

DEATH AND AFTER

False Teachings on Future Punishment

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. All men have a natural aversion to the concept of punishment of any kind. Yet we know from human experience that judgment without the possibility of punishment is impossible. If a person breaks a law of government, he must suffer the punishment for this crime. However, when we transfer this over into spiritual and eternal realms, people, because of sentimentality, attempt to soften down or do away with the doctrine of eternal punishment. NOTE: There are several emotional reasons why men compromise or reject the concept of eternal punishment. First, they feel that punishment is inconsistent with the love of God. A loving God would not judge people for all eternity. They almost completely reject the idea that God is wrath as well as love. Second, man has too high an opinion of himself and does not see himself as a sinner as God sees him. The natural man feels it would be unkind and an act of cruelty for God to judge His own creatures who all have some good in them. To reason this way is to deny the doctrine of total depravity.
- B. Those who reject or soften the concept of eternal punishment are many indeed in the 20th century. All the major cults today deny the Biblical doctrine of an eternal hell (Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Unitarians, Unity and the Christian Advent Church). This would include such false teachers as Herbert W. Armstrong and Garner Ted Armstrong. These cultists have a tremendous appeal to the unregenerate, religious mind which abhors eternal punishment. There are also many liberals and neo-orthodox theologians within the walls of the professing Church who deny eternal punishment. NOTE: The Christian's only hope for silencing false teachers and false teaching is the Word of God. We must know what the Bible teaches so that we will not be tossed about by every wind of doctrine.

II. SHORT HELL

- A. The Position: The advocates of this view do not deny the fact that God punished men for their sins and rejection of Christ after this life, but they also feel that a loving God would not punish men for all eternity. They accept the fact that people who trust Christ on earth go to heaven forever, but deny that unbelievers will be punished forever. All people are finally let out of hell when they have learned the lessons God wants them to learn. Punishment, therefore, is corrective rather than punitive. The proponents of this view do not deny punishment but they deny the eternity of it. NOTE: This view was held by some in the early church and its most ardent supporter was Origen. Origen's view was condemned as heretical by the church at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 A.D.
- B. The Support: Those who hold to a short hell obviously feel they have some support from the Bible for their position. Their major contention is with the words "eternal" and "forever." They seek to prove that these words do not mean an endless duration, and they get the bulk of their support from the Old Testament.

1. Eternal: The proponents of a short hell say the words “eternal” or “everlasting” do not mean forever but have a limited duration in mind. The Bible speaks of “everlasting hills” (Gen. 49:26) and we know that hills are not eternal in duration and will not last forever (II Pet. 3:10). The word “everlasting” is used in relation to the Aaronic Priesthood. It is said to be “everlasting” or “perpetual” (Ex. 40:15; 29:9). The Aaronic or Levitical Priesthood was not forever but came to an end with the death and resurrection of Christ (Heb. 7:23, 24).

OBJECTIONS

- a. Often the word “eternal” is used figuratively in the Bible and it is almost always in a context that is dealing with poetic language such as “everlasting hills” (Gen. 49:26).
 - b. The word “everlasting” is often qualified in the verse where it is mentioned. In Exodus 40:15, the term “perpetual” (everlasting) is qualified by the words “throughout their generations.” The Levitical Priesthood was effective as long as the Lord God was dealing directly with the Jews, but this stopped at the Cross and the whole Levitical system ended in 70 A.D.
 - c. There is a sense in which Jesus Christ is spiritually fulfilling the Aaronic Priesthood in His own eternal priesthood.
 - d. Often the Old Testament does use the word “everlasting” to mean an eternal or endless duration. God is called the “everlasting” God (Psa. 41:13; 90:2) and surely God has an eternal existence. God is also said to be “eternal” in the New Testament (I Tim. 6:15, 16). Furthermore, the Old Testament refers to the “everlasting covenant” which has effects in time and eternity (Gen. 9:6; 17:13), and to the “everlasting salvation” (Isa. 45:17).
 - e. The New Testament is the final interpreter of the Old Testament and the Greek word for “eternal” (aionios) always means eternal in duration. The New Testament speaks of “eternal fire” (Matt. 25:41), “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46), “eternal destruction” (II Thess. 1:7-9) and “eternal chains” (Jude 6). It is hard to believe that anyone would deny the doctrine of eternal punishment. NOTE: The Bible teaches eternal life for all those who trust Christ (Jn. 3:16; 3:36; Acts 13:48; I Jn. 5:11). If we say that eternal punishment is not eternal, then we must say that eternal life must also be shortened. If so, then eternal life and salvation mean nothing.
 - f. The clearest verses on the subject of eternal life for the saved and eternal punishment for the lost is Matthew 25: 41, 46. The lost are consigned to “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” but the saved go to “eternal life.” The same word aionios, “eternal” is used in both places and if hell is to be shortened then eternal life may also be shortened. This same truth is taught in Daniel 12:2 where the word “everlasting” is used. NOTE: The fact of the matter is that hell and heaven are eternal in duration and the Bible clearly teaches this truth.
2. Forever: The word “forever” does not always mean endless or eternal. In II Chronicles 6:2 Solomon said he had built the temple “forever.” Obviously the temple did not stand forever. Therefore, we conclude that “forever” does not mean an endless duration.

