

# DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ANNIHILATIONISM?

Robert A. Peterson

**I**n recent years a number of leading evangelicals have stated in writing that they believe in annihilationism—the view that ultimately the resurrected wicked will be obliterated and no longer exist. Michael Green, for example, wrote, “But it [Scripture] does not teach the conscious unending torment of those who are eternally separated from God.”<sup>1</sup>

In 1989 Philip Edgcumbe Hughes said, “The conception of the endlessness of the suffering of torment and of the endurance of ‘living’ death in hell stands in contradiction to this [biblical] teaching.”<sup>2</sup>

John Stott affirmed, “I also believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment.”<sup>3</sup> And according to John Wenham, “I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away.”<sup>4</sup>

Michael Green, Philip Hughes, John Stott, and John Wenham are four stalwarts of evangelical Christianity (in its Anglican expression), and four proponents of annihilationism (though with varying degrees of conviction, as the quotations suggest).

---

Robert A. Peterson is Professor of Systematic Theology, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1992), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 405–6.

<sup>3</sup> David L. Edwards and John R. W. Stott, *Evangelical Essentials: A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 320.

<sup>4</sup> John Wenham, “The Case for Conditional Immortality,” in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, ed. Nigel M. de S. Cameron (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 190.

What arguments do these respected evangelical thinkers adduce in support of this view? Are there good answers to these arguments? And what difference does it make whether Christians believe in annihilationism or eternal conscious punishment? This article seeks to address these questions, examining both biblical and theological arguments that are given in support of a view traditionally considered false.

### BIBLICAL ARGUMENTS

For more than fifty years John Wenham privately believed in annihilationism but hesitated to state it in print. In 1992, however, he was no longer hesitant when he penned "The Case for Conditional Immortality." Conditional immortality, or "conditionalism," for short, is the view that human beings are not innately immortal, but are only potentially so. God gives the gifts of eternal life and immortality to believers, and the unsaved, not having received immortality, ultimately go out of existence. Today the term "conditionalism" is frequently used as a synonym for annihilationism.

Wenham argues for conditionalism by writing that the words used to describe hell in the New Testament "in their natural connotation are words of destruction rather than words suggesting continuance in torment or misery."<sup>5</sup> He said he found 264 New Testament references to the destiny of the unsaved, and he assigns these references to various categories, four of which he believes teach annihilationism. These are references to fire, destruction, separation from God, and death.

#### FIRE

Gehenna, Wenham points out, refers to the garbage dump in the Hinnom Valley outside Jerusalem, where maggots and fire consumed the refuse (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). In Wenham's estimation, when Jesus called hell "the Gehenna of fire," He meant that those cast into it will be annihilated.

Wenham also asserts that Scripture's hellfire imagery (he lists twenty-six references) conveys annihilation. "Fire naturally suggests destruction and is much used for the destruction of what is worthless or evil."<sup>6</sup> He admits that fire in the Bible sometimes causes pain, as in the case of Dives (the name traditionally

---

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

given to the rich man in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19–31). But, he says, this is “a secondary use.” Fire chiefly signifies consumption, and therefore hellfire imagery conveys the idea of annihilation rather than endless torment.<sup>7</sup>

However, when Jesus warned of being “cast into the eternal fire . . . the fiery hell” (Gehenna, Matt. 18:8–9), this fate is awful because, unlike fires on earth, hell is where “the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44, 48). This is a picture of everlasting suffering, not of destruction.

Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the weeds bears out the fact that biblical hellfire imagery signifies pain: “Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:40–42).

Although Jesus referred in the parable to weeds being burned (v. 30), He did not use it to teach annihilationism. Instead, when He interpreted the weeds being thrown into the furnace, He spoke of suffering. The “furnace of fire” is a place characterized by “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 42), that is, by great anguish.<sup>8</sup>

In Jesus’ message about the sheep and the goats, He said the ungodly will be banished to “the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). John wrote that “the devil . . . was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Here fire denotes unending torment. This is the fate that awaits the devil, his angels, and unbelieving human beings alike.

