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THE ETERNITY OF HELL [PART II]

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[EDITOR'S NOTE: Part I of this two-part series appeared in the January issue. Part II follows below, and continues, without introductory comments, where the first article ended.]

DOES DESTRUCTION IMPLY ANNIHILATION?

According to F. LaGard Smith, "The primary scriptural cornerstone for the case [for the annihilation of the wicked—EL/KB] is Matthew 10:28" (2003, p. 167). Since Jesus told His disciples, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But, rather, fear Him who is able to **destroy** both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28), His statement supposedly proves that hell is merely a picture of complete extermination of the souls of the wicked. Annihilationists, including both Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses, have (mis)used Matthew 10:28 for centuries to propagate their error. In his book, *After Life*, Smith cites this particular verse more than any other verse from Scripture. Surely, annihilationists allege, Jesus would not have employed the word "destroy" in this verse if He did not mean extermination.

The phrase "to destroy" in Matthew 10:28 is derived from the Greek word *apollumi*, which is used 92 times in the New Testament. It is translated by such terms as perish, destroy, lose, and lost. While it is true that occasionally *apollumi* is used to mean death (Matthew 2:13; 8:25; 26:52), most often it simply signifies the idea of suffering a loss of well-being and the loss of being blessed. In Luke 15, Jesus spoke of the shepherd's lone sheep that was "lost" (*apollumi*), but

not annihilated (vs. 6). In that same chapter, He told of the father's prodigal son who was "lost" (*apollumi*), not extinguished (vss. 24,32). The wineskins of which Christ spoke in Matthew 9:17 did not pass into nonexistence, but were "ruined" (*apollumi*). Jesus did not come to seek and to save those who did not exist; rather He came to save those who were alive physically, but ruined spiritually by sin [i.e., lost (*apollumi*)—Luke 19:10]. Paul stated that the Gospel is "veiled to those who are perishing" (*apollumi*) in sin, not to those who are exterminated by sin. Considering the fact that even when *apollumi* is used to mean "death" (Matthew 2:13; 8:25; 26:52), total annihilation of the person is not under consideration (for the soul still would be alive). Therefore, one can rightly conclude that there is not a single instance in the New Testament where *apollumi* means "annihilation" in the strictest sense of the word. The Scriptures clearly teach that those who, at Judgment, will be "destroyed" because of their wickedness, will be like the "beast" who will "go to perdition" (*apoleia*, Revelation 17:8,11) in "the lake of fire and brimstone," where they will be, not annihilated, but "tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 17:8,11; 20:10). "Destruction" does not equal "annihilation."

Respected Greek scholars also disagree with the annihilationist's position that the Greek term underlying our English word "destroy" in Matthew 10:28 means "annihilation." W.E. Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, explained: "The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being" (1940, 1:302).

Specifically, in regard to Matthew 10:28, he stated: "of the loss of well-being in the case of the unsaved hereafter" (1:302). A.T. Robertson added: "'Destroy' here is not annihilation, but eternal punishment in Gehenna" (1930, 1:83). In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, professor Albrecht Oepke commented on the meaning of destroy, stating that it is "definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge" into Hell (1964, 1:396). Lexicographer Joseph Thayer agreed with these assessments, saying that "destroy" in Matthew

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10:28 means “metaphorically, to devote or give over to eternal misery” (1962, p. 64). [NOTE: Considering that the publisher’s introduction to the fourth edition of Thayer’s lexicon indicates “Thayer was a Unitarian” who denied such things as “the eternal punishment of the wicked” (p. vii), it is logical to conclude that his definition of *apollumi* could only be the result of an informed knowledge of the word’s true meaning.]

Even when we use the word “destroy” in modern times, frequently something other than annihilation is intended. Suppose a married couple involved in a violent car wreck survived the accident and returned to the scene the next day with a newspaper reporter to see the wreckage. If the couple spoke of their badly mangled car as being “destroyed,” would anyone think that the newspaper reporter would be justified in writing a story about how the couple’s car allegedly “went out of existence” during the wreck? To ask is to answer. When a sports journalist covers a high school basketball game and writes about the Clearwater Cats “destroying” the Blue Horn Bombers, will any person even slightly familiar with the English language understand “destroy” in the article literally to mean “annihilate”? Certainly not. Even in twenty-first-century English, “to destroy” frequently means something other than “to exterminate.”

In the well-known parallel text to Matthew 10:28, Luke recorded: “My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear

Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” (Luke 12:4-5, emp. added). To be destroyed is equivalent to being cast into hell. Since the New Testament indicates that hell is the place of “everlasting fire” (Matthew 25:41) “that shall never be quenched” (Mark 9:43, 48), and is the future abode of the wicked where they will suffer “everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46), we can know that to be destroyed in hell (Matthew 10:28) is equivalent to suffering eternal misery.

