

The Eternality of Hell [Part I]

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It hardly surprises God-fearing men and women that unbelievers of all sorts reject the notion of an unending penalty for wickedness. Since atheists, agnostics, and infidels of every stripe do not believe in the existence of heaven or an immortal soul, they certainly do not give the idea of an eternal hell much thought (other than to criticize the notion). It is somewhat surprising to many Bible believers, however, to learn that a growing number of people who believe in God, and who accept as genuine the existence of the soul, are rejecting the idea of an eternal punishment for those who live and die outside the body of Christ. What Edward Fudge espoused over twenty years ago in his volume, *The Fire That Consumes*, and what more recently published works by such writers as Homer Hailey and F. LaGard Smith espouse, is the idea that “the wicked, following whatever degree and duration of pain that God may justly inflict, will finally and truly die, perish and become extinct for ever and ever” (Fudge, 1982, p. 425). Allegedly, as best-selling author Smith wrote in the foreword of Hailey’s book, *God’s Judgements & Punishments*, “total destruction rather than conscious, ongoing punishment is the dreaded fate which awaits the wicked” (Hailey, 2003, p. 10). “In hell...those who have rejected God and have refused to believe in his Son will be totally wiped out! Completely eradicated. Their existence will come to an abrupt end” (Smith, 2003, p. 184). According to Smith and other annihilationists, the choice for mankind is simple: “Blessed existence versus non-existence” (Smith, p. 190).

ANNIHILATION—OR UNENDING PUNISHMENT?

To those familiar with Jesus’ statement recorded in Matthew 25:46, it would seem that the question of whether or not the wicked will one day be annihilated, or punished forever in hell, is rather easy to answer. After explaining to His disciples how God will separate the righteous from the wicked at the Judgment (Matthew 25:31-45), Jesus concluded by telling them that the wicked “shall go away into **eternal punishment**: but the righteous into **eternal life**” (25:46, ASV). For many Christians, this verse settles the issue: the wicked will not be extinguished by God after the Judgment, but will suffer unending punishment. The righteous, on the other hand, will enjoy the bliss of an unending life with God in heaven.

Recognizing the fact that if “eternal” means “unending” in Matthew 25:46, then their whole theory about what happens to the wicked after the Judgment crumbles, certain annihilationists have alleged that the word eternal has nothing whatsoever to do with time or the unending duration of the afterlife. F. LaGard Smith, just prior to his discussion of (what he calls) “The Tormenting Conundrum of Hell” (chapter 8), stated:

If you have a computer Bible program (or an antiquated concordance!), pull up the word *eternal* and be prepared for a shock. **In all of its many associations, there is not a single hint of time....** To be *eternal* is to have a *lasting nature*. To have the kind of qualities which endure despite the passing of time (if, in fact, there is any time at all) [p. 162, italics and parenthetical items in orig., emp. added].
To say, then, that we will have eternal life in heaven says **nothing** about *how long* we will live in heaven. It’s already begun before we get there! The point is that life in heaven will be a qualitatively *different kind of life* from the one we have known in earth’s space and time (p. 163, italics in orig., emp. added; see also Hailey, pp. 132-133).

With such an interpretation in place for the word “eternal” (and specifically for the phrase “eternal life”), Smith seemingly laid the groundwork for his interpretation of “eternal fire/punishment.” He confidently declared:

“Eternal fire” bespeaks the *nature* of hell’s fire, not its *duration*.... [W]hen we hear Jesus speaking about “eternal fire,” there’s no reason to think in terms of clocks or calendars. Time is not the issue. *Effect* is the issue (p. 174, italics in orig.).
“Eternal punishment” will no more be punishment throughout an endless eternity than was the immediate, devastating punishment suffered by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (p. 175).

Although Smith seems to think that he has presented a convincing case about the annihilation of the wicked in hell through **his** definition of the word “eternal,” he actually never gave a precise definition of Greek words translated “eternal” or “everlasting.” In the introduction to his book, Smith admitted: “The afterlife, by its very nature, is a subject which calls for careful study of the text.... [T]here are the necessary word studies to be done, so that we can be confident we’re not confusing linguistic apples and oranges” (p. 9). Unfortunately for the reader, Smith omitted vital, fundamental word studies, and as a result, caused mass confusion for the reader.