How can Wenham claim that hellfire pictures consumption and only secondarily pain, when Revelation 14:10–11 states that the wicked “will be tormented with fire and brimstone. . . . And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night”?

The lake of fire is where the devil will be tormented endlessly (20:10), and where sinners will be cast (vv. 14–15); the lake of fire is said to be their place (21:8). Condemned human beings, therefore, will suffer forever in hell.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> In the parable of the net Jesus also described hell as “the furnace of fire,” where “there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 13:49–50). Here too hellfire imagery signifies terrible pain.

Contrary to Wenham's contention, the biblical pictures of fire and burning signify the endless suffering of the unrighteous in hell and not their annihilation.

#### DESTRUCTION

Wenham argues for conditionalism based on fifty-nine New Testament references to destruction, ruin, and the like. In particular he cites (a) Jesus' contrast between the broad "gate that leads to destruction" and the narrow "gate that leads to life" (Matt. 7:13), (b) Paul's warning that the enemies of Christ's cross will suffer "destruction" (Phil. 3:19), (c) Peter's words about "destructive heresies . . . bringing swift destruction" (2 Pet. 2:1), and John's statement that the beast will "go to destruction" (Rev. 17:8, 11). Wenham says these references to eternal ruin, destruction, and loss signify the literal destruction of the unsaved, that is, their annihilation.<sup>9</sup>

Considered in isolation, these verses might seem, at first glance, to teach conditionalism. But they should not be considered in isolation from the rest of the Bible's teaching. Verses such as Matthew 25:41, 46; Mark 9:42–48; Revelation 14:9–10; 20:10, 14–15 have led church leaders throughout the centuries to believe, teach, and confess the never-ending suffering of the lost.

Moreover, not all the passages Wenham cites are even compatible with annihilationism. He calls attention to Revelation 17:8, 11, which states that the beast will go to his destruction. True, this passage does say that, but not in the sense that Wenham understands the word "destruction."<sup>10</sup> He insists that the word "destruction" and its synonyms denote the extinction of the wicked. But the description of the beast's "destruction" that unfolds in the Book of Revelation does not mean he will cease to exist. Two chapters after the prophecy of the beast's "destruction" (17:8, 11) the beast and false prophet are "thrown alive into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone" (19:20). They will still be there "one thousand years" later (20:7, 10). Furthermore, John wrote, as already noted, that the beast, the false prophet, and Satan "will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (20:10). The beast's "destruction," therefore, is not annihilation; it is eternal punishment. This proves that at least two references to "destruction" signify endless torment, not extinction. It also opens the door for us to understand the remaining references in the same way, in light of all of Scripture.

---

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 171–72.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

## SEPARATION FROM GOD

Wenham bases his case for conditionalism on twenty New Testament references to separation from God, asserting that these references carry “no connotation of endlessness unless one presupposes immortality.”<sup>11</sup> Examples include Jesus’ words, “Depart from Me” (Matt. 7:23), “cast him into the outer darkness” (22:13), and “he is thrown away as a branch” (John 15:6). Wenham asserts that this separation means “being utterly cut off from the source and sustainer of life. It is another way of describing destruction.”<sup>12</sup>

Wenham’s argument is not convincing. Although some of the passages he cites could be construed as teaching annihilationism, at least three of the verses clash with it: Matthew 25:41, 46 and 2 Thessalonians 1:9. In Matthew 25:41 the returned Son of Man will consign the “goats” to hell, and will say, “Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.” Jesus banished the wicked from His presence of blessing into eternal fire. And as seen previously, that fate is plainly depicted in Revelation 20:10 as involving endless torment. So separation from Jesus’ presence in Matthew 25:41 means suffering forever in hell, not annihilation.

Surprisingly Wenham uses Matthew 25:46 to support the idea that separation should be understood as annihilation. This verse, the most often cited biblical declaration concerning hell, does not support his view. In this verse—“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”—“punishment” and “life” are both qualified by the same adjective “eternal.” It is difficult therefore to hold that the bliss of believers will last forever, but that punishment of the wicked will come to an end. Instead, one should conclude that conscious existence in heaven and hell is never-ending.