Paul used the unique phrase “eternal destruction” in his second letter to the church at Thessalonica (1:9). The Greek word translated “destruction” in this verse, however, is *olethros*, not *apollumi*. *Olethros* appears a total of four times in the New Testament, three of which refer to the “destruction” of those who rebel against God (1 Thessalonians 5:3; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Timothy 6:9). Like *apollumi*, *olethros* does not connote annihilation. In 1 Timothy 6:9, Paul used *olethros* to describe the miserable spiritual condition of those who lust after riches. These individuals were not annihilated, but were in a state of “ruin” (NASV, RSV, NIV) because they had “strayed from the faith” (vs. 10). Regarding the appearance of *olethros* in 1 Thessalonians 5:3, Gary Workman asked: “[I]f the fate of the ungodly is sudden annihilation at the second coming of Christ (1 Thess. 5:3), how are they going to stand before his seat? (2 Cor. 5:10)” [1992, 23:32]. Furthermore, “[S]ince that destruction is ‘sudden,’ there could not be any torment at all—which is contrary to Bible teaching” (p. 32). In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 1:9

[t]he expression “everlasting destruction” is used in apposition to “suffer punishment” (literally meaning, “to experience just payment”). A part of the “deserved” aspect is that of “affliction.” Note that verse 6 says “...God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you....” “Affliction” implies conscious suffering; it stands in opposition to the concept of annihilation.... As Gerstner observed: “Extermination is not affliction; it is the prevention of affliction” (Jackson, 2003a, 39:31).

There simply is no solid evidence to justify interpreting “eternal destruction” as “annihilation.” Paul used *olethros* in this verse to mean “the loss of a life of blessedness after death, future misery,” not extermination (Thayer, 1962, p. 443; cf. Wuest, 1973, p. 41). The wicked face “eternal ruin” (see Goodspeed, 1943, p. 476) “from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9), which Danker, et al., call “eternal death” (2000, p. 702; cf. Revelation 20:14; 21:8).

DOES DEATH IMPLY ANNIHILATION?

Throughout the New Testament, the fires of hell are depicted as being the “second death.” The picture painted in Revelation 20 tells of a burning lake of fire into which the devil and all his cohorts will be cast, including wicked humans whose names are not written in the Book of Life. Verse 14 of chapter 20 declares: “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” The inspired writer James remarked that if one of the brethren turns away from Christ, then if someone turns the wayward brother back, he will “save a soul from death” (James 5:20). James’ statement speaks directly to the fact that the sinning soul is destined for spiritual death. In John 6, Jesus described Himself as the bread that came down from heaven. Those who eat this “living” bread will “live forever” and not die (John 6:48-51, 58). All who will not eat this living bread will die. Jesus’ comments here clearly refer to the second death in hell.

What Does the Word “Death” Mean?

All those involved in the debate of after-life issues understand that hell is called the second death, and that a person’s soul is said to die in hell. But what does the word **death** actually mean? Those who advocate annihilationism have put forth the idea that the word **death** must mean “to go out of existence.” Along these lines, Smith wrote:

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Those whose names are found written in the book [of life—EL/KB] will inherit life with God forever. For those whose names are missing, there is no lasting life whatsoever, tormented or otherwise. Only death. The second and final death.... As the greater weight of scriptural evidence indicates, the only option is eternal life versus eternal death. Blessed existence versus non-existence (pp. 189,190).

From statements peppered throughout his book, and especially from the final two parallel sentences in this quotation, it is obvious that Smith defines the word **death** as nonexistence.

In truth, however, the concept of death as used in the Bible does not mean non-existence, but rather “separation.” In regard to physical death, it refers to the separation of the soul from the physical body. In regard to spiritual death, it connotes separation of the soul from God.

The *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* gives the following primary definition of the Greek word that is translated “death” (*thanatos*): “(1) the death of the body (1a) that separation (whether natural or violent) of the soul and the body by which life on earth is ended” (see “*Thanatos*,” 1999). The fact that physical death is viewed in the Bible as separation is evident from several Scriptures. The inspired writer James offered a clear picture of this idea of death when he wrote: “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:26). According to James, faith separated from works is a dead faith, in the same way that a body which is separated from the soul is a dead body. Notice that a body separated from a soul is not a nonexistent body. On the contrary, the body still exists and lies lifeless, but is separated from the soul and thus presumed to be dead.

