

Annihilationism

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Annihilationism is the doctrine that the souls of the wicked will be snuffed out of existence rather than be sent to an everlasting, conscious hell. The existence of the unrepentant will be extinguished, while the righteous will enter into everlasting bliss.

Support from Scripture

"The Second Death." Annihilationists point to the Bible references to the fate of the wicked as "the second death" (Rev. 20:14) in support of their view. Since a person loses consciousness of this world at the first death (physical death), it is argued that the "second death" will involve unconsciousness in the world to come.

"Everlasting Destruction." Scripture speaks of the wicked being "destroyed." Paul said: "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with *everlasting destruction* and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power" (2 Thess. 1:7b-9). Annihilationists insist that the figure of "destruction" is incompatible with a continued, conscious existence.

"Perdition." The wicked are said to go into "perdition" (KJV) or "destruction" (NIV) (2 Peter 3:7), and Judas is called the "son of perdition" (John 17:12). The word *perdition* (*apoleia*) means to perish. This, annihilationists argue, indicates that the lost will perish or go out of existence.

Like Not Having Been Born. Jesus said of Judas, who was sent to perdition, that "It would be better for him if he had not been born" (Mark 14:21). Before one is conceived they do not exist. Thus, for hell to be like the prebirth condition it must be a state of nonexistence.

"The Wicked Will Perish." Repeatedly, the Old Testament speaks of the wicked perishing. The psalmist wrote: "But the wicked will perish: The Lord's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish—vanish like smoke" (Ps. 37:20; cf. 68:2; 112:10). But to perish implies a state of nothingness.

Answering Arguments from Scripture

When examined carefully in context, none of the above passages proves annihilationism. At some points language may *permit* such a construction, but nowhere does the text demand annihilationism. In context and comparison with other Scriptures, the concept must be rejected in every case.

Separation, Not Extinction. The first death is simply the separation of the soul from the body (James 2:26), not the annihilation of the soul. Scripture presents death as conscious separation. Adam and Eve died spiritually the moment they sinned, yet they still existed and could hear God's voice (Gen. 3:10). Before one is saved, he is "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1), and yet he still carries God's image (Gen. 1:27; cf. Gen. 9:6; James 3:9). Though unable to come to Christ without the intervention of God, the "spiritually dead" are sufficiently aware that Scripture holds them accountable to believe (Acts 16:31), and repent (Acts 17:30). Continued awareness, but with separation from God and the inability to save oneself—these constitute Scripture's vision of the second death.

Destruction, Not Nonexistence. “Everlasting” destruction would not be annihilation, which only takes an instant and is over. If someone undergoes everlasting destruction, then they have to have everlasting existence. The cars in a junkyard have been destroyed, but they are not annihilated. They are simply beyond repair or unredeemable. So are the people in hell.

Since the word *perdition* means to die, perish, or to come to ruin, the same objections apply. In 2 Peter 3:7 *perdition* is used in the context of judgment, clearly implying consciousness. In our junkyard analogy, ruined cars have perished, but they are still junkyard cars. In this connection, Jesus spoke of hell as a dump where the fire would not cease and where a person’s resurrected body would not be consumed (Mark 9:48).

In addition to comments on *death* and *perdition* above, it should be noted that the Hebrew word used to describe the wicked perishing in the Old Testament (*abad*) is also used to describe the righteous perishing (see Isa. 57:1; Micah 7:2). But even the annihilationists admit that the righteous are not snuffed out of existence. That being the case, they should not conclude that the wicked will cease to exist based on this term.

The same word (*abad*) is used to describe things that are merely lost but then later found (Deut. 22:3), which proves that lost does not mean nonexistent.

“It Would Have Been Better...” When he says that it would have been better if Judas had not been born, Jesus is not comparing Judas’s perdition to his nonexistence before conception but to his existence before *birth*. This hyperbolic figure of speech would almost certainly indicate the severity of his punishment, not a statement about the superiority of nonbeing over being. In a parallel condemnation on the Pharisees, Jesus said Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented had they seen his miracles (Matt. 11:23-24). This does not mean that they actually would have repented or God would surely have shown them these miracles—2 Peter 3:9. It is simply a powerful figure of speech indicating that their sin was so great that “it would be *more tolerable*” in the day of judgment for Sodom than for them (vs. 24).

Further, nothing cannot be better than something, since they have nothing in common to compare them. So nonbeing cannot be actually better than being. To assume otherwise is a category mistake.

Biblical Arguments

In addition to the lack of any definitive passages in favor of annihilationism, numerous texts support the doctrine of eternal conscious punishment. A brief summary includes:

The Rich Man in Hell. Unlike parables which have no real persons in them, Jesus told the story of an actual beggar named Lazarus who went to heaven and of a rich man who died and went to hell and was in conscious torment (Luke 16:22-28). He cried out, “‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony’” (vss. 24-25). The rich man then begged that his brothers be warned “so that they will not also come to this place of torment” (vs. 27). There is no hint of annihilation in this passage; he is suffering constant and conscious torment.

