

unworthy and absurd notion of the mercy of God and would, if true, argue great weakness. It would be a **great defect** and not a perfection in the Sovereign and Supreme Judge of the world to be merciful in such a sense. The Scriptures everywhere represent the mercy of God as free and sovereign, not that the exercises of it are necessary because God cannot bear that justice should take place, or because He cannot help but deliver sinners from misery. This is a most unworthy idea of divine mercy. Such a notion of God's mercy is both absurd and contrary to plain fact. For it implies that all misery in the creature, whether just or unjust, is in itself contrary to the nature of God. This is absurd. For we know that God in His providence doth indeed inflict very great calamities on mankind even in this life.

One of the chief reasons that we reject the idea that God should give over any of His creatures to such a dreadful calamity as eternal, helpless misery and torment, is that we do not have a **sense of the infinite evil that there is in sin**. We do not have a sense of anything so abominable and provoking in any creature answerable to it. If we had, then our minds would rest that this is right and proper, and so to be ordered by the just, holy and good Governor of all.

That this is so, we may be convinced by this consideration: that when we hear or read, as sometimes we do, of very horrible things committed by some men, as for instance, some awful cruelty inflicted on a poor innocent child or a holy martyr, and how these tormentors delighted themselves in torturing them with lingering torments, and what terrible distress the poor innocent creatures were in under their hands for many days, and their cruel persecutors, having no regard to their shrieks and cries, only sported themselves with their misery and would not give in even to put an end to their lives; I say, when we hear and read of such things, we have a **sense** of the evil of them, and they make a deep impression on our minds.

Thus it seems just, and not only so, but in every way fit and suitable that God should inflict a very terrible punishment on persons who have perpetrated such wickedness. It seems in no way disagreeable to any perfection of the Judge of the world. We can think of it without being at all shocked. The reason is that we have a **sense** of the evil of their conduct and a **sense** of the proportion there is between the evil or demerit of their conduct and the punishment.

Just so, if we saw a proportion between the evil of sin and eternal punishment, if we saw something in wicked men that should appear as hateful to us as eternal misery appears dreadful, all objections against this doctrine would vanish at once. Though now it seems incredible; though when we hear of it we do not know how to realize it; though when we hear of such degree and duration of torments as are held forth in this doctrine and think what eternity is, it almost seems impossible that such torments should be inflicted on poor feeble creatures by a Creator of infinite mercy, yet these thoughts arise principally from these two causes:

(1) It is so contrary to the depraved inclinations of mankind. They are so averse to the truth of the doctrine that they hate to believe it and cannot bear that it should be true.

(2) They do not see the suitableness of eternal punishment to the evil of sin. They do not see that eternal punishment is proportionable and no more than proportionable to the demerit of sin.

Having thus shown that the eternal punishment of the wicked is not inconsistent with the divine perfections, I shall now proceed further and show that it is so far from being inconsistent with the divine perfections that those perfections do indeed **require** it. They require that sin should have this punishment, either in the person who has committed it or in a surety. Therefore, with respect to those who do not believe in the Surety and have no interest in Him, the divine perfections require that this punishment should be inflicted on them.

It is not only unsuitable that sin should not be eternally punished, but it is positively suitable, descent, and proper. If it is clear that it is positively suitable that sin should be thus punished, then it will follow that the perfections of God require it; for certainly the perfections of God require that that should be done which is proper to be done. The perfections and excellencies of the nature of God require that that should take place which is perfect, excellent, and proper in its own nature. But that sin should be punished eternally is such a thing which appears by the following considerations:

(1) It is **right** for God to infinitely hate sin and be an infinite enemy of it. Sin is an infinite evil and therefore is infinitely detestable.

(2) If infinite hatred of sin is suitable to the divine character, then the **expressions** of such hatred are also suitable to His character. If it is right that God should hate sin, then it is right that He should **express** that hatred; for that which is suitable to be, is suitable to be expressed; that which is lovely in itself, is lovely when it appears. If it is suitable that God should **be** an infinite enemy of sin, or that He should hate it infinitely, then it is suitable that He should **act** as such an enemy. No possible reason can be given why it is not right for God to act as such a one as it is right for Him to be. Thus the perfections of God require that He should punish sin with an infinite or eternal punishment. Thus we see not only the great objection against this doctrine answered, but the truth of the doctrine established by reason.

### EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT IS NOT ANNIHILATION

(1) The Scriptures everywhere represent the punishment of the wicked as implying very extreme **pains and sufferings**, but a state of annihilation is no state of suffering at all. Persons annihilated have no sense or feeling of pain or pleasure, and much less do they feel punishment. They no more suffer to eternity than they did suffer from eternity.