The narrative describing Rachel's death in Genesis provides further evidence that the Bible depicts physical death as the separation of the soul from the body. As Rachel was giving birth to Benjamin, her labor became so intense that her life was in danger. The text reads: “Now it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her, ‘Do not fear; you will have this son also.’ And so it was, as **her soul was departing** (for she **died**), that she called his name Ben-Oni; but his father called him Benjamin. So Rachel **died** and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem)” [Genesis 35:17-19, emp. added]. Rachel's death occurred when her soul departed (i.e., leaving her physical body). Her body continued to exist for some time and was buried, but it was recognized as a **dead** body

as soon as it was separated from Rachel's soul, not when the body eventually decayed in the tomb. Here again, the biblical picture of death revolves around the concept of separation, not nonexistence.

Luke 8 contains additional evidence that separation of the soul and physical body is the actual meaning of physical death. Jairus came to Jesus pleading for the life of his sick daughter. While en route to the house, someone came from Jairus' house, explaining that the girl had already died. Jesus encouraged Jairus not to doubt, and continued toward the house. Arriving at the ruler's house, Jesus sent everyone out except Peter, James, John, and the parents of the child. He approached the child's dead body, took her hand and said, “Little girl, arise.” Immediately after this comment, the text states: “Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately” (Luke 8:40-55). Note that both the girl's body and her spirit existed at the time Jesus entered the room. Her body, however, was dead because her spirit had departed from it. When her spirit returned to her body, it was made alive again. Once more, the biblical text presents the idea that the concept of death is not one of nonexistence, but of separation.

John 19:30 offers another example that establishes physical death as separation of the soul and body. In the final moments of Christ's life during the crucifixion, after all of the prophecies had been fulfilled, Christ cried, “It is finished.” Immediately following this last cry, the Lord bowed His head, and “He gave up His Spirit.” At this point, when His soul departed from His body, He was dead. Joseph and Nicodemus buried the dead (still existent) body of Christ in a new tomb, while the soul of Christ had departed.

Even after looking at these several biblical examples, some annihilationists might continue to argue that physical death still means “nonexistence,” because those who die no longer exist in the physical world. But notice **what** the Bible describes as dead—the **body**. James stated that “the body without the spirit is dead.” The body continues to exist for some time, but is said to be dead immediately when the soul leaves it. And the spirit is **not** said to be “dead.”

While the idea that physical death is defined by separation and not nonexistence is clear from the Bible, the idea that spiritual death is defined by a soul's separation from God and not by a soul's nonexistence is even more clearly set forth in Scripture. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he wrote: “And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world.

...But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ...” (Ephesians 2:1-2,4-5). When the Ephesians committed sins in their unsaved condition, they were described as “dead.” Obviously, however, they were not nonexistent. Instead, they were separated from God by those sins. In fact, verse twelve of the same chapter says that during their time of sinfulness, they were “without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” The Ephesians were spiritually dead in their sins. This spiritual death was a separation from God, Christ, and hope, yet it was **not** a state of nonexistence. In chapter 4 of the same epistle, Paul told the brethren that they should “no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind, having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God” (Ephesians 4:17-18). The sinful Gentiles described here were in the same state of spiritual death the Ephesians were in prior to their becoming Christians. That death was an alienation (or separation) from the life of God, yet, here again, it was not a state of nonexistence.

The inspired apostle Paul also wrote to Christians in Colossae, declaring, “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:13). Paul obviously did not mean that the Colossians had been physically dead in their sins. Neither did he intend to assert the nonsensical idea that at one time, while they were sinning, their souls were in a state of nonexistence. On the contrary, their souls existed, but were separated from God because of their sins, and thus they were labeled as dead. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah explained this principle clearly when he wrote: “Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear, but your iniquities have **separated** you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2, emp. added).

Paul presents very clearly in 1 Timothy 5:6 the concept that spiritual death is separation from God, not nonexistence. In this chapter, Paul instructed the young Timothy about which widows should receive assistance from the church treasury. In his discussion, Paul mentioned widows who trusted in God and continued in prayer. He contrasted those widows with one who “lives in pleasure” or indulgence of the flesh. Con-

cerning such a widow, he wrote: “But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.” As is the case throughout the New Testament, individuals who live in sin are considered spiritually dead. They are referred to as dead by the Holy Spirit because they have separated themselves from God via their sin. The sinning widow continued to exist physically, and her soul continued to exist, yet she was called dead. The biblical picture of spiritual death is not one of non-existence, but one of a miserable existence separated from God.