Wenham also claims that 2 Thessalonians 1:9–10 presents separation from God as extinction. There Paul taught that the ungodly “will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power when He comes to be glorified . . . and to be marveled at.” “Eternal destruction” will entail the wicked being forever excluded from the gracious presence of the Lord. This cannot be annihilation, for their separation presupposes their existence. Some conditionalists contend that being shut out from Christ’s presence means obliteration. Their argument goes like this: “(1) God’s presence

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

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>13</sup>

This argument, however, is based on a faulty understanding of God's presence in 2 Thessalonians 1:9. Here the presence of God is not His general omnipresence, with the idea that separation from His presence would mean nonexistence. Rather, the verse refers to Christ's revealing His special presence as King to His people. That is why Paul said that the unsaved are "shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (NIV).

#### DEATH

Wenham argues that twenty-five New Testament references to "death in its finality, sometimes called the second death," teach annihilationism.<sup>14</sup> But for the New Testament to refer to the final fate of the lost as "death" does not prove that they will be annihilated. These references are also compatible with the view that involves endless torment. In fact, annihilationism is false, because at least some of Wenham's proof texts contradict the notion that hell means extinction. These are the references to "the second death" in Revelation 20:6, 14; and 21:8. These last two verses equate the second death with "the lake of fire." And 20:10 states that in the lake of fire the devil, the beast, and the false prophet "will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

The "lake of fire" signifies eternal torment for the devil, the beast, and the false prophet, and four and five verses later (20:14–15) human beings are cast into the same lake of fire. Surely it means eternal torment for them too, in the absence of any indication of change of meaning. The words, "the lake of fire is the second death," disprove Wenham's contention that the language of death indicates extinction.

#### CONCLUSION

Wenham's strong conclusion, therefore, is unwarranted. "So both Old and New Testaments taken in their natural sense seem to be almost entirely, if not entirely, on the conditionalist side."<sup>15</sup> This is simply untrue. Verses in each of Wenham's four categories are irreconcilable with annihilationism: fire—Mark 9:44, 48; Matthew 25:41, 46; Revelation 14:10–11; 20:14–15; destruction—17:8, 11; 20:10; separation—Matthew 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalo-

<sup>13</sup> Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*, rev. ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1994), 155, n. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," 173.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 180–81.

nians 1:9; and death—Revelation 20:6, 10, 14; 21:8. These verses support the traditional view that the suffering of the unsaved in hell will know no end.

## THEOLOGICAL ARGUMENTS

Evangelical annihilationists use theological arguments as well as biblical arguments in seeking to defend their position. Four of their most prominent theological arguments are based on God's love, on immortality, on God's justice, and on God's triumph.

### THE ARGUMENT FROM GOD'S LOVE

In 1992 well-known pastor and scholar Michael Green penned a helpful book, *Evangelism through the Local Church*, in which he asked, "What becomes of those who have never heard the gospel?" Green lists three "positively unchristian" answers.<sup>16</sup> These answers are universalism, the view that everyone will be saved; the view that all who do not hear the gospel are consigned to eternal conscious torment; and the view that the heathen will be saved by their good works.<sup>17</sup>

In reference to the second of these three answers, Green holds that the New Testament "does not teach the conscious unending torment of those who are eternally separated from God."<sup>18</sup> Instead, according to Green, it teaches annihilationism. He marshals biblical arguments for his view, the same ones given by John Wenham above.

