

50 CORE TRUTHS
— OF THE —
CHRISTIAN FAITH

A GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING
AND TEACHING THEOLOGY

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BakerBooks

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

RESOURCES

- Allison, *Theological Terms*, s.v. "great white throne judgment"
Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.vv. "Judgment Seat," "Last Judgment"
Erickson, *Christian Theology*, chap. 56
Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, chap. 23
Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chap. 56
Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, chap. 19
Thoennes, *Life's Biggest Questions*, chap. 16

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ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

SUMMARY

One of two results of Christ's final judgment of people (the other being eternal life), this sentence against the unrighteous consists of conscious retribution in hell forever.

MAIN THEMES

- The final judgment will be a world-encompassing, public verdict rendered by Christ.
- The righteous will be rewarded with eternal life, but the unrighteous will be sentenced to eternal conscious punishment in hell / the lake of fire.
- While some locate this judgment at Christ's return, others believe it will take place at the end of the millennium.
- While eternal conscious punishment of the wicked is the historical position of the church, it is challenged by three heresies.
- *Universalism* believes that everyone will be saved.

- *Conditional immortality* maintains that believers will exist forever, but unbelievers will cease to exist at death.
- *Annihilationism* holds that after a period of punishment, the wicked will be destroyed and thus not experience eternal punishment.

KEY SCRIPTURE

Daniel 12:2; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 9:43-48; 2 Thessalonians 1:9; Revelation 14:14-20; 20:11-15

UNDERSTANDING THE DOCTRINE

Major Affirmations

The previous chapter addressed the final judgment, or great white throne judgment, of Jesus Christ. This world-encompassing, public verdict pronounced by Christ will consist of two sentences: The righteous will experience divine remunerative justice and be rewarded with eternal life. They will live forever with the Triune God in the new heaven and new earth. The unrighteous will experience divine retributive justice and be sentenced to eternal conscious punishment in hell. They will live forever apart from the presence of God, suffering divine vengeance.

Amillennialism and *postmillennialism* locate this judgment at Christ's return, as the precursor to the eternal state of either blessedness in the new heaven and new earth or retribution in hell / the lake of fire. Accordingly, eternal conscious punishment for the wicked follows the return of Christ. *Historic premillennialism* and *pretribulational*, or *dispensational*, *premillennialism* place this judgment after the millennium, as the precursor to the eternal state. Accordingly, eternal conscious punishment for the wicked in hell / the lake of fire follows Christ's defeat of Satan as the millennium concludes.

This historic church position has rarely been challenged, but the twentieth century witnessed the rise of more virulent attacks against it. These wrong views are of three types:

Universalism is the position that if not in life, then after death, all people will ultimately embrace salvation. It fails to respect death as the point

at which human destiny, based on faith in Christ during one's lifetime, is fixed. It also imagines some type of postmortem evangelism by which people who rejected the gospel during their earthly existence will receive another opportunity to believe in Christ and be saved.

Conditional immortality is the position that God alone possesses immortality; he is intrinsically immortal. Believers by God's grace receive eternal life—immortality—by becoming partakers of his nature. Unbelievers, who do not possess or receive immortality, naturally die. Conditional immortality differs from universalism because it denies that everyone will be saved. It differs from the church's historic position because it considers that view to be based on the immortality of the soul, a belief that it deems not a biblical teaching. Rather, believers receive immortality and unbelievers cease to exist.

Annihilationism is the position that after death, the wicked will be destroyed as punishment for their sin. It differs from conditional immortality because it holds that, after death, unbelievers will suffer punishment for their sin for a time and then they will be annihilated. This position points to the biblical expression "eternal destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9) as indicative of the destiny of the wicked: their punishment is cessation of existence. Moreover, the imagery of fire—a destructive element—in association with hell suggests annihilation rather than ongoing suffering. Furthermore, appealing to the legal principle that one's punishment must match one's crime, the position maintains that eternal punishment of the wicked would be cruel and unjust. Thus, the wicked will ultimately be destroyed after limited punishment.

The church has faced these challenges and consistently denounced them. It has always maintained that the wicked will experience eternal conscious punishment.