OBJECTIONS

- a. It can be shown in a few cases that “forever” in the Old Testament does have a limited duration, but quite often it does mean eternal in duration. The context is the deciding factor.
- b. In the New Testament the word “forever” definitely means “eternal” (Rev. 14:11; 20:10; Jude 13). The Greek for “forever and ever” is aionas aionon which cannot be taken any other way but eternal duration. “No sound Greek scholar can pretend that aionios means anything less than eternal” (W.R. Inge, What is Hell?).
- c. The New Testament using figurative language states that hell is a place of “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43) and a place where the “worm dies not” (Mark 9:48). NOTE: If these expressions do not teach that the punishment of the wicked continues eternally, it is difficult to see how it could be taught in human language.

III. ANNIHILATION

- A. The Position: Proponents of this position assert that after the final judgment all unbelievers (body and soul) are cast into the Lake of Fire and annihilated; that is, they cease to exist as beings, eliminating any consciousness of existence. True believers, however, are immortal in soul and body because they are united to Him who is immortal. This viewpoint has sometimes been called conditional mortality.
- B. The Support
 1. God Alone is Immortal (I Tim. 6:15, 16): God alone is said to have immortality and natural man is never said to have it. OBJECTION: God is immortal and all the souls He creates are created in His image. Since God is eternal, it is therefore logical to conclude that all souls have an eternal or endless existence, but all do not have eternal life.
 2. Man is Immortal Only As He is Related to God: Annihilationists say that the Bible does not teach the immortality of the soul of all men and men only become immortal when they are united to God. The Bible speaks of eternal life as a gift from God (John 10:27, 28; Rom. 2:7; 6:22, 23) and it is clearly stated that the saved man cannot die (Rom. 6:23). OBJECTION: The Bible does speak of eternal life as a gift from God but an annihilationist has confused endless existence with eternal life. Man’s body is mortal (I Cor. 15:53, 54) but his soul is immortal. All men outside of Christ are spiritually dead but at death there is separation of the spiritually dead eternal soul from the mortal body which produces eternal separation from God.
 3. Sinners are Threatened with Eternal Extinction: Unbelievers are to face “death” (Rom. 6:23) which is unconsciousness, “destruction” (II Thess. 1:9) which is the destroying of body and soul, and “perishing (Jn. 3:16; Lk. 13:3) which is non-existence. These are all words which express no future conscious existence.

OBJECTIONS

- a. The “death” that men are faced with is “spiritual death” where the soul is separated from God for all eternity.
- b. The word “destruction” does not mean extinction but ruin, loss, not of being but of well-being. This word signifies a continual condition of privation and suffering. “Destruction” does not mean annihilation, but is applied to something that is so ruined that it no longer serves

the use for which it was designed. For instance, Noah's generation was "destroyed" (Lk. 17:27) and so were the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Lk. 17:28, 29) but they shall yet come up for judgment (Matt. 11:24). There is no annihilation implied here.

- c. The word "perish" also gives the idea of ruin or loss. The disciples cried out "Lord, save us, we perish" (Matt. 8:28), and by this they meant that they would die physically but not lose conscious existence. The Apostle Paul said that the outward man was "perishing" but this did not mean annihilation but a weakening of the body because of sin and age (II Cor. 4:16). Dr. Charles Hodge said,

"The word death, when spoken of the soul, means alienation or separation from God; and when that separation is final it is eternal death. This is so plain that it never has been doubted, except for the purpose of supporting the doctrine of the annihilation of the wicked. The same remark applies to the use of the words "destroy" and "perish." To destroy is to ruin. The nature of the ruin depends on the nature of the subject of which it is predicated. A thing is ruined when it is rendered unfit for use; and when it is in such a state that it can no longer answer the end for which it was designed. A ship at sea dismantled, rudderless, with its sides battered in, is ruined, but not annihilated. It is a ship still. A man destroys himself when he ruins his health, squanders his property, debases his character, and renders himself unfit to act his part in life. A soul is utterly and forever destroyed when it is reprobated, alienated from God, rendered a fit companion only for the devil and his angels. This is a destruction a thousand fold more dreadful than mere annihilation." (Beottner, Immortality)

C. Logical Objections

1. Annihilation is really no threat of punishment because death for the unsaved merely means eternal nothingness. A person who grows old or is depressed would not mind dying if he knew only a state of unconscious existence faced him where pain and guilt were no more. The Bible gives a real threat of eternal punishment where there will be separation, loneliness, guilt and pain to all who have not Christ as Saviour and Lord.
2. Annihilation does violence to the justice of God. Justice demands that the sinner shall receive punishment commensurate with his crime, not annihilation.
3. Annihilation is refuted by the angels. Wicked angels sinned before Adam fell and they are "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). The angels have been punished for their sin of rebellion but for many thousands of years they have not ceased to exist. They are personalities and personalities do not cease to exist.
4. Annihilationism is refuted by human experience. The idea of immortality is so deeply embedded in the human mind that most unsaved people are afraid to die because they are worried sick as to what lies ahead beyond the grave.

5. Annihilationism takes the keen edge off evangelism, for the minds of those witnessing and those witnessed to rationalize that the eternal destiny of the unsaved is not as bad as the Bible presents it.