The Nature of Hell

Eternal, Conscious Torment and Its Recipients

By Justin Huffman

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In a recent article in The New Yorker about former mega-church pastor Rob Bell and his controversial book Love Wins, Kelefa Sanneh writes:

"To anyone looking for loopholes in the doctrine of damnation, the Bible offers plenty… There is plenty in the Bible to suggest that Hell is big and cruel… But few of these Bible verses, read closely, seem definitive; visions and allegories outnumber rules and regulations."¹

While it is not surprising to find a secular paper questioning the spiritual claims of the Bible, it is striking when the author claims to do so from the vantage point of Holy Scripture. Yet this approach is not new. Many who deny the inerrancy of Scripture (including Bell) nonetheless seek to use the Bible to bolster their argument against the common belief in Hell (Sanneh himself admits that a majority of Americans still believe in Hell). Meanwhile some (even conservative) Christians who affirm the inerrancy of Scripture have affirmed the reality of Hell, but have questioned whether its nature is eternal and conscious. None other than evangelical hero John Stott has written in support of annihilationism.

It cannot be denied that the everlasting, conscious torment of certain persons in hell is an historic Christian doctrine. Even critics of the doctrine admit that this teaching has “the advantage of being the majority position of the tradition of the church.”² However, since this teaching has been questioned—both in the past and in the present—it is always wholesome and timely to revisit the Scriptural data in relation to this doctrine.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to consider specifically what the New Testament teaches in relation to the nature of Hell; and it will be the contention of this paper that the biblical Hell is a place where the wicked suffer unending,
conscious torment. While the Old Testament clearly contains material relevant to this subject as well, for the sake of brevity and direct applicability we limit our study to the New Testament. In addition, we are in this paper assuming that the Bible is God’s inerrant, inspired Word; therefore, we will not attempt to answer materialistic or purely philosophical arguments against the doctrine of an eternal hell.

Eternal Torment

The Scriptural evidence for the eternal duration of the torment in Hell is so compelling that Charles Hodge asserts, “It is an almost invincible presumption that the Bible does teach the unending punishment of the finally impenitent.” A host of New Testament passages speak with clarity to the everlasting duration of Hell, many of them from the lips of Jesus himself. So perhaps it is best to summarize the teaching with four main points: 1) death is not the end of the wicked; 2) the duration of the bliss of the righteous and the misery of the wicked are the same; 3) the misery of Hell is described as far exceeding even the most excruciating of deaths; and, most importantly, 4) the word-choice of Scripture insists upon, not only a lengthy, but an unending torment.

First, it is not difficult to prove from Scripture that death is not the end of the wicked. Jesus’ curse on Chorizan and Bethsaida speaks of the dead wicked in Sodom and Gomorra rising in judgment against them (Matthew 11:21-24); likewise, he speaks of the people of Nineveh as a condemning witness on judgment day (Matthew 12:41). And in John 5:28-29 Jesus explicitly describes the resurrection of the wicked for judgment: “…an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.” Similarly, Paul writes that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ…whether good or evil” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Second, the existence of the godly and ungodly after the final judgment is of the same duration. Jesus, in describing the separation and judgment before the judgment throne, says “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’… And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matthew 25:41,46). While it has been pointed out that the Greek word aionios does not necessarily always carry the weight of “eternity”, Jesus himself clarifies his use of the word in context. Not only will the cursed be cast after the final judgment into the same “eternal fire” that is also prepared for the devil and demons, Jesus goes on to explain that this “eternal punishment” of the wicked is identical in its duration to the “eternal life” experienced by the righteous. As Wayne Grudem

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points out, “In this text, the parallel between ‘eternal life’ and ‘eternal punishment’ indicates that both states will be without end.”

Third, annihilation after the final judgment simply will not square with the graphic descriptions of Hell as being a misery that far exceeds mere death. Jesus warns, for instance, that we not be fearful of those who can only annihilate, but to fear God who is able to punish both soul and body in hell:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

“I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!” (Luke 12:4-5).

When Jesus describes the final judgment, he describes the experience of the wicked as involving “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:41-42; 49-50). While it is true that the language of “gnashing teeth” probably includes some idea of rebellious anger, the context makes it clear that this weeping and teeth-gnashing is not merely the response to God’s judgment but the direct result of the punishment being inflicted: they will be thrown (against their will) “into the fiery furnace” and “in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” The implication is that the fire of “that place” is the occasion of the weeping and teeth-gnashing, not merely the location of it.

As Jesus anticipates his betrayal by Judas, he utters a curse which surely intimates more than mere annihilation: “For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Mark 14:21). Surely it is better to be born and then annihilated than to have never been born at all; but the same cannot be said of those who face unending torment after their death.

When Jesus speaks of the consequences of sin and its punishment, he warns that it is far worse than a Mafia-style hit (being drowned with a stone tied around your neck Mark 9:42), and more terrible than even dismembering torture (having a hand or foot cut off, or an eye plucked out Mark 9:43; Matthew 18:8-9). Surely annihilation would be a mercy compared to such painful experiences, yet Jesus insists the punishment for sin is far greater than these merely temporary pains. As Wayne Grudem wisely observes, passages such as these “should make us realize the immensity of the evil that is found in sin and rebellion against God and

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the magnitude of the holiness and justice of God that call forth this kind of punishment.”

