



This material is excerpted from the pre-publication manuscript of “My Long Journey to Annihilationism,” in *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*, eds. Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015, pp, 26-31.

Stage 5: Belief that annihilationism is what the Bible teaches about the end of wicked.

When I first reached this stage, I identified myself as “formally agnostic” about the nature of hell, although I had come to believe that annihilationism is the best reading of Scripture’s teaching on this subject. I did not think that I feared the wrath of the evangelical majority but I can see how my thinking in stage four may still have been at work, even though the scale had tipped from a tenuously held traditionalism to a lightly held annihilationism. When I told Edward Fudge about this movement in my understanding, he warned me that I should not expect my professed agnosticism to appease traditionalists any more than had been the case when John Stott spoke in those terms. I could see very quickly the likelihood that he was right. Having done so, and considering the strong degree to which I now lean toward an annihilationist reading of Scripture, I see no reason to describe myself any longer as agnostic about the nature of hell.

As was the case when I first became an annihilationist, however, I consider this issue relatively unimportant within the hierarchy of doctrines, and I am convinced that one’s stance in regard to this issue affects no other doctrines and no important matters of Christian life and ministry. Christian churches and organizations should affirm that God will raise all people from the dead and will judge them all irrevocably, and that his judgment will result in one of two

ends, either eternal life or second death (Dan 12:2; Jn 5:29; Rev 20:6, 14-15). But I can see no reason why any Christian organization would find it necessary to specify the *nature* of the second death (hell) to which the damned will be consigned.

Annihilationism is not a step down a slippery slope. I see no other dominoes that might fall as a result of one's affirmation of either traditionalism or annihilationism, but I now find the latter to be the most plausible reading of the biblical text, and it is least likely to present a stumbling block in evangelism and apologetics. Clearly, John Stott felt this to be true as well, since he revealed his own annihilationist convictions only when he felt the need to present to David Edwards an evangelicalism that was not subject to Edwards' Liberal critique of the traditional view of hell. I am finding that nothing substantial has changed in regard to my understanding of any other doctrines or any aspects of my Christian life. I continue to feel as strongly as ever the awful horror of hell, as the irrevocable, everlasting, but just judgment of God which will be experienced by all those who choose their sinfulness rather than Christ's righteousness, spurn God's grace, and reject his right to be their king.

I continue to believe in the just proportionality of God's judgment upon sinners. The eight year old child who is your neighbor, but who is rejecting God's gracious overtures in whatever way these are given to him, will be no less destroyed in body and soul than the evil tyrants who have inflicted such terrible suffering on many people, but I expect that the process which will bring about that destruction will differ considerably, both in duration and in intensity. Yet I do not find much detail in Scripture concerning the means by which God will bring about the final end of the wicked, and I have no desire to imagine it, even though the righteous souls "under the altar" long for the day of God's vengeance (Rev 6:10). They can do this righteously in a way that we who remain alive and suffering may not always be able to do, so we do best to

pray for and seek the salvation of all people, even our enemies, with no desire for their condemnation.

While still a traditionalist, I had gained an appreciation for “reconciliationism,” as a way to understand the texts regarding God’s ultimate victory (1 Cor 15:28; Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:20) within a traditionalist (rather than a universalist) framework. I looked forward to a time when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord (Phil 2:9-11), even those in hell, although it will be an end of their fight against God which involves submission but not repentance. I find this concept equally helpful within an annihilationist perspective, where I postulate the likelihood that the moment at which God finally destroys a wicked person will not come until their conscious punishment has brought them to acknowledgement that Jesus is Lord. The extinction of the wicked is the inevitable result of God’s withdrawal, not only of his patient grace, but of his metaphysical sustaining. When the sin of the wicked has been justly punished temporally, and when they have been brought to a teeth gnashing acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord, God will cease to support their existence as embodied souls.

