize the immensity of the evil that is found in sin and rebellion against God and the magnitude of the holiness and the justice of God that calls forth this kind of punishment.

The idea that there will be *eternal* conscious punishment of unbelievers has been denied recently even by some evangelical theologians.¹¹ It has previously been denied by the

Seventh Day Adventist Church and by various individuals throughout church history. Those who deny eternal conscious punishment often advocate “*annihilationism*,” a teaching that, after the wicked have suffered the penalty of God’s wrath for a time, God will “annihilate” them so that they no longer exist.¹² Many who believe in annihilationism also hold to the reality of final judgment and punishment for sin, but they argue that after sinners have suffered for a certain period of time, bearing the wrath of God against their sin, they will finally cease to exist. The punishment will therefore be “conscious” but it will not be “eternal.”¹³

Arguments advanced in favor of annihilationism are (1) the biblical references to the *destruction* of the wicked, which, some say, implies that they will no longer exist after they are destroyed (Phil. 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2 Peter 3:7, et al.); (2) the apparent inconsistency of eternal conscious punishment with the *love of God*; (3) the apparent injustice involved in the *disproportion* between sins committed in time and punishment that is eternal; and (4) the fact that the *continuing presence of evil creatures in God’s universe* will eternally mar the perfection of a universe that God created to reflect his glory.

In response, (1) it must be said that the passages which speak of *destruction* (such as Phil. 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2 Peter 3:7) do not necessarily imply the cessation of existence, for in these passages the terms used for “destruction” can simply be ways of referring to the harmful and destructive effects of final judgment on unbelievers, and they do not necessarily imply a ceasing to exist or some kind of annihilation.¹⁴

(2) With respect to the argument from the love of God, the same difficulty in reconciling God’s love with eternal punishment would seem to be present in reconciling God’s love with the idea of divine punishment at all, and, conversely, if (as Scripture abundantly testifies) it is consistent for God to punish the wicked for a certain length of time after the last judgment, then there seems to be no necessary reason why it would be inconsistent of God to inflict the same punishment for an unending period of time.

This kind of reasoning may lead some people to adopt another kind of annihilationism, one in which there is no conscious suffering at all, not even for a brief time, and the only punishment is that unbelievers cease to exist after they die. But, in response, it may be wondered whether this kind of immediate annihilation can really be called a punishment, since there would be no consciousness of pain. In fact, the guarantee that there would be a cessation of existence would seem to many people, especially those who are suffering and in difficulty in this life, to be in some ways a desirable alternative. And if there was no punishment of unbelievers at all, even people like Hitler and Stalin would have nothing coming to them, and there would be no ultimate justice in the universe. Then people would have great incentive to be as wicked as possible in this life.

(3) The argument that *eternal* punishment is unfair (because there is a disproportion between temporary sin and eternal punishment) wrongly assumes that we know the extent of the evil done when sinners rebel against God. David Kingdon observes that “sin against the Creator is heinous to a degree utterly beyond our sin-warped imaginations’ [ability] to conceive of. . . . Who would have the temerity to suggest to God what the punishment . . . should be?”¹⁵ He also responds to this objection by suggesting that unbelievers in hell may go on sinning, receiving punishment for their sin, and never repenting, and notes that Revelation 22:11 points in this direction: “Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy.”¹⁶

At this point, moreover, an argument based on God’s justice may be brought against annihilationism. Does the short time of punishment envisaged by the annihilationist actually *pay* for all of the unbeliever’s sin and satisfy God’s justice? If it does not, then God’s justice has not been satisfied and the unbeliever should not be annihilated. But if it does, then the unbeliever should be allowed to go to heaven, and he or she should not be annihilated. In either case, annihilationism is not necessary or right.

(4) Regarding the fourth argument, while evil *that remains unpunished* does detract from God’s glory in the universe, we also must realize that when God *punishes* evil and *triumphs* over it, the glory of his justice, righteousness, and power to triumph over all opposition will be seen (see Rom. 9:17, 22–24). The depth of the riches of God’s mercy will also then be revealed, for all redeemed sinners will recognize that they too deserve such punishment from God and have avoided it only by God’s grace through Jesus Christ (cf. Rom. 9:23–24).

Yet after all this has been said, we have to admit that the ultimate resolution of the depths of this question lies far beyond our ability to understand, and it remains hidden in the counsels of God. Were it not for the scriptural passages cited above that so clearly affirm eternal conscious punishment, annihilationism might seem to us to be an attractive option. Though annihilationism can be countered by theological arguments, it is ultimately the clarity and forcefulness of the passages themselves that convince us that annihilationism is incorrect and that Scripture does indeed teach the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked.

Because the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment is so foreign to the thought patterns of our culture and, on a deeper level, to our instinctive and God-given sense of love and desire for redemption for every human being created in God’s image, this doctrine is emotionally one of the most difficult doctrines for Christians to affirm today. It also tends to be one of the first doctrines given up by people who are moving away from a commitment to the Bible as absolutely truthful in all that it affirms. Among liberal theologians who do not

accept the absolute truthfulness of the Bible, there is probably no one today who believes in the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment.

What then are we to think of this doctrine? It is hard—and it should be hard—for us to think of this doctrine today. If our hearts are never moved with deep sorrow when we contemplate this doctrine, then there is a serious deficiency in our spiritual and emotional sensibilities. When Paul thinks of the lostness of his kinsmen the Jews, he says, “I have *great sorrow and unceasing anguish* in my heart” (Rom. 9:2). This is consistent with what God tells us of his own sorrow at the death of the wicked: “As I live, declares the Lord God, *I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked*, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11). And Jesus’ agony is evident as he cries out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! See, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:37–38; cf. Luke 19:41–42).

The reason it is hard for us to think of the doctrine of hell is because God has put in our hearts a portion of his love for people created in his image, even his love for sinners who rebel against him. As long as we are in this life, and as long as we see and think about others who need to hear the gospel and trust in Christ for salvation, it should cause us great distress and agony of spirit to think about eternal punishment. Yet we must also realize that whatever God in his wisdom has ordained and taught in Scripture is *right*. Therefore, we must be careful that we do not hate this doctrine or rebel against it, but rather we should seek, insofar as we are able, to come to the point where we acknowledge that eternal punishment is good and right, because in God there is no unrighteousness at all.

It may help us to realize that if God were not to execute eternal punishment, then, apparently, his justice would not be satisfied and his glory would not be furthered in the way he deems wise. And it will perhaps also help us to realize that from the perspective of the world to come there is a much greater recognition of the necessity and rightness of eternal punishment. Martyred believers in heaven are heard by John to cry out, “O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10). Moreover, at the final destruction of Babylon, the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven cries out with praise to God for the rightness of his judgment as they finally see the heinous nature of evil for what it really is: “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of his servants. . . . Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up

forever and ever” (Rev. 19:1–3). As soon as this happened, “the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who was seated on the throne, saying, ‘Amen. Hallelujah!’ ” (Rev. 19:4). We cannot say that this great multitude of the redeemed and the living creatures in heaven have wrong moral judgment when they praise God for executing justice on evil, for they are all free from sin and their moral judgments are pleasing to God.

In this present age, however, we should only approach such a celebration of the justice of God in the punishment of evil when we meditate on the eternal punishment given to Satan and his demons. When we think of them we do not instinctively love them, though they too were created by God. But now they are fully devoted to evil and beyond the potential of redemption. So we cannot long for their salvation as we long for the redemption of all humanity. We must believe that eternal punishment is true and just, yet we should also long that even those people who most severely persecute the church should come to faith in Christ and thus escape eternal condemnation.