The antithesis of death is “life” (*zoe*). As we have seen from numerous passages, one way that the word **life** is used in the Bible is to describe the state in which the physical body is joined or connected to the soul of a person. Furthermore, spiritual **life**, the opposite of spiritual **death**, is used in the New Testament to describe the condition in which a separated soul is brought back to, and joined with, its Creator. Paul described this condition when he wrote: “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, **yet now He has reconciled** in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight” (Colossians 1:21-22, emp. added). Sin alienates a person from God and leads to spiritual death. God, through Christ, allows those dead, separated souls to be cleansed of that sin and have spiritual life, which reconciles them to Him. That is why John wrote: “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).

It is evident, then, from a close look at the Scriptures that the word **death** does not mean a state of nonexistence—either in the physical realm or the spiritual realm. The Bible describes bodies that were dead, yet still very much in existence. The inspired record describes individuals who were spiritually dead, yet existing in that dead condition nonetheless. The misguided ploy to define “the second death” (Revelation 20:11; 20:6,14; 21:8) as a state of nonexistence is merely a failed attempt to avoid the actual meaning of the biblical text. The second death describes nothing more (or less) than the total separation of wicked, unsaved souls from the God Who created them.

Of all those wicked people who will ask “in that day” (i.e., the Day of Judgment), “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” (Matthew 7:22), Jesus, the righteous Judge (John 5:22; 2 Timothy 4:8), will declare (sentencing them to a second death), “I never

knew you; **depart from Me**, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matthew 7:23, emp. added). Of those evil people who neglect the needy, He will say, “**Depart from Me**, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41, emp. added).

“Eternal destruction” awaits those who are cast away “**from** the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9, emp. added). As both Jesus and the apostle Paul declared, the second death is not annihilation, but eternal separation “from the presence of the Lord.” Death in no way implies a state of nonexistence.

If God punishes people forever in hell, then He would be, according to F. LaGard Smith, “a twisted, cruel God who tortures the wicked, dangling them over licking flames.”

HOW CAN A LOVING GOD PUNISH PEOPLE ETERNALLY?

It seems obvious that the idea of annihilationism did not originate from a straightforward reading of the biblical text. After looking at the way biblical verses must be bent, stretched, ripped out of context, and twisted to support the concept of annihilationism, one cannot help but wonder why this idea is so attractive to certain well-educated individuals. While we do not have the space here to examine all of the reasons for the acceptance of this false doctrine, one very pertinent motive for accepting annihilationism does surface regularly in the writings and lectures of those who adhere to annihilationism.

In April 1988, while speaking on the subject of “A Christian Response to the New Age Movement” at the annual Pepperdine University lectures in Malibu, California, F. LaGard Smith asked the members of his audience:

I also wonder if you feel as uncomfortable as I do in our traditional view of hell. Do you readily accept the traditional view of hell that says God sort of dangles you over the fires that burn day and night?... Is that what hell is all about? Haven’t you struggled with the idea of how there can be a loving God and anywhere in his presence permit that to exist? Doesn’t it seem like cruel and unusual punishment? (1988).

Notice his line of reasoning. Smith is “uncomfortable” with the “traditional view” of hell. What does he suggest has caused this cognitive dissonance on his part? He states that eternal punishment in hell seems (to him) like “cruel and unusual punishment.” Smith does not believe that a “loving God” could permit eternal torture of impenitent sinners. Fifteen years later, in his book, *After Life*, Smith was even more assertive in his view that God is “not a twisted, cruel God who tortures the wicked, dangling them over licking flames” (p. 183). Do not miss his point. According to Smith, **if God punishes the wicked eternally in a flaming fire (rather than annihilating them), then God is both “twisted” and “cruel.”**

Smith’s complaints bear a striking resemblance to the countless attacks that have been made upon the God of the Bible by skeptics and infidels. The renowned agnostic, Bertrand Russell, once stated:

There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ’s moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment (1957, p. 17).

Russell’s self-defined sense of humanness balked at the idea of an everlasting punishment, which he offered as one of his primary reasons for rejecting Christ (since Jesus taught on an everlasting hell). Russell further noted:

Christ certainly, as depicted in the Gospels, did believe in everlasting punishment, and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching.... I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world.... I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him as His chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that (pp. 17-18).

Smith and Russell both “feel” that there exists an irreconcilable moral dilemma between a loving God and an eternal Hell. Due to this belief, Russell felt compelled to reject **the Christ** of the gospel accounts Who forcefully presents, to any unbiased reader, the idea of an eternal hell. On the other hand, Smith, not willing to reject the Christ of the Gospel, rejects the **eternal hell** presented in the New Testament. Both have rejected a facet of New Testament teaching based on a subjectively perceived moral dilemma.