First, he failed to cite even one Greek lexicographer in his defense of the word eternal “in all its many associations” **not** having “**a single hint of time**” (p. 162, emp. added). Perhaps the reason for Smith’s omission of relevant material from Greek dictionaries is that such word studies overwhelmingly disagree with his premise. Notice how the following eminently respected Greek scholars have defined the two New Testament Greek words (*aion* and *aionios*) that commonly are translated “forever,” “eternal,” or “everlasting,” especially when they are connected with ideas that relate to the invisible world.

- The first two definitions of the word *aion* provided by Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich are as follows: (1) “a long period of time, without ref. to beginning or end” and (2) “a segment of time as a particular unit of history, age.” Three definitions are then provided for *aionios*: (1) “pert. to a long period of time, *long ago*,” (2) “pert. to a period of time without beginning or end, *eternal* of God;” and (3) “pert. to a period of unending duration, *without end*” (Danker, et al., 2000, pp. 32-33, italics in orig.).
- According to Thayer, *aion* is used in the New Testament numerous times simply to mean “forever” (1962, p. 19). He then defined *aionios* in the following three ways: (1) “without beginning or end, that which always has been and always will be;” (2) “without beginning;” and (3) “without end, never to cease, everlasting” (p. 20).
- Of *aionios* (the Greek word used twice in Matthew 25:46 to describe both “punishment” and “life”), W.E. Vine wrote: “describes duration, either undefined but not endless, as in Rom. 16:25; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 1:2; or undefined because endless as in Rom. 16:26 and the other sixty-six places in the N.T.” (1940, 2:43).
- Of the word *aionios*, R.C.H. Lenski asked, “[I]f this Greek adjective does not mean ‘eternal,’ which Greek adjective does have that meaning? Or did the Greek world, including the Jewish (Jesus spoke Aramaic) world, have no words for eternity or eternal?” (1943, p. 997).
- According to A.T. Robertson: “The word *aionios*...means either without beginning or without end or both. **It comes as near to the idea of eternal as the Greek can put it in one word**”(1930, 1:202, emp. added).
- The first definition Hermann Sasse provided for *aion* in the highly regarded *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is “in the sense of prolonged time or eternity” (1964, 1:198). Later, when discussing *aionios* “as a term for the object eschatological expectation,” he indicated that it likewise is used to mean “unceasing” or “endless,” while sometimes extending beyond the purely temporal meaning (1:209; see also Carson, 1996, p. 523).
- Writing in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* under the subject heading of **time**, Joachim Guhrt stated that *aion* is “primarily a designation for a long period of time [either ending or unending—EL/KB].... Eternity is thus not necessarily a timeless concept, but the most comprehensive temporal one which the experience of time has produced” (1978, p. 826). Although Guhrt admitted that when *aionios* is used in the gospel of John (to form “eternal life”), it can be used in a qualitative sense, nevertheless “there is also a temporal sense, so that eternal (*aionios*) indicates the quantity of this life” (p. 832; see also Robertson, 1932, 5:49-50).
- Finally, James Orr wrote in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* that

the reply...that *aionios*...denotes quality, not duration, cannot be sustained. Whatever else the term includes, it connotes duration.... [I]t can hardly be questioned that “the aeons of the aeons” and similar phrases are the practical New Testament equivalents for eternity, and that *aionios* in its application to God and to life (“eternal life”) includes the idea of unending duration.... When, therefore, the term is applied in the same context to punishment and to life (Matt. 25:46), and no hint is given anywhere of limitation, the only reasonable exegesis is to take the word in its full sense of “eternal” (1956, 4:2502).

