

Conditional Immortality (Hell or Annihilation?)

"... you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes ..." (Mal. 4:3)

In the making.

Will the unsaved suffer eternally in the Lake of Fire or be annihilated after a period of punishment? It's hard to get past the fact that the natural meanings of many words point to annihilation. Words like "die", "death", "everlasting destruction", "perish", "consume", "they will be ashes" and "will not see life", all have the natural meaning of a complete end to life. To support eternal torment, the normal meanings of these words have to be turned upside down and redefined to say things like -

- "*die*" actually means to live on in eternal torment. (Rom. 8:13)
- "*death*" is not the absence of life but endless life in the Lake of Fire. (Rom. 6:23)
- "*everlasting destruction*" never actually destroys. (2 Thess. 1:9)
- "*perish*" means to live on and somehow keep on perishing forever in a fire. (John 3:16)
- "*consume God's enemies*" doesn't mean that the fire consumes as we know it. (Heb. 10:27)
- "*they will be ashes*" means being in a conscience state, not lifeless like ashes. (Mal. 4:1-3)
- "*will not see life*" actually means "will see life in unending torment". (John 3:36)

More examples can be given but this is enough to make the point. Surely a doctrine that needs new definitions for such plain language is on shaky ground. What other doctrine do we accept that openly reverses (twists) the natural meaning of simple words? The fact is, when someone presents us with a doctrine based on peculiar interpretations we reject it outright, and rightly so, but not so with the doctrine of eternal torment in hell.

Is our soul immortal?

In John 6:51, Jesus said, "*I am the living bread ... if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever*". If we are already immortal then why did Jesus tell us that we need to eat of Him to live forever? The fact is, the Bible clearly teaches that man has been mortal since Creation. Gen. 3:22-24 say that God removed Adam and Eve from the Garden so that they could not eat from the Tree of Life and live forever and 1 Tim. 6:16 plainly states that only God is immortal. However, Rom. 2:7 tells us that God *grants* immortality (eternal life) *to those who persevere in the faith*. The Bible says nothing about the unsaved becoming immortal therefore they can be annihilated. Jesus confirms this in Matt. 10:28 saying to fear Him who can kill and destroy *both* body and soul in hell, so God can put an end to the existence of both body and soul. The Bible clearly tells us that man is mortal but will be granted immortality on the condition that he perseveres in the faith (Rom. 2:7), hence the term Conditional Immortality. Also, 1 Cor. 15:51-54 say that at the last trumpet, the mortal will be clothed with immortality. How can this make sense if we are already immortal?

In Matt. 10:28, destroy and kill mean same thing.

Regarding the meaning of destroy, Jesus uses "destroy" and "kill" interchangeably in Matt. 10:28. He said, "*Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.*" Jesus changed from saying or "kill the body" to "destroy the body" so it is obvious that "destroy" and "kill" have the same meaning in this context. Jesus is saying not to be afraid of man who can only kill the body but rather be afraid of God who can kill *both* body and soul. When something is killed, it loses all life so killing or destroying both body and soul means loss of life for both body and soul - total annihilation in the Lake of Fire, with no hope of resurrection.

Eternal punishment

Matt. 25:46 tells us that we face two possible outcomes, namely eternal life or eternal punishment. Everyone agrees that eternal life means living forever however eternal punishment does not necessarily mean that the punishing continues eternally because -

- Even though the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah is no longer burning, it is called an eternal fire because its results are eternal (Jude 1:7).
- Likewise, Heb. 5:9, 6:2 & 9:12 speak of eternal salvation, eternal judgment and eternal redemption even though the saving, judging and redeeming do not continue eternally. They are completed in Glory but all are referred to as being eternal because their results are eternal.
- In the same way, annihilation puts an end to the punishing but it can be called eternal punishment because its results are eternal.
- Our earthly death is not eternal because we will be resurrected but there is no resurrection following the Second Death in the Lake of Fire. It's an eternal death *without hope of resurrection*.

Weeping and gnashing of teeth

Regarding weeping and gnashing of teeth, Matt. 13:42 tells us that the unsaved will be thrown into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Many believe that this is proof of eternal torment in the furnace but it doesn't make sense to say that the weeping and gnashing of teeth occurs in the furnace because -

- Who could possibly weep in an incinerator? They could only scream in the blistering heat.
- The term "*gnashing of teeth*" is used in Job 16:9, Psa. 37:12, Lam. 2:16 and Act 7:54 and in each case it is an expression of anger, not pain.