That dilemma, however, has been created more from a sense of emotional discomfort than from an honest study of the Bible and God. As J.P. Moreland accurately stated when questioned about the eternality of conscious punishment, many people “tend to evaluate whether it’s [eternal punishment—EL/KB] appropriate, based on their feelings or emotional offense to it” (as quoted in Strobel, 2000, p. 172). He went on to state: “The basis for their evaluation should be whether hell is a morally just or morally right state of affairs, not whether they like or dislike the concept” (p. 172). The alleged moral dilemma presented by Smith and Russell is one that is based on emotions, not on accurate assessments of morality and justice. Upon further investigation, there proves to be no dilemma at all. Allow us to explain.

God is Love

It would be extremely difficult for a person to read the Bible and miss the fact that God is described as a loving and caring Creator. In 1 John 4:7-8, the writer declared that love issues directly from God and that, in fact, “God is love.” First John 4:16 states: “And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” Throughout the Scriptures, God’s love for His creatures is repeated time and time again. One of the most familiar passages of Scripture, known even to the masses, is John 3:16, which declares: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

It is here, however, that a very important point must be made. Our “politically correct” society has influenced many people to believe that a loving person would never cause harm or discomfort to the object of his love. In an interview with Lee Strobel, J.P. Moreland addressed this issue when he observed:

Yes, God is a compassionate being, but he’s also a just, moral, and pure being. So God’s decisions are not based on modern American sentimentalism.

...People today tend to care only for the softer virtues like love and tenderness, while they’ve forgotten the hard virtues of holiness, righteousness, and justice (as quoted in Strobel, p. 174).

What does the Bible mean when it says that “God is love”? In today’s society, the concept of love quite often is misunderstood. Many people seem to think that a “loving person” is one who always tries to keep others out of **every** pain or discomfort. Punishment often is looked upon as an “unloving” thing to do. But that is not the case. In fact, a loving person sometimes will **cause** pain to others in order to accomplish a greater good. For instance, suppose

If the point is conceded that a loving God could punish sin with at least one minute of punishment after this life, then, who would be in the best position to determine exactly how long punishment should be?

a mother tells her 4-year-old son to stop putting the hair dryer into his little sister’s bath water, but the child continues his mischievous and dangerous activity? Is it not likely that the boy will be punished? Maybe he will get a swift swat on the leg, or have to sit in the corner of a room. The physical pain or mental discomfort inflicted on the child is for his own good and/or the good of his sister. This mother loves her children, but still punishes them. In fact, the Proverbs writer stated that a parent who **does not discipline** his/her child (which includes corporal punishment) simply **does not love** that child (Proverbs 13:24; cf. 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15).

God is Just

God is hardly a one-sided Being. He has many different attributes that need to be considered. Yes, one of those attributes is His love. But another is His justice. Psalm 89:14 states that “righteousness and justice” are the foundation of God’s throne. Deuteronomy 32:3-4 declares: “For I proclaim

the name of the Lord: ascribe greatness to our God. He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He.”

What is justice? Justice is the principle that crime must be punished. It is not difficult to recognize justice. Suppose a certain judge in a large U.S. city let every murderer walk away from his courtroom without any punishment. Even though many of the murderers had killed several people in cold blood, the judge would just wave his hand, pat the murderer on the shoulder, and say something like, “I am feeling very loving and generous today, so you are free to go without any punishment.” The judge obviously would not be administering justice, and he should promptly be relieved of his position. In the same way, if God did not provide punishment for the sinful actions of humans, then justice could not be the foundation of His throne.

It can be shown, then, that a loving person could punish those that he loves, and that justice demands that some type of punishment or penalty must be endured or paid for actions that break the law. But the problem still remains that **eternal** punishment seems to some to be too harsh and permanent to come from a loving God.

There is one other principle of justice that needs attention at this juncture. Punishment almost always lasts longer than the actual crime. When a gunman walks into a bank, shoots two tellers, robs the bank, and is successfully apprehended, tried, and found guilty, his punishment is of a much longer duration than his crime. The actual shooting and looting might have taken only three minutes to accomplish, but he most likely will pay for those three minutes by spending the remainder of his life in prison. Those who contend that hell will not be eternal say that forever is “too long.” But once a person concedes that punishment can (and generally does!) last longer than the crime, his argument against an eternal hell becomes self-defeating. Once a person admits that the punishment can last longer than the crime, it is simply a matter of who gets to decide how long the punishment should be.