(2) It is agreeable both to Scripture and reason to suppose that the wicked will be punished in such a manner that they shall be **sensible** of the punishment they are under; that they should be sensible that now God has executed and fulfilled what He threatened and which they disregarded and would not believe; that they should know themselves that justice takes place upon them; that they should see and find that God vindicates that majesty which they despised; that they should see that God is not so despicable a Being as they thought Him to be; that they should be sensible for what they are punished while they are under the threatened punishment; that they should be sensible of their own guilt and should remember their former opportunities and obligations and should see their own folly and God's justice.

If eternal punishment be eternal annihilation, then when it is inflicted, they will **never know** that it is inflicted, they will **never know** that God is just in their punishment, or that they have their deserts. And how is this agreeable to the Scriptures in which God threatens that "He will repay the wicked **to his face**"

(Deut 7:10)? Of God's punishing wicked men, it is said: "He rewardeth him, and **he shall know it**; his eyes shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of the wrath of the Almighty" (Job 21:19,20); "Yea, I will gather you and blow upon you in the fire of my wrath, and ye shall be melted in the midst thereof. As silver is melted in the midst of the furnace, so shall ye be melted in the midst thereof; and **ye shall know** that I the Lord have poured out fury upon you" (Ezek 22:21,22). And how is it agreeable to that expression so often annexed to the threatenings of God's wrath against wicked men, "And **ye shall know** that I am the Lord"?

(3) The Scriptures teach that the wicked will suffer **different degrees** of torment according to the different aggravations of their sins and degrees of their guilt. It shall be "**more tolerable**," Christ said, for Sodom and Gomorrah, for Tyre and Sidon, than for the cities where most of His mighty works were done (Matt 11:20-24). And again our Lord assures us that he that knows his Lord's will and neither prepares himself nor does according to His will shall be beaten with "**many stripes**." But he that does not know and commits things worthy of stripes shall be beaten with "**few stripes**" (Luke 12:47,48). These passages of Scripture prove that there will be different degrees of punishment in hell. But if the punishment of the wicked is annihilation, then there can be no degrees, but the same thing to everyone who is the subject of it.

(4) The Scriptures are very express and abundant in teaching that the eternal punishment of the wicked shall consist of **sensible misery and torment**, not annihilation. What is said of Judas is worthy to be observed here: "It had been good for that man if he had not been born" (Matt 26:24). This seems plainly to teach us that the punishment of the wicked is such that their existence, upon the whole, is worse than non-existence. But if their punishment consists merely of annihilation, this is not true.

The wicked, in their punishment, are said to weep and wail and gnash their teeth (Matt 13:42), which implies not only real existence, but life, knowledge, and activity, and that they are in a very sensible and exquisite manner affected with their punishment. Sinners, in the state of their punishment, are said to be "dwelling with everlasting burnings" (Isaiah 33:14). But if they are only turned into nothing, where is the foundation for this representation? It is absurd to say that sinners

will dwell with annihilation, for there is no dwelling in that case. It is also absurd to call annihilation a burning, which implies a state of existence, sensibility, and extreme pain. In annihilation there is none of these.

The wicked shall be “cast into a lake of fire and brimstone” (Rev 19:20). How can this expression, with any propriety, be understood to mean a state of annihilation? They are expressly said to “have no rest day or night, but to be tormented with fire and brimstone forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). But annihilation is a state of rest, a state in which not the least torment can possibly be suffered. The rich man in hell lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom and entered into a particular conversation with Abraham, all of which proves that he was not annihilated (Luke 16:19-31).

The spirits of ungodly men before the resurrection are not in a state of annihilation, but in a state of misery—“in prison” (1 Peter 3:19). This appears plainly from the rich man before mentioned if we consider him as representing the wicked in their separate state between death and the resurrection. But if the wicked, even then, are in a state of torment, much more will they be when they shall come to suffer that which is the proper punishment of their sins.

Annihilation is not so great a calamity but that some men would have undoubtedly chosen it rather than such a state of suffering as they have been in even in this life. This was the case of Job, a good man. But if a good man in this world may suffer that which is worse than annihilation, doubtless the proper punishment of the wicked, in which God means to manifest His peculiar abhorrence of their wickedness, will be calamity vastly greater still, and therefore, cannot be annihilation. That must be a very mean and contemptible testimony of God’s wrath towards those who have rebelled against His crown and dignity, have broken His laws, and have despised both His vengeance and His grace, which is not so great a calamity as some of His true children have suffered in this life.

Wicked men will suffer the same kind of death with the devils: “Depart, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt 25:41). The punishment of the devil is not annihilation, but torment; he therefore trembles for fear of it, not for fear of being annihilated. He would be glad of that. What he is afraid of is torment, as appears where he

cries out and begs Christ that He would not “torment him before the time” (Matt 8:29). It is said, “The devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone... and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Rev 20:10).