When Smith commented on the word eternal, saying, “In all of its many associations, there is not a single hint of time” (p. 162), he placed himself at odds with the most respected Greek lexicographers and scholars of the past century. Any attempt to explain away eternal punishment by redefining the Greek words for eternal will fail because eternal “describes duration” (Vine, 2:43).

Second, even without delving into various Greek dictionaries to find the meaning of the word *aionios* (translated “eternal” or “everlasting” in Matthew 25:46), one easily could grasp the primary meaning of the word simply by noting two contrasts that Paul made in two of his epistles. First, in 2 Corinthians 4:18, he indicated that the antithesis of the spiritual things that are “eternal,” are the physical “things which...are **temporary** (*proskaira*)” [viz., that which endures for a time or season]. Later, in his letter to Philemon, he wrote that “perhaps” his servant Onesimus “departed for a **while**” so that he (Philemon) “might receive him **forever**” (Philemon 15). Paul suggested that perhaps Onesimus had abandoned his master for a season/hour (*horan*), so that their relationship might become one that prevailed in both this life and in the unending life to come. In each of these passages, Paul contrasted the temporary with the eternal—that which comes to an end, with that which is unending.

Third, Bible translators obviously believed that *aionios* denotes duration, else surely they would have chosen to use English words other than “everlasting” or “eternal” in their respective translations of this Greek word. According to the fourth edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the English word “everlasting” means exactly what it sounds like it means: “1. Lasting forever; eternal. 2a. Continuing indefinitely or for a long period of time,” and in its noun form, “eternal duration” (2000, pp. 616-617). The word “eternal” is similarly defined: “1. Being without beginning or end; existing outside of time.... 2. Continuing without interruption; perpetual...” (p. 611; see also *Merriam-Webster’s* definition of these words). Why have English Bible translators been translating *aionios* as “everlasting” or “eternal” for the past four centuries? Because they understood that this word denotes duration, and specifically, when dealing with the future state of the righteous and the wicked, an unending, unceasing duration. Considering that the Greek words *aion* and *aionios*, and the English words everlasting and eternal, all obviously signify duration, one is bewildered as to how Smith could allege that in the word eternal, “[i]n all of its many associations, there is not a single hint of time” (p. 162). Talk about confusing apples with oranges!

Though Smith's definition of eternal is troubling, his attempt at explaining away Matthew 25:46 (in light of his doctrine of annihilationism) is even more perplexing. Having just previously indicated that "eternal" says **nothing** about duration (pp. 162-163,174), he then proceeded to argue that "the Hebrew word *olam* and the Greek word *aiōnios*, both of which mean the same as 'eternal' " (p. 174), **do** indicate some kind of duration, but not always an ongoing, unending duration. He gave eight examples from the Old Testament where "eternal" (*olam*) means "all the days of life" [as when a servant pledged allegiance to his master, had his ear pierced to the door, and was not discharged **as long as he lived** (cf. Deuteronomy 15:17; see Gesenius, 1847, p. 612)]. He then connected Matthew 25, verses 41 and 46, to his discussion of *olam*, saying:

So it is that when Jesus talks about the great dividing of the sheep from the goats, and says of those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels," the point is *destination*, not *duration*. Likewise, when Jesus says, "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:41,46), he's speaking of the kind of punishment—namely *destruction*—which has everlasting consequences (p. 175, italics in orig.).

Such was Smith's explanation of Matthew 25:46. At first, he alleged that "eternal" is **not** about time (pp. 162-163,174). Then he alleged that it **was** about time, though not always unending in its nature (p. 174). Finally, he stated that "eternal" is **not** about duration, but destination (p. 175). To say the least, we find his reasoning extremely confusing.

When all of the evidence is considered, Smith's comments regarding Matthew 25:46 and the word "eternal" are nothing more than a tenuous attempt to propagate an extremely dangerous doctrine. As we have documented, "eternal" **does** imply duration. Furthermore, simply because the Old Testament Hebrew word for eternal (*olam*) often involved an eventual ending, does not mean that "eternal" is to be understood in that sense in every case in the New Testament (and certainly not in Matthew 25:46).