Skeptics, infidels, and others admit that punishment can be longer than the crime, but then they contest that “forever” is too long. Who says forever is too long? Would a hundred years be too long to punish a child molester? What about two hundred? It soon becomes obvious that determinations of “too long” are arbitrarily made by those (like skeptics and infidels) who want to reject the God of the Bible or (like annihilationists) the hell of the Bible.



In his debate with renowned atheistic philosopher, Antony Flew, Thomas B. Warren pressed this point masterfully. Before one of the debating sessions, Warren gave Flew a list of questions to be answered (a facet of the debate that was agreed upon before the debate started). One of the questions was a “true or false” question that read as follows: “It is not possible that the justice of God would entail any punishment for sin.” To this question Flew answered “false,” indicating that it is possible that the justice of God could entail some punishment for sin. The next “true or false” question offered by Warren stated: “It is possible that this infinite justice of God might entail at least one minute of punishment when this life is over”—to which Flew answered “true.” Warren then commented:

He answered “true.” Now note, it might entail at least one minute of punishment and not be out of harmony—the basic concept of God would not be self-contradictory. What about two minutes, Dr. Flew? What about three minutes, four minutes, an hour, a day, a year, a month, a hundred years, a million years? Where do you stop? Would a billion years be long enough? Could God punish a man a billion years and still be just and loving? You can see that he has given up tonight.... He has shown his inability to answer these questions in harmony with the atheistic position and the implications which follow from it. He himself is on record as saying when a man cannot do that, then it is clear that he holds a false position (Warren and Flew, 1977, p. 150).

Once the point is conceded that a loving God could punish sin with at least one minute of punishment after this life, then the only question left to answer is: Who is in the best position to determine how long punishment should be? Would it not be a righteous judge who knew every detail of the crime, including the thoughts and intents of the criminal? God is exactly that. He is not motivated by selfishness, greed, or other vice, but sits on a throne of righteousness (Psalm 89:14). Furthermore, He knows **all** the facts of the case (Proverbs 15:3) and the intents and thoughts of the lawbreakers (Psalm 44:21). Only God is in a position to determine how long sin should be punished.

Furthermore, it is ironic that those who are claiming that “forever” is “too long” to punish people for sins, have themselves sinned. Of course a person who is guilty of sin is going to want to lessen the punishment of that sin. Once again we must ask, would a person guilty of sin be in a better position to determine how long sin should be punished than a sinless, perfect God (1 John 1:5)? To ask is to answer.

Yet again, the idea that eternity is “too long” only tugs at human emotions when dealing with punishment, never with reward. Who would argue that heaven cannot be eternal because God would be unjust to reward us for “too long.” On the contrary, the eternity of heaven and hell stand and fall together. And both are deeply rooted in the justice and mercy of God. When Jesus spoke to the people of His day about the ultimate fate of humanity in eternity (as we discussed earlier), He stated that the

wicked would “go away into **everlasting** (*aionios*) punishment, but the righteous into **eternal** (*aionios*) life” (Matthew 25:46). The Greek word rendered “eternal” in the English, is the same Greek word (*aionios*) rendered earlier as “everlasting.” Observe that precisely the same word is applied to the **punishment** of the wicked as to the **reward** of the righteous. Those who are willing to accept Christ’s teaching on heaven should have no trouble whatsoever accepting His teaching on hell.

WHY DO AFTERLIFE QUESTIONS MATTER?

One pertinent question that should properly be addressed in any discussion of this nature is simply, “What does it matter?” Why should these questions be discussed at length? In answer to such appropriate questions, it must be stated that God, through His inspired Word, saw fit to include these issues in the list of “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3). That fact alone is enough to justify such a discussion.

But that is not the only reason afterlife issues are of utmost importance. In a discussion regarding Roman Catholicism’s unofficial doctrine of limbo, F. LaGard Smith wrote:

[A]fterlife issues become a litmus test of the legitimacy of underlying theological assumptions. Whenever any afterlife scenario lacks coherence with other clear biblical teaching regarding what happens after death, red flags are raised immediately as to the validity of any doctrines upon which that afterlife theology is based (p. 242).

Smith correctly noted that what a person believes about the afterlife often stems from that person’s beliefs about God and the Bible—what Smith calls his or her “underlying theological assumptions.” Interestingly, an outstanding case of this statement’s validity can be seen in Smith’s own dealings with afterlife issues.