So, when Jesus said, "*There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out*" (Luke 13:28), He is saying that, at the Great White Throne Judgment, some of the lost will weep in fear and sorrow while others will angrily gnash their teeth at God as they face being annihilated in the Lake of Fire.

Revelation 14 - "*the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever*"

Rev. 14:9-11 are talking specifically about those who worship the Beast during the Great Tribulation. The verses say, "⁹*If anyone worships [present tense] the Beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand ... ¹⁰he will be tormented [future tense] with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. ¹¹And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship [present tense] the Beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name". "Worship" is present tense, telling us that these verses are speaking about those who are worshipping the Beast during the Tribulation period. Young's Literal Translation says, "*they have no rest day and night, who are bowing before the Beast and his image". "Bowing before the Beast" can only happen during the Great Tribulation so these verses are not talking about torment in the Lake of Fire but about the suffering of those who worship the Beast during the Tribulation.**

Regarding "*no rest day and night*", this is only referring to the people who are worshipping the Beast during the Tribulation period. Among other things, the Bowls of wrath cause painful sores and intense heat which will result in the Beast worshipers having no rest day or night.

Regarding "*tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb*", the word "*tormented*" is future tense telling us that, as well as having no rest day or night during the Tribulation, those who worship the Beast will also suffer torment with burning sulfur later on at the Great White Throne judgment. This can hardly be talking about eternal punishment as Jesus would not choose to spend eternity watching people being tormented with burning sulfur. This torment is punishment prior to being thrown into the Lake of Fire and annihilated.

Regarding "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever", this is not talking about torment going on forever but about smoke rising forever – a big difference. In Isa. 34:10 we are told that the smoke of Edom "will rise forever" but we know that this is not true because the smoke of Edom ceased rising long ago. The term "will rise forever" is a figure of speech and simply means that the destruction of Edom will never be forgotten.

Regarding the word "forever", it is a bad translation of the **Hebrew** word "olam". The definition of "olam" is "time concealed"; an indefinite period of time. It means forever when used in reference to God (e.g. Psa. 45:6) but not necessarily so in other cases. It was translated into **Greek** as "unto the ages" which in turn was translated into **English** as "forever" despite the fact that an age is not forever but a particular period of time. So, the Hebrew word "olam", which means "time concealed", has become "forever" in English and this mistranslation has brought about much confusion.

The translation of "olam" to "forever" or "everlasting" has caused many other apparent contradictions such in Ex. 40:13-15 where the Aaronic priesthood is said to be everlasting yet we know that it has been replaced by Jesus' priesthood (Heb. 7:11-24) so obviously "olam" does not mean "everlasting" in these verses. Furthermore, a serious problem would arise if "olam" did mean "everlasting" in these verses. It would mean that the Jews could rightly argue that Jesus can't be the new high priest because, according to these verses, Aaron's Levitical priesthood is everlasting. Another example is in Ex. 21:2-6 where a slave who wants to stay with his master, rather than be freed, has his ear pierced and remains a servant "forever". Obviously this should read "for life".

Regarding "the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful" (Rev. 14:12), the word "obey" is present tense just like "worship" in the previous verses. So this is telling us that at the same time as people are worshiping the Beast during the Tribulation, the saints are patiently persevering in obedience to God and remaining faithful. This makes it obvious that the passage Rev. 14:9-12 concerns the time of the Tribulation because no one will be worshiping the Beast after the Tribulation nor will the saints need to patiently persevere any longer as they will be in heaven.

Revelation 20:10

Rev 20:10 says, "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". A point to note is that there is no direct mention of humans being tormented in this verse.

Because Revelation is highly symbolic, there are many interpretations of what this verse really means and I can't say that I have the answer. Many believe that the Beast and False prophet are not human but entities that persecute believers.

The Beast: Rev. 13:1-8 tell us that a ten horned beast will come out of the sea and persecute the saints for 3 ½ years. Dan. 7 also says that a ten horned beast will come out of the sea and persecute the saints for 3 ½ years so they are obviously talking about the same Beast. Dan. 7:23-24 give additional information telling us that the Beast is a kingdom and the horns are kings so the ten horned Beast is not a person but a kingdom made up of ten kings who will persecute the saints.

The False Prophet: Rev. 13:11-18 tell us that "another" beast, known as the False Prophet, will come out of the earth - "another" is "allos" in Greek and means "another of the same type". The False Prophet has two horns and represents false religions which support the ten horned Beast.

For these reasons, some believe that the Beast and False Prophet are entities, not humans.