Admittedly, there are instances in the Old Testament where the Hebrew word *olam* means something other than eternal (cf. Exodus 12:24; 29:9; 40:15; Joshua 14:9). As Smith noted, the example of the slave who served his master "forever" (Deuteronomy 15:17) does not mean he will serve him for eternity. The context demands that we interpret the word *olam* ("forever") in this verse (and numerous others in the Old Testament) to mean something other than performing the action everlastingly (cf. Exodus 40:15; Leviticus 16:34; 1 Chronicles 16:17). In this case of the "eternal" slave, *olam* was used to mean "as long as the slave lived on Earth."

In other Old Testament passages, however, the Hebrew word for eternal clearly **is** used to mean unending in its duration. When Abraham called on the name of the Lord (Genesis 21:33), He called on the "Eternal" (*olam*) God. The psalmist praised the God Who is "from everlasting to everlasting" (90:2; cf. Micah 5:2), and Solomon, near the end of Ecclesiastes, wrote of man's place in the next life as being an "eternal home" (12:5). When the psalmist wrote, "My days are like a shadow that lengthens, and I wither away like grass. But You, oh Lord, shall endure forever (*olam*)" (Psalm 102:11-12), he quite obviously was contrasting the shortness of human life with the duration of God's existence. The psalmist went on to say that God's "years would have no end" (Psalm 102:27). According to Daniel 12:2, "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting (*olam*) life, some to shame and everlasting (*olam*) contempt." *Olam* was used in these cases to convey the idea of eternal in **duration**.

In fact, the *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon* gives the following definition for the word *olam*: (1) long duration, antiquity, futurity, for ever, ever, everlasting, evermore, perpetual old, ancient, world; (1a) ancient time, long time (of past); (1b) (of future); (1b1) forever, always; (1b2) continuous existence, perpetual; (1b3) everlasting, indefinite or unending future, eternity (see "*Owlam*," 1999).

Like so many words throughout Scripture that have more than one meaning, *olam* and *aiōnios* must be understood in light of the contexts in which they are found. Take, for example, the use of the word "day" (Hebrew *yom*; Greek *hemera*) in Scripture. Depending on the context in which it is found, it can mean: (1) the period opposite of night (Genesis 1:5); (2) a literal 24-hours (cf. Joshua 6:1-16); (3) a period of time in the future (not necessarily a literal 24 hours—cf. Matthew 7:22; 2 Peter 3:10); or (4) the total days of Creation (Genesis 2:4). When questions arise about the kind of days experienced during the Creation week, one is compelled to examine the specific context of Genesis 1. When he does, an overwhelming amount of evidence points to these days being literal 24-hour days just as we experience today. (Perhaps most noteworthy is the fact that each of these days is described as having both an "evening" and a "morning"—1:5,8,13,19,23,31.) Similarly, the word "eternal" also must be understood in light of its immediate and remote contexts.

Although Smith saw fit to indoctrinate his readers on how the Hebrew word for eternal (*olam*) frequently is used to mean something other than eternal in duration, he completely neglected to mention any of the numerous Old Testament passages where *olam* is used to mean a **literal** forever (as noted above—Genesis 21:33; Ecclesiastes 12:5; et al.). Why mention one usage, but ignore the other? Furthermore, it seems quite inappropriate for someone to comment on a **New Testament** verse like Matthew 25:46 (originally written in **Greek**), and basically deal only with how that corresponding **Hebrew** word is used in the **Old Testament**, all the while neglecting the overwhelming majority of instances in the New Testament where the word means "unending."

The word *aiōnios* is used seventy times throughout the New Testament. Three times it is used to describe God's eternal nature (Romans 16:26; 1 Timothy 6:16; Hebrews 9:14). It is found over forty times in the New Testament, in reference to the unending happiness of the righteous (e.g., John 10:28; Romans 5:21; 6:23; 1 John 1:2). And five times it is used in reference to the punishment of the wicked (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Jude 7). In Matthew 25:46, the word appears twice—once in reference to "eternal punishment," and once in reference to "eternal life." Simply put, if the

punishment mentioned in this verse is temporary, then so is heaven. Contextually, the two are linked. Just as Jesus expected His disciples to understand heaven as a place of permanent, unending happiness for conscious souls of people, He likewise intended for them to understand hell as a place of permanent, unending torment for conscious souls. The fact that Christ made a special point of repeating *aionios* in the same sentence requires that we stay with the plain meaning of the word. Both heaven and hell will be eternal (unending!) in duration.