This is not a doctrine concerning which the classic ecumenical creeds of the church stated a position, and I am grateful that many evangelical bodies, including the World Evangelical Alliance, have chosen not to make it an issue in their statements of faith. This is as it should be, I believe, and I hope to see a time when evangelicals globally will accept that on this point, as on many others which have far more consequence (e.g. monergism and synergism), doctrinal differences regarding the final judgment of the wicked will not hinder Christian fellowship or cooperation in ministry.

It is difficult to reconstruct the process I went through in this last stage of my journey thus far, but two experiences stand out in my memory. The first was reading the article

Ralph Bowles wrote regarding the interpretation of Rev 14:11, and the other was reading the pre-published manuscript of *Rethinking Hell*,¹ when I was asked if I would consider writing an endorsement. Prior to reading that excellent collection of annihilationist readings, I had read many of the items it contained, but reading them all together had a cumulative effect. I wrote my commendation of the book from the perspective of a traditionalist, since that was still my position, but in the months that followed, I gradually found myself moving to general agreement with the conclusion of the authors in that work.

It is now my firm conviction that if people were not previously taught that hell is being consciously tormented forever by God (as were many Christians, like me, from childhood), no one would reach that conclusion from their own careful reading of Scripture itself. There, the end of the wicked is regularly spoken of as death in contrast with life, and the language is almost always descriptive of destruction, perishing or being consumed. As Paul warned the Romans, “the wages of sin is *death* [as readers of Scripture will have heard repeatedly, all the way back to Gen 2:17, through the use of numerous synonyms], but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23 ESV). Likewise James contrasts the two destinies brought about by different actions: “sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (Jas 1:15), but “the word of truth” brings forth new creatures (1:18). And Jesus, in what may be the most memorized passage in Scripture, stated that belief in Jesus results in eternal life, but persistent unbelief results in perishing (Jn 3:16). This drastic contrast between life for the righteous and death for the wicked (even destruction of soul as well as body, Mt 10:18) is so continuous as to be inescapable for an attentive reader of Scripture, who will find remarkably few passages which might give the impression of endless conscious torment for the wicked.

¹ Date, et. al., *Rethinking Hell*.

I cannot lay out a chronology of the interpretive moves I made as I came to believe that God finally destroys the wicked, but I am able to identify a few factors which were critical in my journey, including the following:

1) I concluded that it is very unlikely that anyone who only had the Old Testament scriptures would expect that God would finally punish the wicked by causing them to suffer endlessly and consciously. Overwhelmingly, death, ruin and destruction were the potential fate concerning which God's old covenant prophets warned Israel and the nations. Even in the New Testament, the fire about which Jesus warns sinners is a fire that consumes, not one that perpetually torments (Mt 3:10-12; 7:19; 13:30,40-42,49,50). The opposite of the life which God gives the righteous is death or destruction, not endless torment (cf. Mt 7:13,14).

2) I became more aware of the diversity of understanding concerning the final end of the wicked during the inter-testamental period, and I could see that the idea of endless conscious torment was the consequence of Greek philosophical influence rather than Old Testament exegesis. I also realized that this diversity continued into the thought of the early theologians of the Christian church, until consensus grew that human souls can not be destroyed, after which eternal conscious punishment was an inevitable theological deduction.

3) The fact that I had believed in the conditional immortality of the soul from the earliest period of my formal theological formation had always made annihilationism a possibility for me, so I was a traditionalist because I believed the Bible taught the endless conscious punishing of the wicked, not because of my theological anthropology. Consequently, my traditionalism depended upon the biblical texts which seemed to indicate that God keeps the condemned alive forever, in parallel with the endlessness of the joy of the saved, although the quality of that life was so vastly different that neither "immortality" nor "eternal life"

were ever ascribed to the wicked. Those texts were not numerous (Mt 18:34, 35; Mk 9:43–48; Rev 14:10–11 and 20:10, particularly the ones in Revelation), but they were critical anchors for my traditionalism.