Beasts coming from the Abyss

Another thought is that the Beast and False prophet are not entities but demons. Rev. 11:7 & Rev. 17:8 speak of a Beast(s) who comes out of the Abyss. Only demons inhabit the Abyss so any beast that comes out of it must be a demon. In Rev. 16:13 it says, "Then I saw three evil spirits that looked

like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet". Here we have the Beast and the False Prophet performing actions similar to the Devil and this somewhat puts them on a par with him. These points lead to the thought that the Beast and False Prophet who are thrown into the Lake of Fire are demonic powers that possess the Beast that comes from the sea and False Prophet that comes from the earth in Rev. 13.

These thoughts tell us that the Beast and False Prophet are not humans but either evil entities or demons who will be thrown into the Lake of Fire to be destroyed. The book of Revelation is highly figurative and difficult to interpret. For example, how literal can the Lake of Fire be when an abstract thing like Death is said to be thrown into it (Rev. 20:14)? The Lake of Fire seems to be symbolic of something that will eventually destroy all evil.

The Devil

1 Tim. 6:16 tells us that only God is immortal but Luke 20:35-36 seems to contradict this, saying that the angels cannot die. However, the state of being unable to die is different from God's immortality. He alone possesses immortality within Himself (John 5:26). God created the angels in such a way that nothing in Creation can kill them but this does not mean He can't reverse things. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things and, having made the angels out of nothing, He can turn things around and return them to being nothing. Ezekiel 28:11-19 shows that angels can indeed be annihilated, if the cherub spoken of is a real angel. These verses say that the guardian cherub will be consumed by fire, reduced to ashes, come to a horrible end and be no more (vs.16-19) so he will obviously be annihilated.

Rev. 20:10 does say that the Devil will be tormented "*forever and ever*" but in Greek this is "unto the ages of ages" which does not necessarily mean forever.

The Great White Throne Judgement (Rev. 20:11-15)

At the Great White Throne Judgement, the unsaved will be judged according to what they have done and Luke 12:47-48 say that they will be punished in proportion to their sins. After a time of punishment, these mortal humans will be cast into the Lake of Fire where they will be annihilated in what is called the Second Death; the Devil, the Beast, the False Prophet, Death and Hades will all be thrown into the Lake of Fire to be totally destroyed, ceasing to exist and putting an end to all evil.

Isa. 66:24

This verse is about dead bodies being burned not people being eternally tormented.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

This passage is about the intermediate state between death and the Great White Throne Judgment so it has nothing to do with eternal, conscious punishment in the Lake of Fire. No one is thrown into the Lake of Fire until the Great White Throne judgment which is after the Millennium.

The horror of eternal torture

Think about eternal torment a little. What normal person could torture a dog in a fire for even one minute, for whatever reason? That would be a long, long time to listen to and watch the dog's horrific agony. The fact is, no sane person could do it yet the common belief is that God will torture rebellious humans for all eternity. Are we more merciful than God who tells us, "*Be merciful just as your Father is merciful*" (Luke 6:36)? No, we certainly are not. God is perfectly merciful and Mal. 4:1,3 gives us a very clear picture of how His justice and mercy will extend to the lost: "*¹Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace ... not a root or a branch will be left to them ... ³you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes*".

So, rather than be eternally tortured, after they have received their due punishment (Luke 12:47-48), the lost will be mercifully reduced to ashes in the Lake of Fire. 2 Pet. 2:6 confirms this, saying that the ungodly will be burned to ashes just as Sodom and Gomorrah were. After being annihilated, the unsaved will feel nothing and know nothing as they will be non-existent. God could not wipe away all our tears if we knew that friends and family were being eternally tortured (Rev. 21:3-4).

Everlasting destruction

2 Thess. 1:9 says that the unsaved will be "*punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord*" (NIV); "*shut out*" is not in the Greek. The verse should read something like "*the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord*" (ESV). Considering that God is omnipresent then only through annihilation, the cessation of life, can it be said that a person is away from God's presence. A living being cannot be separated from our omnipresent God; life has to cease for that to happen.

Finally, Phil. 3:19 (KJV) speaks of, "*the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction*". Thayer's dictionary defines "*end*" as, "termination, the limit at which a thing ceases to be". So the unsaved will cease to be when their life is terminated in the Lake of Fire. Rather than the punishment of the wicked continuing forever, Psa. 37:20 tells us, "*the wicked will perish ... they will vanish - vanish like smoke*".

A free book on Conditional Immortality (Annihilation), by D. Barry, can be download from - <http://www.hellhadesafterlife.com/conditionalimmortality.pdf>

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Mick Alexander
leeandmick@gmail.com
<http://www.ChristianIssues.biz>