Biblical Support

The Old Testament introduces the reality of eternal punishment when it presents a division between those in the resurrection who will experience "everlasting life" and others who will experience "shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12:2). Jesus picks up on this imagery as he describes the final judgment: "These [the unrighteous] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). Importantly, the two destinies are modified by the same adjective: both life and punishment

are *eternal*. Similarly, Jesus contrasts the future of “those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (John 5:29).

Scripture presents hell as the place of misery and torment for the unrighteous. The expressions associated with it—“weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 25:30), “the unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43, 48), “their worm does not die” (v. 48), “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night” (Rev. 14:11)—underscore the painful, castigating nature of hell. Indeed, hell is first and foremost the sphere of punishment for Satan and demons (2 Pet. 2:4). It then becomes the state and place of unbelievers who have died. Still, they do not experience the fullness of their punishment, which awaits their resurrection and the final judgment: “Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14–15). The eternal conscious punishment of the wicked begins in hell and continues in the lake of fire.

The three major challenges to the traditional doctrine attempt to build a biblical case, but each one fails.

Universalism appeals to biblical affirmations that in and through Christ, all will be justified and live forever (Rom. 5:18; 1 Cor. 15:22). It also underscores the biblical teaching that one day all things will be subjected to Christ “that God may be all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28). However, Paul’s comments apply specifically to believers—“those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness” (Rom. 5:17), those who have faith and hope in Christ (1 Cor. 15:14, 17, 19)—not to all people. As for the glory of God being “all in all,” even in the divine punishment of the wicked forever, God will be glorified as holy, righteous, and just.

Conditional immortality is correct that God alone possesses immortality; he is intrinsically immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). Whether the traditional view is dependent on the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul is not important, for a biblical case for the everlasting existence of human beings can be made. Not in themselves, but because of God’s providence, human beings will continue to exist forever, either as the righteous blessed with eternal life or as the unrighteous cursed with eternal destruction (Matt. 25:46).

Annihilationism takes the biblical expression “eternal destruction” (Phil. 3:19; 2 Thess. 1:9) to indicate that the destiny of the wicked is the

cessation of existence. Additionally, it appeals to the imagery of fire—a symbol of destruction—to support annihilation rather than ongoing suffering. In response, “destruction” does not necessarily mean cessation of existence. Rather, it can refer to the retributive, damning nature of the eternal punishment. Also, Jesus drew the parallel between eternal life and eternal punishment (Matt. 25:46). If the former is everlasting (blessed) existence, then the latter must be everlasting (cursed) existence. As for the imagery of fire, when Jesus used it to describe hell, he modified the word with “unquenchable” (Mark 9:43–48), indicating that in regard to hell, fire does not destroy but will continually smoke.

Major Errors

In addition to the three heresies discussed above, two other errors arise in conjunction with this doctrine.

1. *The dismissal of eternal conscious punishment.* One reason for this is the rejection of divine retributive justice because this attribute does not present God in the way people want him to be. Another reason is the legal principle that the punishment must match the crime, with the conclusion drawn that because the sin of human beings is finite, so God’s punishment of their sin must be finite. The church has responded to this argument in several ways: First, the view undervalues the enormity of the crime that human beings commit against God. Second, the view overlooks the fact that unbelievers in hell do not cease to sin, but continue to do so eternally. Third, the punishment for a crime is meted out according to the dignity of the person against whom the crime is committed. Because sin is committed against God, who is infinitely majestic, sin deserves infinite punishment.

2. *A gleeful anticipation of the eternal punishment of the wicked.* In one sense, this sentiment is correct: God is right and just in meting out eternal condemnation against entrenched sinners. Moreover, such divine punishment corresponds with the human sense of justice. Where it errs is when believers prefer that nonbelievers experience damnation rather than salvation. Like God, who does not wish “that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9), and “who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:4), Christians should share that same sentiment. No matter how much they have been mistreated, believers must long for the perpetrators of those

Perennial Questions and Problematic Issues

- Does this doctrine mean that my deceased brother, who I doubt was a Christian, will be punished forever?
- Eternal punishment just sounds like too great a sentence for God to mete out.
- I prefer to believe that God, whose mercy is boundless, will eventually save everyone.
- Emotionally, I can't stand the thought that so many people will be eternally punished in hell.

that people everywhere may hear the good news, believe in Christ, be incorporated into a church, and engage their neighbors, their nation, and the world with the gospel.

