

ETERNAL DAMNATION, UNIVERSALISM, AND CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY - Sunday, June 29th, 2025 - 5:30 p.m.

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We're going to labor over two very difficult questions that are related around the common theme of the nature and duration of the end-time judgment of those who reject God's saving grace in Jesus Christ, God the Son.

- 1) **Will any people experience conscious eternal suffering for their rejection of the Savior, Jesus Christ, God the Son? Or will the unsaved just be annihilated (conditional immortality)? Or will everyone actually be saved in the end (universalism)? There are really three questions here but we'll try to cover them all under the same point.**

Will those who resist God's grace be annihilated at the judgment? No, I don't think so. ***Will they suffer eternally, or eventually be saved sometime after death.*** I believe they will suffer ***eternally*** and ***not*** be purged and saved after a time of judgment.

Let's look carefully at some texts:

Daniel 12:2 - "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

It's true that the Hebrew word for "everlasting" (*olam*) can sometimes be used to refer to an limited period of time during one's own life. But most commonly its meaning is literally "*unceasingness*" or "*perpetuity.*"

Certainly that seems to be the most likely case here because it refers clearly to a time of division that is entered into *after* this temporal life and death and resurrection. Clearly there is no annihilation. There is everlasting joy and everlasting contempt. If annihilation were intended here it would be strange indeed that dead decayed bodies would be raised to life so they could cease to exist. The more natural reading is that they are raised in their bodies again so they can enter into their appointed destinies *bodily* and *consciously*.

Mark 9:43-48 - "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. [44]....[45] And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. [46]....[47] And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, [48] 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"

No one likes the idea of eternal punishment. There is no joy in proclaiming it. Many evangelicals embrace the idea that those who reject God's grace are annihilated at God's judgment. The redeemed enter into eternal joy and the unredeemed simply cease to exist. As great an expositor as **John Stott** comments on this text from Mark and says that the worm will not die nor the fire be quenched "until presumably their work of destruction is done"(Evangelical Essentials). But that qualification isn't in the text.

Clark Pinnock, who, until his recent death, was at McMaster Divinity College, says this: "The fire of God's judgment simply consumes the lost....God does not raise the wicked in order to torture them consciously forever, but rather to declare his judgment upon the wicked and condemn them to extinction...."

So hell and the fire of hell are both real. But while the fire may be eternal, those thrown into it are not. They are simply incinerated. That's the view quite commonly known as **conditional immortality**. Only those in Christ live forever.

But does this work with the Scriptures? I still don't think so:

Matthew 25:41-46 - “Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. [42] For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, [43] I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' [44] Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' [45] Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' [46] And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Here the most loving person who ever lived contrasts *eternal life* with *eternal punishment* (46). It's not just the flames that last forever. It's the condition of *being punished*. It does not honor the full import of *eternal life* to say it only refers to a certain *kind* or *type* of life, with no reference whatsoever to *duration*. And the same applies to *eternal punishment*. It is not just a certain *type* or *nature* of pronouncement, but a *duration* of punishment.

But there's even more in Jesus' words that would seem to rule out annihilation. The important phrase is in verse 41 - “Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

So we need to see exactly what the Bible says about the place specifically “***prepared for the devil and his angels.***” There are some texts:

Revelation 20:10 - “....and 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.***”

Note carefully, this is the ***same*** place Jesus said those on His left hand would be cast into (**Matthew 25:41**). It is a place that is ***designed*** for eternal torment - “....***they will be tormented day and night forever and ever***”(Rev.20:10).

This also fits with what we're told about this place of torment as it relates to God's eternal judgment in other key portions of Scripture - **Revelation 14:9-11** - "And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, [10] 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. [11] 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."

Look at another text: **Matthew 26:24** - "The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

These are Jesus' words regarding Judas and his act of betrayal. Jesus compared the condition of Judas ***before*** birth with the state of Judas ***after*** his death. And Jesus says the condition ***after*** is nothing like the condition ***before***. The condition after is ***worse***, much worse than before. And so we must ask, "***Worse for whom?***" And the only answer that makes any sense of Jesus' words at all is ***worse for Judas***.

But worse *how?* And again, the only answer that makes sense is the degree of *awareness of circumstances* (in this case the pain of punishment) of which Judas couldn't possibly experience consciously *before* his birth. No awareness *before* birth. *Consciousness* after birth. That seems to be Jesus' point.

There are some implications to Jesus' words. If Judas would eventually be purged from sin after his death and come into eternal bliss (*universalism*) then his state after death could hardly be called *worse* than before his birth. And if Judas was *annihilated* upon judgment after death (*conditional immortality*) then, again, his ultimate state would be *the same* as before his birth, but hardly *worse*.