In addition, Green argues for annihilationism from the concept of God. He asks rhetorically, "What sort of God would He be who could rejoice eternally in heaven with the saved while downstairs the cries of the lost make an agonizing cacophony?"<sup>19</sup> Green answers his own question: "Such a God is not the person revealed in Scripture as utterly just and utterly loving." Green labels the traditional view of hell, "a doctrine of savagery."<sup>20</sup>

Admittedly this argument exerts a powerful influence on the minds of many. It is difficult for modern people to believe in both a loving God and eternal punishment. In fact it is difficult for moderns to believe in hell at all. Liberal Anglican John Robinson speaks for many when he says, "Christ, in Origen's old

---

<sup>16</sup> Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church*, 70.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 70–74.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–73.

words, remains on the Cross so long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation; it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God's nature. In a universe of love there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at the same time make it hell for God."<sup>21</sup>

This quotation and the mind-set it discloses expose the weakness of Green's argument. It is unreliable to base views of the afterlife on what human beings think God should be like. Humans are simply not qualified to say what a loving God would or would not do. Instead, they are limited to what God Himself has declared in His Word. Scripture must tell humankind about God's nature and the world to come. And Scripture declares that the loving God who made the universe created heaven and hell, for saint and sinner, respectively.

Jesus will say to "the sheep" (believers), "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). And to "the goats" (the unsaved), He will say, "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels" (v. 41). The Savior and Judge of the world declared that heaven and hell were prepared by God. Furthermore, as noted, Jesus said both destinies are "eternal" (v. 46).

The idea of God's rejoicing in heaven with His people while the wicked suffer endless punishment in hell is a distortion of Scripture. The Bible teaches that God is present everywhere, including heaven and hell. The unsaved "will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb*" (Rev. 14:10, italics added).<sup>22</sup> Of course, Christ is not present in hell in the same way He is in heaven. He is present in heaven in grace and blessing, but He is present in hell in justice and wrath.

Green's portrayal of God rejoicing in heaven while the lost suffer in hell also fails to appreciate the fact that God will be glorified by every person's fate. The glory of God's grace will be eternally magnified in His people on the new earth, and the glory of God's justice will be eternally magnified in the punishment of the wicked in hell. Praise is due God for His holy hatred of sin. Revelation 15:1 speaks of the completion of God's wrath in seven final plagues. The redeemed in heaven sing God's praise: "Great and marvelous are Thy works, O Lord God, the Almighty; Righteous

<sup>21</sup> J. A. T. Robinson, *In the End God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 133.

<sup>22</sup> Twenty-seven times in Revelation, John used "the lamb" as a symbol of Christ. The only other use is in a simile in Revelation 13:11, where John wrote that he saw a "beast" who had "two horns like a lamb."

and true are Thy ways, Thou King of the nations. Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? For Thou alone art holy; for all the nations will come and worship before Thee, for Thy righteous acts have been revealed" (15:3–4). These great and marvelous deeds for which His people will praise God include the outpouring of His wrath mentioned in 15:1, 7.<sup>23</sup>

Although Green's argument has great popular appeal, it must yield to the testimony of Scripture. The loving and holy God has created heaven for those who believe in His Son and hell for those who reject Him. Believers must allow His Word to govern their thinking and emotions. Admittedly, these are difficult tasks, but faithfulness to God and His truth requires nothing less.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM IMMORTALITY

Near the end of his book *The True Image* Philip Hughes asks, "Is the soul immortal?"<sup>24</sup> He answers this question in the negative:

Immortality, or deathlessness . . . is not inherent in the constitution of man as a corporeal-spiritual creature, though, formed in the image of God, the potential was there. That potential, which was forfeited through sin, has been restored and actualized by Christ, the incarnate Son, who has "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim 1:10). Since inherent immortality is uniquely the possession and prerogative of God (1 Tim 6:16), it will be by virtue of his grace and power that when Christ is manifested in glory our mortality, if we are then alive, will be superinvested with immortality and our corruption, if we are then in the grave, will be clothed with incorruption, so that death will at last be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor 15:51–57; 2 Cor 5:1–5). And thus at last we shall become truly and fully human as the destiny for which we were created becomes an everlasting reality in him who is the True Image and the True Life. At the same time those who have persisted in ungodliness will discover for themselves the dreadful truth of Christ's warning about fearing God, "who can destroy both body and soul in hell" (Mt. 10:28).<sup>25</sup>

According to Hughes, although most Christian thinkers have assumed the inherent immortality of the soul (and its corollaries, everlasting life and everlasting punishment), this is a false assumption. Only God, he says, is inherently immortal, and human beings, by contrast, were created only potentially immortal. By sinning, Adam lost immortality for himself and the entire human race. Immortality is regained only by those in Christ.