A Place of Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth. Jesus repeatedly said the people in hell are in continual agony. He declared that “the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; cf. 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). But a place of weeping is obviously a place of conscious sorrow. Those who are not conscious do not weep.

A Place of Unquenchable Flames. Jesus repeatedly called hell a place of unquenchable flames (Mark 9:43-48) where the very bodies of the wicked will never die (cf. Luke 12:4-5). But it would make no sense to have everlasting flames and bodies without any souls in them to experience the torment.

A Place of Everlasting Torment. John the apostle described hell as a place of eternal torment. He declared that “the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:10). Eternal torment indicates that the everlasting state of woe is conscious.

A Place for the Beast and False Prophet. In a clear example of beings who were still conscious after a thousand years of conscious torment in hell, the Bible says of the beast and false prophets that “The two of them were thrown *alive* into the fiery lake of burning sulfur” (Rev. 19:20) before the “thousand years” (Rev. 20:2). Yet after this period the devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet [still] *are*” (Rev. 20:10, emphasis added). Not only were they “alive” when they entered, but they were still alive after a thousand years of conscious torment.

A Place of Conscious Punishment. The fact that the wicked are “punished with everlasting destruction” (2 Thess. 1:9) strongly implies that they must be conscious. One cannot suffer punishment without existence. It is no punishment to beat a dead corpse. An unconscious person feels no pain.

Annihilation would not be a punishment but a release from all punishment. Job can suffer something worse than annihilation in this life. The punishment of evil men in the afterlife would have to be conscious. If not, then God is not just, since he would have given less punishment to some wicked than to some righteous people. For not all wicked people suffer as much as some righteous people do in this life.

A Place That Is Everlasting. Hell is said to be of the same duration as heaven, “everlasting” (Matt. 25:41). As the saints in heaven are said to be in conscious bliss (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23), so the sinners in hell are in conscious woe (cf. Luke 16).

Philosophical Arguments

For Annihilation. In addition to biblical arguments, many annihilationists offer philosophical reasons for rejecting everlasting conscious punishment. Granting a theistic perspective, most of them, however, are a variation on the one theme of God’s mercy.

Annihilationists reason that God is a God of mercy (Exod. 20:6), and it is merciless to allow people to suffer consciously forever. We kill trapped horses if we cannot rescue them from burning buildings. We put other suffering creatures out of their misery. Annihilationists argue that a merciful God would surely do as much for his creatures.

Against Annihilationism. The very concept of an ultimately merciful God supposes that he is the absolute standard for what is merciful and morally right. Indeed, the moral argument for God’s existence demonstrates this. But if God is the ultimate standard for moral righteousness, we cannot impose our concept of justice upon him. The very idea of injustice presupposes an ultimate standard, which theists claim for God.

Annihilation would demean both the love of God and the nature of human beings as free moral creatures. It would be as if God said to them, “I will allow you to be free only if you do what I say. If you don’t, then I will snuff out your very freedom and existence!” This would be like a father telling his son he wanted him to be a doctor, but when the son chose instead to be a park ranger the father shot him. Eternal suffering is eternal testimony to the

freedom and dignity of humans, even unrepentant humans.

It would be contrary to the created nature of human beings to annihilate them, since they are made in God's image and likeness, which is everlasting (Gen. 1:27). Animals are often killed to alleviate their pain. But (the euthanasia movement notwithstanding) we do not do the same for humans precisely because they are not animals. They are created in the image of God and, hence, should be treated with the greatest respect for their dignity as God's image bearers. Not to allow them to continue to exist in their freely chosen destiny, painful as it may be, is to snuff out God's image in them. Since free choice is morally good, being part of the image of God, then it would be a moral evil to take it away. But this is what annihilation does: It destroys human freedom forever.

Further, to stomp out the existence of a creature in God's immortal image is to renege on what God gave them—immortality. It is to attack himself in effigy by destroying his image-bearers. But God does not act against God.

To punish the crime of telling of a half-truth with the same ferocity as the crime of genocide is unjust. Hitler should receive a greater punishment than a petty thief, though both crimes affront God's infinite holiness. Certainly not all judgment proportionate to the sin is meted out in this life. The Bible speaks of degrees of punishment in hell (Matt. 5:22; Rev. 20:12-14). But there can be no degrees of annihilation. Nonexistence is the same for all persons.

Conclusion

The doctrine of annihilation rests more on sentimental than scriptural bases. Although there are some biblical expressions that *can* be construed to support annihilationism, there are none that *must* be understood this way. Furthermore, numerous passages clearly state that the wicked will suffer consciously and eternally in hell.

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