It is strange how men will go directly against such plain passages of Scripture as to suppose, notwithstanding all these things, that the eternal punishment against the wicked signifies no more than annihilation.

**EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT SHALL BE ABSOLUTELY WITHOUT END**

(1) Wicked men shall suffer, not merely for a very long time, but eternally; for it is said not only that their punishment shall be forever, but “**forever and ever.**” “The smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever” (Rev 14:11), and they “shall be tormented day and night, forever and ever” (Rev 20:10). If this does not signify an absolute eternity, nothing does.

(2) The Scripture uses the same way of speaking to set forth the eternity of the punishment of the wicked that it uses to set forth the eternity of the happiness of the righteous, or the eternity of God Himself. “These shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal” (Matt 25:46). The words everlasting and eternal, in the original, are the same. The saints “shall reign forever and ever” (Rev 22:5). The Scripture has no higher expression to signify the eternity of God Himself than that of His being forever and ever: “To Him that sat on the throne, who liveth forever and ever” (Rev 4:9; see v 10; 5:14; 10:6; 15:7).

(3) The Scriptures say that wicked men shall not be delivered “until they have paid the uttermost farthing of their debt” (Matt 5:26) and “until they have paid the last mite” (Luke 12:59). All mercy is excluded by this expression. The utmost that is deserved will be paid by the wicked who, as we have shown, deserve an infinite, endless punishment.

(4) The Scripture says absolutely that their punishment shall not have an end: “Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:44). It will not do to say that this means that their worm shall live a great while, or that it shall be a great while before their fire is quenched. If ever the time comes that their worm shall die; if ever there shall be a quenching of the fire at all, then it is not true that “their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”

**ESCAPE FROM EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT**

Oh, be entreated, you that are in a Christless state and are going on in the way to hell, that are daily exposed to damnation, to consider these things. If you do not, it will surely be but a little while before you will experience them, and then you will know how dreadful it is to despair in hell.

That you may effectually escape these dreadful and eternal torments, be entreated to flee from the wrath to come and embrace Jesus Christ who came into the world for the very purpose of saving sinners from these torments, who has paid the whole debt due to the divine law and has exhausted the eternal torments by His sufferings. What great encouragement it is to those of you who are sensible that you are exposed to eternal punishment, that there is a Saviour provided who is able and who freely offers to save you from this punishment, and that in a way which is perfectly consistent with the glory of God, yea, which is more to the glory of God than it would be if you should suffer the eternal punishment of hell. For if you should suffer that punishment, you would never pay the whole of the debt. Justice, therefore, can never be actually satisfied in your damnation; but it is actually satisfied in Christ. He is accepted of the Father, and all who believe are accepted and justified in Him. Therefore, believe in Him, come to Him, commit your soul to Him to be saved by Him. In Him you shall be safe from the eternal torments of hell.

Nor is that all. Through Him you shall inherit inconceivable blessedness and glory which will be of equal duration with the torments of hell. For, as at the last day the wicked shall go away into everlasting punishment, so shall the righteous, or those who trust in Christ, go into life eternal. □

—Adapted from the writings of Jonathan Edwards

**EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT**

“THESE SHALL GO AWAY INTO EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT”—MATT 25:46

In this chapter we have one of the most particular descriptions of the Day of Judgment of any in the whole Bible. Christ here declares that when He shall hereafter sit on the throne of His glory, the righteous and the wicked shall be set before Him, separated one from the other as a shepherd divides the sheep from the goats. Then we have an account of how both will be judged according to their works, how the good works of the one and the evil works of the other will be rehearsed, and what the sentence will be on each. The righteous are said to “go away into life eternal,” but the wicked “into **everlasting punishment.**”

**EVERLASTING PUNISHMENT IS NOT CONTRARY TO GOD’S PERFECTIONS**

Many believe that a just and merciful God cannot bear to eternally torment His creatures.

(1) Everlasting punishment is not inconsistent with **the justice of God**. Sin is heinous enough to deserve such a punishment, and such a punishment is no more than proportionable to the evil or demerit of sin. If God be infinitely glorious, or infinitely worthy of love, honor, and obedience, then our obligation to love, honor, and obey Him is infinitely great. Sin is the violation of infinite obligation and so is an infinite evil. Sin being an infinite evil deserves an infinite punishment, and infinite punishment is no more than it deserves; therefore, such punishment is just. There is no evading the force of this reasoning but by denying that God is infinitely glorious.

(2) Everlasting punishment is not inconsistent with **the mercy of God**. It is an unreasonable and unscriptural notion of the mercy of God that He is merciful in such a sense that He cannot bear that penal justice should be executed. This is to conceive of the mercy of God as a passion to which His nature is so subject that God is liable to be moved, affected, and overcome by seeing a creature in misery, so that He cannot bear to see justice executed. This is a most