4) Consequently, key factors in undermining my traditionalist reading of the New Testament were new grammatical and lexicological understandings. Among these, the most important were the following:

a) I gained a better understanding of the significance of the range of meaning of *aiōnios*, which is commonly translated “eternal.” It can have the sense of “age long” or refer to something derived from God, the Eternal One, so that it describes qualitatively rather than quantitatively (cf. Rom 16:25–26, and phrases like eternal life and “eternal fire” [Mt 18:8 and 25:41; cf. Jude 7 and 2 Pet 2:6]). When I revisited Edward Fudge’s work, I realized more keenly the importance of the fact that “when the [NT] word *aiōnios* modifies words which name acts or processes as distinct from persons or things, the adjective usually describes the issue or result of the action rather than the action itself.”²

This is indisputably true in four of the six New Testament occurrences. There is eternal salvation [Heb 5:9] but not an eternal act of saving. There is eternal redemption [Heb 9:12] but not an eternal process of redeeming. The eternal sin [Mk 3:29] was committed at a point in history, but its results continue into the coming age which lasts forever. Scripture pictures eternal judgment [Heb 6:2] as taking place ‘on a day,’ but its outcome will have no end. In the light of this usage, we suggest that Scripture expects the same understanding when it speaks of ‘eternal destruction’ [2 Thess 1:9] and ‘eternal punishment’ [Mt 25:46]. Both are acts. There will be an actual destroying and the punishing will issue in a result. That resultant punishment of destruction will never end.

This awareness opened the door to the possibility that the eternality of punishment might lie, not in its temporal endlessness, but in its effective irreversibility, particularly when

² Fudge, *Fire that Consumes* [1982 edn.], 49.

we consider the metaphors of fire and consumption by worms which are regularly used in Scripture to denote total destruction (cf. Ezek 20:47, 48; Amos 5:5,6; Mal 4:1–6; Mt 3:12). Eternal punishment need not connote eternal conscious punishing; indeed it *cannot* do so, if God grants eternal (in the sense of endless) life exclusively to those whom he saves in Christ, which can only be denied through contorted readings of the clear statements of the New Testament.

b) I gained a stronger appreciation of the interpretive importance of the Old Testament incidents and language which were in the minds of the authors of New Testament texts, particularly in Revelation, where some of the most important texts which purportedly support eternal conscious torment are found. These included highly important references to unquenchable fire, smoke that rises forever, and worms that never die. I saw more clearly how New Testament descriptions of the punishment of the wicked, which had seemed to connote an endless process, were drawn from Old Testament descriptions of God's judgment of opponents like Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet 2:6) and Edom (Isa 34:10 cf. Rev 14:11).³ These judgments were clearly temporary but unstoppable until God was finished with them, and their destructive effects were never ending. The language of Isaiah 66:24, as cited by Jesus in Mark 9:44-48, has been particularly important in the church's traditional perception of hell. But, as Edward Fudge noted, it is likely reminiscent of the historical incident in Isaiah 36 and 37, which alerts us to the significant fact that, in both Isa 37:36 and Isa 66:24, the enemies go out and see dead bodies or corpses, as they view their enemies' destruction, not their misery.⁴

³ See particularly Bowles, "Does Revelation 14:11 Teach?," in *Rethinking Hell*, 141-42, 146-48.

⁴ Fudge, *Fire that Consumes* [1982 edn.], 110-11.

Other essays and books have dealt with these interpretive issues in great detail, and I can not do them justice here without writing another book. But these were key factors in my eschatological development.

I hope that this brief theological autobiography in relationship to one small, but very significant part, of Christian doctrine will be of some help to others. I write it because I have benefited from hearing others tell about aspects of their theological journey. To really grasp the immensity of the loss that God's enemies will ultimately experience, we need to know what God has in store for those who love him and are loved by him. All Scripture is profitable, and we should not shrink from declaring the truth that those who fight God all their lives will be very severely punished. God can use those warnings as means of graciously drawing people back from the brink of hell. But we must not neglect to paint just as clearly, for those who are rejecting God's grace, a biblical picture of the wonderful and endless life that God has planned for his children by faith, in the new heaven and earth which will be more glorious than anything we can possibly imagine. No decision human beings make in their entire lives is more important than the one that will finally determine whether they experience endless joy with God through Christ in the new earth, or lose all of that and perish in the second death.