Matthew 25:46 serves as a death knell to the theory of annihilationism. Those who teach the limited duration of hell either refrain altogether from commenting on this particular verse, or the comments they make, like Smith's, are disorderly and void of evidentiary support. In Homer Hailey's work on God's judgments (in which half of the book was dedicated specifically to defending the position that hell is not eternal), **he never once** gave a clear explanation of this verse. The only comment he offered that might remotely be considered an "explanation" of Matthew 25:46 is found on page 153, where it follows immediately after his only quotation of this verse. Hailey wrote:

It is sometimes said that Jesus gave a full and accurate picture of hell. Certainly, it was accurate, but it was not the complete teaching on the subject. Much would be added by the Holy Spirit through Paul and Peter, and through John in Revelation. The seven times Jesus used the word **Gehenna**, He used it from the Jewish point of view. He left the universal aspect of the subject to be revealed by the Holy Spirit (2003, emp. in orig.).

Certainly the Holy Spirit inspired others to write on this subject. But that does not mean that what Jesus said about "eternal punishment" is wrong (or not worthy of comment). How can someone write a book titled *God's Judgements & Punishments*, yet never explain the Lord's comments on "eternal punishment"?

Even after granting annihilationists the fact that *aionios* can extend at times beyond the meaning of duration, and also may be used on occasion in a qualitative sense (see Guhrt, 1978, p. 832), as we have already seen, "the temporal sense is rarely forfeited" (Carson, 1996, p. 523). First and foremost, the word has to do with **duration**. Moreover, whenever *aion* is brought into the discussion, the case against annihilationism is strengthened considerably. If God "lives for ever (*aion*) and ever (*aion*)" (Revelation 1:18; 10:6; 15:7), and glory is to be given to Him "for ever and ever" (Revelation 1:6; 4:9-10; 5:13; 7:12), and if the saved "shall reign for ever and ever" with the Lord in heaven (Revelation 22:5), then the wicked assuredly "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10; cf. Revelation 14:11). "Forever and ever" is "the formula of eternity" (Vincent, 1889, 2:418). Without a doubt, it denotes duration, even when describing the punishment of the wicked in hell. As Moses Stuart concluded in his book, *Exegetical Essays on Several Words Relating to Future Punishment*:

[I]f the Scriptures have not asserted the endless punishment of the wicked, neither have they asserted the endless happiness of the righteous, nor the endless glory and existence of the Godhead. The one is equally certain with the other. Both are laid in the same balance. They must be tried by the same tests. And if we give up the one, we must, in order to be consistent, give up the other also (1830, p. 57).

TAKING COMPARISONS TO HELL TOO FAR

Sodom and Gomorrah

Another argument of the annihilationist goes something like this: (1) Sodom and Gomorrah were burned to ashes, and were completely annihilated; (2) in the New Testament, hell is likened to Sodom and Gomorrah; thus (3) hell will not be eternal. Those who attempt to explain away the Bible's teaching on the eternity of hell are well known for making such an argument. Immediately after quoting 2 Peter 2:6 and Jude 7, where the inspired writers compared the future judgment of the unrighteous to the condemnation of Sodom and Gomorrah, F. LaGard Smith asked if hell's fire was indeed an "[e]ternal fire...that keeps on burning its victims forever?" (p. 173). His answer:

Not if Sodom and Gomorrah are anything to go by. The fate of those two abominable cities stands as the quintessential illustration of a **consuming** fire. In the wake of that catastrophic fire—however long it burned—nothing was left of the two cities, not even a trace! For anyone still insisting that hell is all about ongoing torment in fire and brimstone, serious thought needs to be given to a specific day in history when fire and brimstone literally rained down on the wicked.