<sup>23</sup> Also see Revelation 11:17–18 and 14:10.

<sup>24</sup> Hughes, *The True Image*, 398–407.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 405.

Since the unsaved were never given the gift of immortality, they will be annihilated after receiving punishment for their sins, Hughes alleges.

This argument, a common one among annihilationists, has been overrated for at least three reasons. First, it is a mistake to say that those who hold the traditional view of hell do so chiefly because they believe in the immortality of the soul. On the contrary, they hold to eternal punishment because of what they believe is fidelity to biblical teaching. This is true, for example, of Tertullian, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, and Charles Shedd, to name some stalwarts of orthodoxy.

Second, these theologians agree with Hughes in rejecting the Platonic doctrine that the souls of humans are inherently immortal. Instead, they hold, again with Hughes, that God alone is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). Nevertheless against Hughes, they have taught that the immortal God grants immortality to all human beings, not just to believers.

Third, and most importantly, persons ought not believe in the traditional view of hell because they accept immortality. It should be the other way around. They should believe in the immortality of human beings because the Bible clearly teaches everlasting damnation for the wicked.

#### THE ARGUMENT FROM GOD'S JUSTICE

In 1988 John Stott shocked the evangelical world when he tentatively defended annihilationism. Among the arguments he used was an argument from God's justice. The Bible, he wrote, teaches that God will judge justly, "which implies that the penalty inflicted will be commensurate with the evil done."<sup>26</sup> But, he said, eternal conscious torment is seriously disproportionate to sins consciously committed in time. It clashes with the biblical revelation of divine justice.

This argument loses some of its impact when it is examined carefully. First, it must be pointed out that few people take sin seriously. As evidence of this, consider five of God's judgments against what might be called "little sins."

Because Lot's wife looked back at Sodom and Gomorrah "she became a pillar of salt" (Gen. 19:26). The death penalty was exacted because of a glance. Because of irregularities in their priestly service in the tabernacle, Nadab and Abihu "fell dead before the LORD" (Num. 3:4; cf. Lev. 10:1–2). This was capital punishment for "only" faulty worship.

---

<sup>26</sup> Stott, *Evangelical Essentials*, 318–19.

Because Achan coveted and stole a robe, silver, and gold, he and his family were stoned and burned (Josh. 7:25). A whole family was destroyed because of one person's greed. Because Uzzah steadied the ark with his hand, the Lord was angry and took his life (2 Sam. 6:6–7). Because Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles, God struck them dead (Acts 5:1–10). Lying led to capital punishment.

On hearing these things our first response is to think that justice has not been served; repeatedly, it seems, God has been overly severe. God's assessment, however, is far different.

Lot's wife disobeyed God's command and failed to heed His warning, "Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, and do not stay anywhere in the valley; escape to the mountains, lest you be swept away" (Gen. 19:17). Is God unjust to repay disobedience with a previously announced penalty? Evidently Jesus didn't think so, for He admonished His hearers, "Remember Lot's wife" (Luke 17:32).

Leviticus informs us that Nadab and Abihu "offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them" (Lev. 10:1). God viewed their disobedient priestly service as dishonoring to Himself, as is evident from His evaluation of it: "By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored" (v. 3). Can anyone question God's right to keep His worship pure?

Achan "acted unfaithfully" (Josh. 7:1), and when he was confronted, he confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel" (7:20). Was it unfair for God to inflict capital punishment on him?

Uzzah was guilty of what Scripture calls "his irreverence" (2 Sam. 6:7). God is to be worshiped in spirit and truth (John 4:24). Israel, however, had followed the Philistines' example instead of obeying God's instructions for transporting the ark (cf. 2 Sam. 6:3; Exod. 25:12–14; Num. 4:5–6, 15). Should God be criticized for giving only one person what David and many others deserved?