As was quoted earlier, Smith stated that God is “not a twisted, cruel God who tortures the wicked, dangling them over licking flames” (2003, p. 183). When one dissects such a statement, he can view Smith’s primary “underlying theological assumption,” which becomes evident via the following syllogism. First, any God Who “tortures the wicked, dangling them over a licking flame” is “twisted and cruel.” But the God of the Bible is not “twisted and cruel.” Therefore, the God of the Bible could not, and would not, torture the wicked by dangling them over a flame that lasts forever. Notice that his “underlying theological as-

SPEAKING SCHEDULES

Dr. Bert Thompson

March 4-6	Collinsville, IL	(618) 667-6708
March 18-20	Scott City, KS	(529) 872-2425

Dr. Brad Harrub

March 11-13	Evant, TX	(817) 417-5705
April 8-10	Mart, TX	(254) 876-2620

Dr. Dave Miller

March 4-6	Lakeland, FL	(863) 682-4702
March 9-13	Olympia, WA	(360) 357-8304

Kyle Butt

March 11-13	Canton, OH	(330) 499-4303
March 20	Ironton, OH	(740) 532-3365

Eric Lyons

March 4-5	Sandy, UT	(801) 304-7009
March 11-13	Somerville, AL	(256) 778-8961

sumption” is that any God Who would torture the wicked in everlasting fire is twisted and cruel. Because of his assumption, Smith must twist the Scripture in a way that would not allow for God to punish the wicked forever in hell.

The problem with Smith’s argument is that he **falsely assumes** that a God Who punishes people forever in hell is twisted or cruel. As we have shown, eternal punishment of the wicked in unending flames does not violate any of the attributes of God, including His love. It is the case that a loving, just, righteous God could cast the wicked into an eternal hell, where they would be punished by fire forever, and still be a loving God. Smith’s views on the afterlife have been shaped by this false assumption, and thus are built upon a faulty foundation.

What is worse, since the assumption is false, the implications of Smith’s argument impugn the very nature of God. Follow the logic. If any God Who tortures the wicked by “dangling them over licking flames” is “twisted and cruel,” and if the Bible teaches that God does, in fact, torture the wicked in licking flames unendingly, then the God of the Bible must by necessity be both “twisted” and “cruel.”

It is no wonder that Smith so adamantly defends his position that the Bible does not teach that the wicked will be punished forever in hell fire. He, like so many other annihilationists, has painted himself into a corner. If the Bible does, in fact, teach that the wicked will be punished forever in hell then all those who have stated that any God Who would allow such is “twisted and cruel,” have in reality accused the God of the Bible of being “twisted and cruel”—an extremely dangerous accusation to make, to be sure (since the Bible **does** teach that God **will** punish the wicked forever in hell).

Make no mistake about it: a person’s beliefs about afterlife issues are of utmost importance to that person’s spiritual well-being and future eternal destination. As Wayne Jackson correctly stated:

The dogma of annihilation is not an innocent view with harmless consequences. It is a concept that undermines the full force of that fearful warning of which the Almighty God would have men be aware. There is many a rebel who would gladly indulge himself in a lifetime of sin for an eternal nothingness (Jackson, 2003b).

It is ironic that the picture of nonexistence painted by annihilationists and described as hell, is almost identical to the picture of nonexistence painted by Buddhists and la-

beled as the ultimate reward (also called Nirvana). Buddhists’ “heaven” closely resembles many annihilationists’ idea of hell!

Does it really matter what a person believes in this regard? Jackson again spoke to that question when he wrote:

Those who contend that the wicked will be annihilated are in error. But is the issue one of importance? Yes. **Any theory of divine retribution which undermines the full consequences of rebelling against God has to be most dangerous** (1998, 33[9]:35, emp. added).

CONCLUSION

Those who argue that a “loving God” cannot punish impenitent sinners for eternity, simply have neglected to realize the heinousness of sin. What could possibly be so bad that it would deserve an eternity of punishment? God’s divine answer to that is simple—unforgiven sin. Adam and Eve’s sin brought into the world death, disease, war, pestilence, pain, and suffering. The cumulative weight of the sin of mankind from that day until the Day of Judgment was, and is, **so overwhelming** that it cost God the lifeblood of His only Son.

To see the atrociousness of sin, cast your eyes back 2,000 years to the excruciating violence, mockery, and torture perpetrated on the only human ever to live a perfect life without sin—Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4: 15). Does God **want** the wicked to be punished for eternity in hell? Absolutely not! Scripture, in fact, speaks expressly to that point. “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Paul wrote that God “desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel recorded the words of God concerning the wicked: “‘Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the Lord God, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?’” (Ezekiel 18:23).

The answer to that rhetorical question is a resounding “No.” God does not **want** the wicked to die in their sin and be lost forever in eternal punishment. He will not, however, override the freewill of humans, and **force** them to accept His free gift of salvation. Nor will He contradict His own revealed Word in order to save those who have not obeyed the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8) by coming into contact with the saving blood of Christ (Ephesians 1:7). The Scriptures are crystal clear on these important points.