To be sure, there would have been suffering in the process—undoubtedly even some "weeping and gnashing of teeth." But their suffering would not have lasted long (p. 173, emp. in orig.).

Two pages later, he stated matter of factly: " 'Eternal punishment' will no more be punishment throughout an endless eternity than was the immediate, devastating punishment suffered by the people of Sodom and Gomorrah" (p. 175). Is Smith right? Will the destruction of those in hell after the Judgment be exactly like the one-time physical annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah?

What Smith and others who hold to the theory of annihilationism seem to forget is that analogies are meant to be carried only so far. When Jesus compared His disciples to sheep (John 10), He obviously did not mean that His followers are the most senseless people on Earth. Rather, He was stressing that His disciples are dependent upon Him to direct their paths in the way of righteousness, just as sheep are dependent upon the leadership of a shepherd to keep them from harm. Biblical comparisons that are pressed beyond their intended design produce needless (and sometimes dangerous) misunderstandings of Scripture. Those who teach that the command in the parable of the tares to allow both the wheat and the tares to "grow together until the harvest" (Matthew 13:30) somehow prevents the church from exercising discipline upon wayward members, have overextended Jesus' parable. Such an interpretation stands at odds with what Jesus and Paul taught elsewhere (cf. Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13;

2 Thessalonians 3:6,14-15). Likewise, those who point to the earthly comparisons that Jesus and the inspired writers made with the ultimate punishment of the unrighteous in hell have carried the analogies too far.

The physical punishment that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered for their heinous sins was destruction of their **physical** lives. "The Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah...out of the heavens" (Genesis 18:24). For the next 2,000 years, this unique fiery judgment served as a constant reminder to the descendants of Abraham of God's hatred toward sin. Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Zephaniah all reminded their Hebrew brethren of this devastating event, as they communicated God's wrath upon sinners. It seems only natural then, that when Jesus and the apostles and prophets of the first century chose to illustrate the spiritual "everlasting destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1:9) of the souls of the unrighteous in hell, they compared it to the infamous physical destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The devastating event that had occurred over 2,000 years earlier was one of the best **earthly** examples that God's messengers could use to convey the idea of the type of judgment, pain, and suffering that eventually would be brought upon the unrighteous.

The comparison of Sodom and Gomorrah's temporal destruction with that which the souls of the unrighteous will experience spiritually in hell was meant to be about the **type** of judgment and punishment suffered, not the **duration** of the punishment. Like the judgment of the immoral citizens of these two cities of old, the eventual punishment upon all of the unrighteous will be final, deliberate, devastating, and hot—like the fire and brimstone that devastated the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, whenever spiritual truths are illustrated using earthly examples there are limitations—at least two of which are apparent in this instance. First, unlike the kind of fire that burned in Sodom and Gomorrah, which caused excruciating **physical** pain to those who dwelt in those cities, the "fire" of hell will torment **spiritual** bodies (cf. Luke 16:24). It obviously will be a different kind of "fire" than what we see upon the Earth, because heaven and hell are not physical places, but spiritual. Second, and perhaps most important, the New Testament explicitly teaches that the fiery destruction of the unrighteous in hell differs from that of Sodom and Gomorrah in that the flames of hell will burn forever. Whereas "Sodom...was overthrown **in a moment**" by fire (Lamentations 4:6, emp. added), the fire and destruction of hell is described in the New Testament as "unquenchable" (three times—Matthew 3:12; Mark 9:43,48) and as "eternal" (six times—Matthew 18:8; 25:41,46; Mark 3:29; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Jude 7). If the Bible nowhere used such terminology to describe the punishment of the wicked in hell, then we might come to the same conclusion Smith and others have in regard to the annihilation of the wicked. The truth of the matter, however, is that God conspicuously and purposefully revealed the significant difference between the type of **temporary** flames that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah, and the **unending** flames that burn in hell, by using such terms as "eternal" and "unquenchable." Jesus even used the term "eternal" in reference to hell in the same sentence He used the word to describe heaven (Matthew 25:46). How much clearer could He have made it that heaven and hell are both eternal in duration? If God wanted to get across to mankind that hell is a place of everlasting torment, what else should He have done than what He did?