If someone is offended by God's bringing capital punishment on Ananias and Sapphira because they merely lied to the apostles, we are missing Luke's whole point. The husband and wife were ultimately guilty of lying not to men but to God (Acts 5:3–4). People have difficulty in recognizing God's justice in His punishment of so-called little sins because they adopt a human-centered perspective, rather than a God-centered one. If a person today lied to someone else, disobeyed another, or spoke against someone, that individual would not be worthy of death. If a person does these things against God, however, he or she deserves capital punishment. The Bible views sin as an attack on God's character, and

therefore it is deserving of great punishment.

Readers may agree in principle, but perhaps they protest that these examples illustrate temporal not eternal punishment. This criticism is fair. The most scandalous example, however, has been saved for last. Because Adam ate the forbidden fruit, he plunged the human race into sin and misery. "By the transgression of the one the many died. . . . the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation. . . . by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one. . . . through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners" (Rom. 5:15–19).

Is this penalty proportionate to the crime committed? Because of Adam's sin, physical and spiritual death, even eternal condemnation, came to the entire human race. "Through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men" (5:18). Condemnation of the entire human race came because of one man's eating a piece of fruit.

Pride, disobedience, and unfaithfulness summarize the significance of Adam's primal sin, when it is viewed from a God-centered perspective. Adam proudly wanted to be like his Maker. He disobeyed God's prohibition. And he was unfaithful to the Lord (Gen. 3:1–6). Can anyone charge God with injustice, since He warned Adam, "From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (2:17)? Of the Fall God said, "Judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation" (Rom. 5:16).

If believers submit to the authority of God's Word, they must accept the fact that He was not unjust in punishing the human race with condemnation for Adam's sin. And He condemned the world not only because of Adam's sin, but because of individual sins as well, as Paul emphasized in Romans 1:18, 32; 2:5, 12; 3:10–12, 23.

It will not do to protest against God's judgments on the basis of what seems fair or unfair. Instead, people must adjust their thinking—including their view of God's justice—to God's truth.

Aquinas was right: Sin is an attack on the infinite and holy character of God.<sup>27</sup> God therefore sets the penalties for sin in this world and the next. He justly condemns sinners for Adam's sin and for their own. And He plainly teaches that He punishes the wicked forever. Certainly God is just in doing so.

---

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Aquinas wrote, "The magnitude of the punishment matches the magnitude of the sin. . . . Now a sin that is against God is infinite; the higher the person against whom it is committed, the graver the sin . . . and God is of infinite greatness. Therefore an infinite punishment is deserved for a sin committed against him" (*Summa Theologiae* [New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974], 25).

## THE ARGUMENT FROM GOD'S TRIUMPH

Another argument has played a major role in the annihilationist literature—that of the implications of God's triumph over sin. Hughes summarizes it well.

The everlasting existence side by side, so to speak, of heaven and hell would seem to be incompatible with the purpose and effect of the redemption achieved by Christ's coming. . . . The renewal of creation demands the elimination of sin and suffering and death. . . . The conception of the endlessness of the suffering of torment . . . in hell stands in contradiction to this teaching. . . . When Christ fills all in all and God is everything to everyone (Eph 1:23; 1 Cor 15:28), how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fulness and by its very presence contradicts it?<sup>28</sup>

Hughes is correct when he asserts that Scripture envisions God as ultimately victorious. The crucial question is, What does God deem compatible with His being "all in all"? This question is answered by the Bible's final three chapters: God's victory does not involve the eradication of evil beings from His universe.

At the Great White Throne judgment "the dead, the great and the small," will stand before God's throne (Rev. 20:11–19). Immediately before presenting this judgment, John had written that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone to suffer everlasting torment (v. 10). Four verses later, he stated that wicked human beings share their fate (v. 15).