George MacDonald and others have taught that all will eventually be reached by God's saving love. Regarding *universalism* (the idea that ultimately God's love triumphs over all wrong and everyone will be saved) consider just one more text: **Matthew 12:32** - **"And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."**

Now, admittedly, Jesus is dealing with a very specific sin in this text. But it still rules out the possibility of **everyone** being saved eventually through the purifying fires of judgment after this life. These people, says Jesus, will **never** be forgiven.

Another thought: Do we need to talk about this grizzly subject? Shouldn't we reserve this talk of hell and eternal judgment to the red-necks carrying mis-spelled signs on street corners? Apparently not, as the writer of Hebrews makes clear:

Hebrews 6:1-2 - "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, [2] and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment."

This is a very significant text. It tells us there is **more** to talk about than eternal judgment, to be sure. But not **less**. In other words, the writer clearly identifies the doctrine of **eternal judgment** with the "**elementary**" and "**foundational**" doctrines of the church. They are not all there is. But they certainly are **basic** and **essential**.

- 2) **If we believe some people will suffer eternal judgment in Hell for their rejection of God’s redeeming work in Christ, is it fair for God to punish anyone eternally for sins committed in a short, finite space of life?**

This is the really hard question. My own conviction is that people who reject the idea of eternal punishment *usually* don’t do so for textual reasons. This comes out in their own writings by their own admission. **Clark Pinnock** writes, “It just does not make sense to say that a God of love will torture people forever for sins done in the context of a finite life” (Theological Crossfire, 226). And **John Stott** says, “Would there not be serious disproportion between sins consciously committed in time and torment consciously experienced throughout eternity?” (Evangelical Essentials, 318).

No one should make light of those very serious, thoughtful questions. These are not *light* questions. And I certainly don’t have all the answers to these deep theological/philosophic questions. But here’s how I try to manage them.

First, I try to remind myself that God never has and never does kneel at the altar of what *I* deem to be appropriate behavior for Him. **God** is all-wise and all-knowing and all-loving. *I* bow before **His** ways. **He** does not bow before *mine*. My reasoning power and my moral values are warped and fallen, His are not.

Second, I still honestly believe these objections are the fruit, at least partly, of not asking the *right* question. Usually, as in the quotes I've given, people object to eternal punishment on the basis that why should the *punishment* be eternal when the *sin* was so short-lived. I think there's a more helpful approach to the issue.

Rather than give consideration only to the *shortness* of the sin we should measure appropriate punishment by the *greatness and glory of the one sinned against*. In other words, what makes sin so eternally damning isn't how long it was committed but the fact that all sin is against a God who is *infinitely pure and holy*.

In other words, I believe the punishment of sin is so *long* (eternal) for the same reason the universe is so *big*. Let me explain. To say our universe is big is not just an understatement, it's a *gross* distortion of truth.

John Piper gives this quote: “Scientists know that light travels at the speed of 5.87 trillion miles in a year. They also know the galaxy of which our solar system is a part is about 100,000 light years in diameter - about 587 thousand trillion miles. It is one of about a million such galaxies in the optical range of our most powerful telescopes. In our galaxy there are about one hundred billion stars. The sun is one of them, a modest star burning at about 6000 degrees centigrade on the surface and traveling in an orbit at 155 miles per hour, which means it will take about 200 million years to complete one revolution around the galaxy.”

We live to be 70 or 80 years of age. In duration, our earthly lives don't even make a blip on the screen of time. So here's the obvious question - ***why do we need the universe to be so big?*** Why didn't God make it smaller? Why all this wasted space?

And the profound answer is it's not wasted space at all. There's an important lesson in the bigness of the universe that would be lost if we were all crammed into a much smaller space. Because the universe is so vast, it tells me something very important about God when the Bible says this universe is the ***“work of His fingers”*** (**Psalm 8:3**). God made the universe so big so I would know His vastness is incalculable to my finite mind.

And God made the punishment of sin so eternal so this whole world, as this message is proclaimed and not domesticated, will know that God is infinitely holy and pure - more than we could even picture or imagine. When we tone down the punishment to make it ***fit the crime***, we're thinking as though sin is committed against the likes of us. We're shrinking God's moral purity down to our fallen system of what's fair. But God's holiness is a trillion times more vast than all the universes He's created.

Again, the seriousness of sin isn't measured by the duration of its practice. It's measured against the infinite holiness and purity of the One against whom it's committed.