But someone might ask, "How is 'eternal' used in Jude 7 in reference to the punishment of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if their punishment was simply temporary? Is the word 'eternal' used in a different sense in this passage?" Although Sodom and Gomorrah's "suffering...of eternal fire" (Jude 7) is used by proponents of the theory of annihilationism to assert that the wicked will not suffer forever in hell, "the term 'suffering' (*hupechousai*—literally to 'hold under') is a present-tense participle, which asserts that the ancient citizens of the twin cities were suffering **at the time that this letter was penned**. The 'eternal fire' was not that which was rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah, but that into which they entered at death to suffer eternally" (Jackson, 2003, 39:30, emp. in orig.; see also Hiebert, 1989, p. 239). The immoral inhabitants of these cities suffered a one-time physical death by fire, and currently are suffering in torment while awaiting their sentence to hell (cf. Luke 16:19-31).

Additional evidence from Jude shows that the example of Sodom and Gomorrah was in no way intended to be construed to teach annihilationism. Within the immediate context of the passage, after mentioning Sodom and Gomorrah, the inspired Jude said: "Likewise also these dreamers..." (vs. 8). He next recorded a compendium of sins of which "these dreamers" were guilty. Then, in verse 13, just six verses from the statements concerning the wicked twin cities, Jude commented that these sinners were "wandering stars for whom is reserved **the blackness of darkness forever**" (emp. added). His point was clear: just as the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah once suffered earthly destruction, and were at present enduring continuing punishment (as evinced by the present-tense participle), those wicked men during the time of Jude could look forward to the same darkness and punishment for no less time than "forever."

Chaff, Tares, and Withered Branches

Other biblical comparisons to the punishment of the wicked that some offer as proof of its temporality include the chaff mentioned by John the Baptist (Matthew 3:11-12), as well as the tares and the withered vine branches discussed by Jesus (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43; John 15:1-10). Allegedly, since all three of these combustible components "burn up" when cast into fire, rather than burn continually, then there is no existence for any wicked soul beyond that of being "burned up." After expounding on these three illustrations of hell, Homer Hailey asked (in a chapter he wrote titled "Examples of Eternal Punishments"): "Considered strictly from the words of Jesus, and what He intended to teach, **is there anything** in these figures from which we can conclude that one who is cast into the fire continues consciousness or suffers beyond the point of having been burned up?" (p. 144, emp. added).

Although Hailey meant for this to be a rhetorical question with the "obvious" answer being "no," **there is something** that indicates the punishment continues forever and ever; John said that Jesus "will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable (asbesto) fire**" (Matthew 3:12, emp. added). This fire differs from that of normal flames in that it is perpetual. Greek lexicographers Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich defined *asbestos* as "inextinguishable" fire, and then

listed “eternal” (*aiōnios*; Matthew 18:8; 25:41) as its closest synonym (2000, p. 141). If the wicked are annihilated in hell, one is forced to ask what possible purpose “unquenchable fire” serves? Why have an “inextinguishable” fire for “extinguishable” souls? Why should the fire burn forever if its **purpose** comes to an end? Furthermore, since Jesus used the word “unquenchable,” it is evident that His parallels to physical materials burning were incomplete, and needed to be qualified in order for His point to be communicated.