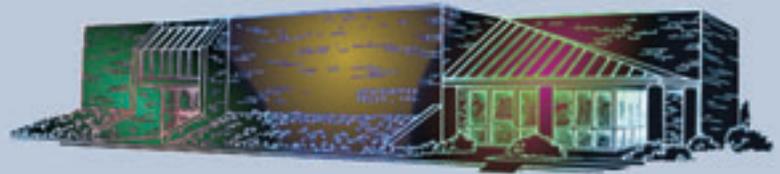
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WE RECOMMEND...

The entire January 2005 issue of *The Spiritual Sword*, which is edited by Alan E. Highers, is devoted to the topic of “Eternal Punishment. We recommend that our readers who are interested in this important subject obtain a copy of the 48-page journal, which is available for only \$1.75 by calling 901/743-0464, or by writing to: *The Spiritual Sword*, 1511 Getwell Road, Memphis, TN 38111. The eleven articles in the January issue are thorough, well researched, timely, and definitely worthy of serious consideration.

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



APOLOGETICS PRESS—PUBLICLY PROCLAIMING AND DEFENDING THE TRUTH

As most of our regular readers know, one of our goals at Apologetics Press is to produce cutting-edge materials that are both scientifically accurate and biblically sound. Whenever big news items “break” that pertain to issues with which our work deals, we make it a point to produce responses and/or rebuttals that are logical, thoroughly documented, well reasoned, and up to date. For example, in just the last three years alone, we have produced in-depth responses/rebuttals to:

- the July 29, 2002 issue of *U.S. News & World Report*, in which staff writer Thomas Hayden produced a lengthy cover-story article titled “A Theory Evolves,” promoting evolution as fact (see our Web site article, “Creationists Fight Back: A Review of *U.S. News & World Report*”);
- the September 2002 issue of *Scientific American*, in which editor John Rennie berated and denigrated creationists (see our Web site article, “15 Answers to John Rennie and *Scientific American*’s Nonsense”);
- the November 2004 issue of *National Geographic*, in which editor Bill Allen devoted a whopping 33 pages of that issue to a defense of Darwinian evolution (see our Web site article, “*National Geographic* Shoots Itself in the Foot—Again!”);
- F. LaGard Smith’s book, *After Life*, and Homer Hailey’s book, *God’s Judgements & Punishments*, both of which advocated the erroneous concept that hell is not eternal (see our articles, “The Eternality of Hell,” in the January and February 2005 issues of *Reason & Revelation*).

My staff and I are prepared to work (and often **do** work!) around the clock in order to publish the actual facts of the matter and set the record straight—while simultaneously defending the Bible’s teachings, whenever and wherever those teachings are called into question or attacked.

Sometimes, our efforts entail writing articles for *R&R* (as Eric Lyons and Kyle Butt did in refuting Smith’s and Hailey’s views). At other times, our efforts entail producing rebuttals that appear on our Web site (as in the articles Dr. Brad Harrub and I co-authored in regard to the *Scientific American* and *National Geographic* fiascos). But more often than not, we find ourselves involved in presenting in a **positive** manner the results of our research in specific areas that other apologists have not frequently addressed. Within the past several months, for example, Dr. Harrub and I (in conjunction with other staff members and interns) had approved for publication in various scholarly, refereed journals published by creation scientists, the following **eight** articles [NOTE: *CRSQ* stands for *Creation Research Society Quarterly*; *TJ* stands for *Technical Journal*].

- “The Origin of Language and Communication,” *TJ*, 2003, 17[3]:93-101.
- “The Origin of the Brain and Mind,” *CRSQ*, 2004, 41[1]:28-45.
- “Mind, Materialism, and Consciousness,” *CRSQ*, 2004, 41[1]:46-59.
- “Consciousness: King of Evolutionary Problems,” *CRSQ*, 2004, 41[2]:113-130.
- “The Origin of Consciousness,” *CRSQ*, 2004, 41[2]:131-155.
- “The Hox Gene—Evolution’s Hoax,” *CRSQ*, 2004, 41[3]:231-241.
- “Evolutionary Theories on Gender and Sexual Reproduction,” *TJ*, 2004, 18[1]:97-104.
- “The Origin of Gender and Sexual Reproduction,” *TJ*, 2004, 18[1]:120-127.

I thought our readers might like to know “what we’ve been up to,” and might benefit from having access to this information. Stay tuned. There is more yet to come. Much more!

Bert Thompson