Revelation 21:1–8 then confirms this conclusion. Believers will enjoy the new heavens and the new earth, whereas the final destination of the unrepentant will be "the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (v. 8). Evidently God does not view unbelievers' being eternally alive in the lake of fire as incompatible with His being "all in all."

That God's ultimate victory does not include the annihilation of the unsaved is substantiated by the picture of the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21–22. John spoke of the bliss of those privileged to live in this city. God will be in their midst to "wipe every tear from their eyes." For them "there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (21:3–4). Yet four verses later he wrote of the wicked being in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone (v. 8).

Furthermore, in chapter 22 John contrasted the joy of those who "may enter by the gates into the city" of God with the godless who are "outside" the city (22:14–15). Here the wicked are not an-

<sup>28</sup> Hughes, *The True Image*, 405–6.

nihilated. Instead, they are alive, but are cut off from the happiness of eternal fellowship with God.

The traditional view of hell fits the scriptural vision of the end better than does annihilationism. The Bible's concluding chapters reveal that God's being "all in all" means that He reigns over the just and the unjust; it does not mean that only the former remain.

### CONCLUSION

The contemporary case for annihilationism has been set forth from the writings of four respected evangelicals, Michael Green, Philip Hughes, John Stott, and John Wenham. Their arguments have been weighed on the scales of Scripture and are found wanting. The conviction that the church's traditional doctrine of hell is correct has been strengthened.

Some important implications follow. "One key difference between [Jonathan] Edwards and our contemporary spokesmen who abandon the historic Biblical view of hell is that Edwards was radically committed to deriving his views of God's justice and love *from God*. But more and more it seems contemporary evangelicals are submitting to what 'makes sense' to their own moral sentiments. This will not strengthen the church or its mission. What is needed is a radical commitment to the supremacy of God in determining what is real and what is not."<sup>29</sup>

John Piper's observation is accurate. Since annihilationism contradicts the teaching of the Bible, it is an error. Although some evangelical Christians hold this doctrine, they should be encouraged to abandon it because error dishonors God and His truth.

In fact annihilationism is a serious error because it leads unrepentant sinners to underestimate their fate. Annihilationists insist that the obliteration of the wicked is a terrible destiny when measured against the bliss of the righteous.<sup>30</sup> However, it is simply not that bad to cease to exist, especially in comparison to suffering in hell forever. The ungodly could live selfishly their entire lives, without any thought of God, and after death face ultimate extinction rather than eternal punishment. No doubt the unsaved in hell would *like* annihilationism to be true, as Jonathan Edwards noted: "Wicked men will hereafter earnestly wish to be turned to nothing and forever cease to be that they might

---

<sup>29</sup> John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 128 (italics his).

<sup>30</sup> Hughes, *The True Image*, 406–7.

escape the wrath of God.”<sup>31</sup> But annihilationism is not true, and believers who love the lost must tell them the truth—all who fail to trust Christ as their Savior face eternal conscious torment at the hands of the living God.

This leads to the final implication. If annihilationism is widely accepted by Christians, the missionary enterprise may well be hindered. True, some evangelicals such as John Stott and Michael Green have consistently shown a zeal for evangelism while holding to annihilationism. Nevertheless what would be the effect on churches and denominations that once held to eternal conscious torment, if they were to shift to annihilationism? Their missionary zeal might well wane.

D. A. Carson speaks a hard but necessary truth: “Despite the sincerity of their motives, one wonders more than a little to what extent the growing popularity of various forms of annihilationism and conditional immortality are a reflection of this age of pluralism. It is getting harder and harder to be faithful to the ‘hard lines’ of Scripture. And in this way, evangelicalism itself may contribute to the gagging of God by silencing the severity of his warnings and by minimizing the awfulness of the punishment that justly waits those untouched by his redeeming grace.”<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Jonathan Edwards, quoted in John H. Gerstner, *Jonathan Edwards on Heaven and Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 75.

<sup>32</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 536.



#### Copyright and Use:

**As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.**

**No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)' express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.**

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

#### About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.