A second thought regarding the three above-mentioned comparisons to hell is that “their illustrative value, in terms of punishment, is limited. They are strictly material objects; human beings are not!” (Jackson, 2003, 39:30). Any physical example that inspired men used to give their audience a glimpse into the future punishment of the wicked fails to give an adequate picture of the unending **duration** of hell. Obviously, the duration of hell is not what John and Jesus attempted to illustrate with those particular analogies. Furthermore, if the punishment of the wicked is not eternal, because the chaff, tares, and withered vine branches to which this punishment is compared are not eternal, then pray tell, will the righteous be annihilated as well? After all, in the parable of the tares, the wheat represented the righteous, whom Jesus said “will shine forth **as the sun**” in heaven (Matthew 13:43, emp. added). If the Sun is a physical object that will be extinguished when Jesus returns, then, using the “logic” of annihilationists, shouldn’t the righteous be annihilated as well? Peter wrote:

The **heavens** and the earth...**are reserved for fire until the day of judgment** and perdition of ungodly men. ...The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which **the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat**; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since **all these things will be dissolved**, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which **the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat**? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:7,10-13, emp. added).

Since all that are in the physical heavens (**including the Sun**) “will be dissolved” at the coming of the day of God, and since the kingdom of heaven will be illuminated by the glory of God instead of the Sun (Revelation 21:23; 22:5), then clearly when Jesus compared the souls of the righteous to the Sun, He was not referring to the Sun’s temporary existence in the heavens. The eventual **extinction** of the Sun was not the point of comparison with the righteous. The comparison is of the Sun’s “brilliance and splendor” (Lenski, 1943, p. 540), which the saints will acquire from “the glory of God” (Revelation 21:23) after being separated from those who will be cast “into outer darkness” (cf. Matthew 22:13; 25:30). In contrast to the righteous who will “reign **forever and ever**” in the presence of the Lamb (Revelation 22:5), the wicked will burn “day and night **forever and ever**” (Revelation 20:10) in “the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Gehenna

A final picture of the wicked’s punishment can be derived from an understanding of the Greek word *gehenna*. This word appears twelve times in the New Testament, and literally means “Valley of the Sons of Hinnom” (Danker, et al., 2000, p. 191)—the name given to the valley south of the walls of Jerusalem. This valley was notoriously connected to the sinful, horrific practice of child sacrifice associated with the pagan god Molech. Josiah, the righteous king of Judah, in his efforts to restore true worship, ransacked the pagan worship arena and “defiled Topheth, which is the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire to Molech” (2 Kings 23:10; cf. 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). As a result, the valley became a refuse dump for discarding filth, dead animals, and other garbage (see Jeremiah 7:32).

Allegedly, since all that was thrown into this earthly model of hell was “ultimately consumed” (see Smith, 2003, p. 176), then the wicked who will be cast into “hell fire” (Matthew 5:22) likewise will be annihilated. This is yet another comparison to hell that has been pressed beyond its intended design. The **length of time** in which humans, animals, and garbage burned in the valley of Gehenna is **not** the emphasis of the comparison. The burning dump in the valley of Gehenna served as a great example of what hell will be like for the damned, because it had been a place of **fiery torment** in the days when children were **tortured by fire** in the idolatrous worship of Molech. It then was decimated and polluted by King Josiah so as to make it an undesirable place to live, work, or perform religious ceremonies, even for the heathens. Jews associated this place with sin and suffering, which “led to the application of its name, in the Greek form of it, to the place of final and eternal punishment” (McGarvey, 1875, p. 55).

One must recognize that no earthly example can ever perfectly parallel “eternal punishment,” because nothing physical lasts forever. Every earthly example that gives mankind some insight into the hideousness of hell, falls short in this aspect. That which once burned in the valley of Gehenna has been consumed. The burning fire of this repugnant valley has long been quenched. Hell’s fire, on the other hand, “shall never be quenched” (Mark 9:43), the figurative “worm” that eats on the flesh of hell’s inhabitants “does not die” (Mark 9:48), and the wicked who find themselves in hell (due to their rejection of the grace of God) “shall suffer the punishment of **eternal destruction**” (2 Thessalonians 1:9, emp. added, RSV).

In many of the instances in which a physical example is given to illustrate the horrors of hell, it is of extreme interest that Jesus and the inspired writers added descriptive words like “unquenchable” and “eternal” to denote the difference between the physical illustration and the spiritual reality of the future spiritual punishment.

[to be continued]

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