What's at stake in this doctrine? The prerogative of our holy God to exercise his retributive justice and punish his image bearers who refuse to honor his Son and avail themselves of the salvation that his Son accomplished.

TEACHING THE DOCTRINE

Whereas eschatology fascinates many people, a discussion of the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked often brings consternation. Like the doctrine of reprobation, this doctrine concerns the eternal destiny of our ancestors, parents, siblings, spouses, children, friends, coworkers, and multitudes of others. Accordingly, acknowledge the difficulties, and exercise care, in teaching it. Refuse to compromise the holiness and justice of God, especially the rightness of his retributive justice. Oppositely, refuse to allow participants to picture God as a sadistic tormentor. Those whom he justly consigns to eternal conscious punishment in hell are, after all, his image bearers who willfully refused to embrace his rescue scheme.

crimes to turn to Christ and be saved. If that does not occur due to the wrongdoers' rejection of the gospel, then believers will rest contentedly with the eternal conscious punishment that God will mete out against those evil ones.

ENACTING THE DOCTRINE

Knowing the fate of the wicked should push the church to engage missionally with non-believers. We should take the initiative to share the gospel with those around us. As a church, we should plant churches both in our city and around our country. Furthermore, as a church, we should send out missionaries into every part of the globe, especially to unreached people groups, so

Participants will likely be surprised by the amount of biblical material that addresses this doctrine. It is Scripture, rather than our emotions or our preferences, which must form our belief on this matter. So be sure to spend adequate time studying what the Bible affirms about it. Reinforce this doctrine by explaining that the church has historically and unapologetically held to the eternal conscious punishment of the wicked. Indeed, it was not until the nineteenth century that the doctrine came under serious attack.

And attacked it has been! Work through the three major challenges—universalism, conditional immortality, and annihilationism—and demonstrate the misunderstanding of the biblical passages to which their proponents appeal. Underscore Jesus's description of the final judgment: "These [the unrighteous] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). The three major errors contradict, in one way or another, what our Lord affirmed on this matter.

TEACHING OUTLINE

1. The summary
2. Major affirmations (with biblical support)
 - A. The nature of the final judgment
 - B. The eternal conscious punishment of the wicked in hell / the lake of fire
 - C. Three major challenges to the traditional doctrine
 - i. Universalism
 - ii. Conditional immortality
 - iii. Annihilationism
3. Major errors to avoid
 - A. Dismissing eternal conscious punishment
 - B. Anticipating gleefully the eternal punishment of the wicked
4. Enacting the doctrine
 - A. Taking the initiative to engage nonbelievers with the gospel
 - B. Planting churches that plant other churches
 - C. Sending out missionaries to unreached people groups

RESOURCES

Allison, *Theological Terms*, s.vv. “annihilationism,” “conditional immortality,” “eternal conscious punishment,” “universalism”
Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, s.vv. “Annihilationism,” “Eternal Punishment,” “Universalism”
Erickson, *Christian Theology*, chap. 58
Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, chap. 23
Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chap. 56
Horton, *Pilgrim Theology*, chap. 19
Thoennes, *Life’s Biggest Questions*, chap. 16

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THE NEW HEAVEN
AND NEW EARTH

SUMMARY

The new heaven and new earth is the final and eternal state of the universe resulting from the renewal of the current, fallen creation, for the glory of God.

MAIN THEMES

- The original heaven and the earth, as God created it, was very good.
- Because of the human fall into sin, God cursed the creation so that it too is fallen.
- The future of the creation is tied to the future of redeemed humanity.
- A total renewal of the entire creation, which is the hope toward which all exists, will take place.
- This may involve the destruction of the current cosmos, followed by its renewal.