This brings us to the fourth and final point regarding the duration of Hell’s suffering: that a plain reading of the word-choice of Scripture militates in favor of an unending torment for the wicked. In other words, one would have to give a controlling priority to historical, cultural, or philosophical presuppositions in order to not receive the most obvious reading of Scripture: that the suffering of the wicked is eternal, unquenchable, and undying.

As an example, let us return to Jesus’ warning against sin in the parallel passages of Mark 9 and Matthew 18. Jesus insists that the punishment for sin is worse than being drowned alive, having one’s hand or foot cut off, or plucking out one’s eye. Why is this? Putting the parallel accounts together, Jesus describes Hell (by name) as a place (notice the local language “go to” and “thrown into”) of eternal, unquenchable fire where their worm does not die. It is hard to imagine a more explicit description of unending torment, or a more direct address regarding Hell. William Hendriksen comments on this passage: “When Scripture speaks of unquenchable fire, the point is not merely that there will always be a fire burning in Gehenna, but that the wicked will have to endure that torment forever. They will always be the objects of God’s wrath, never of his love.”

While it has been pointed out that similar language can be found in the Old Testament (e.g. Isaiah 66:16-24), there are at least two reasons we should not transpose an Old Testament interpretation over the plain New Testament language. First, it seems a strange and forced hermeneutic to diminish New Testament descriptions of eternal torment (or eternal life!) by applying a literal application of Old Testament passages that merely foreshadow the final consummation of all things. Just as the Promised Land was only a limited, temporary picture of heaven, so the destruction of some wicked in the Old Testament was only a foreshadowing of the greater, eternal punishment of all wicked. Second, although some similar language can be found in the Old Testament, nowhere does it include such an explicit description of Hell itself. Thus, as we stated above, one would have to grant a controlling priority to other presuppositions in order to not receive the most obvious reading of this unmistakable New Testament description of Hell.

Conscious Torment

Not only is the torment of the wicked unending, it is also suffered by those who are in a conscious awareness of their punishment.

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6 Grudem, 460.
7 William Hendriksen, Mark (NTC; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 367.
8 Fudge, 329.
We see this reflected in Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31. While the poor man Lazarus dies and experiences joy and consolation, Jesus describes a rich man who also dies and is buried. Yet, rather than being annihilated, he finds himself in torment. In the midst of his pain, this rich man is conscious of his condition and surroundings: he looks around him, carries on a conversation, even begs for relief from his pain. When his request is refused, he displays a clear connection with his earthly existence by asking for Lazarus to be sent to warn his still-living relatives so that they don’t “also come into this place of torment.”

While it is true that this story is a parable, Jesus’ parables are—without exception—connected to reality. The parables are never set in a fairytale world, or on a foreign planet unconnected with human life. Particularly regarding this parable, the characters are interacting with an overarching biblical reality: reference is made to death, to the law of Moses, to the need for repentance, etc. And the force of the parable is entirely lost if it does not correspond with reality.

So as we consider the truths represented in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it seems evident that the wicked are punished in a conscious awareness of who they are and of why they are suffering: they did not repent, they did not listen to God’s Word or God’s messengers (i.e. “Moses and the Prophets”). There is continuity between the conscious existence they had on earth and the conscious existence they experience while suffering for their sin.

In addition, the language of “weeping” and “gnashing of teeth”—as we’ve already observed—is used to describe the torment of the wicked. And it does appear that the gnashing of teeth, even in the New Testament, indicates not only personal pain but also personal rage. Both pain and rage, for instance, are clearly implied in Revelation 16:10-11: “The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness. People gnawed their tongues in anguish and cursed the God of heaven for their pain and sores. They did not repent of their deeds.”

It seems apparent that the wicked, even in their punishment and pain, are still consciously opposed to God and his rule. Thus, their weeping and gnashing of teeth in the hell of fire is an indication, not only of their personal suffering, but also of their conscious, ongoing rage and rebellion against the God who is punishing them.

**The Nature of the Torment**

Having established that the torment of the wicked is both eternal and conscious, it is helpful to consider what specific form this torment takes. What is the nature of the suffering of the wicked that lasts forever?
Here we must be especially careful to tread humbly and with an awareness of our limited comprehension of the after-life. This is not to say that the New Testament is not clear in what it teaches, but the fact is that anything in relation to eternity is in some ways beyond us — whether we speak of eternal bliss or of eternal suffering. In relation to heaven there are some plainly communicated truths: there is no more pain or suffering, there is no more marriage, we are in the presence of Jesus. These things we must affirm, although we may not understand how we will be happy outside of marriage to our spouse, or how past pains will not plague us there, or how we can all be present with Jesus in any meaningful sense at the same time. Similarly, the everlasting suffering of the wicked has in some ways been plainly communicated. While there are aspects to it that will not be comprehensible to us this side of eternity, the information that is provided must be studied and affirmed.

The combination of suffering in both soul and body, without end, is so horrific and sobering that J.I. Packer points out that there is no direct parallel for it in our earthly experience. Therefore, Packer urges, “Do not try to imagine what it is like to be in hell.” He goes on to observe—while affirming Hell as a place of eternal, conscious torment— that “the mistake is to take such pictures as physical descriptions, when in fact they are symbolizing realities… far worse than the symbols themselves.”

In general terms, the judgment of the righteous—followed by “glory and honor and immortality”—is contrasted with the judgment of the wicked, which will involve God’s “wrath and fury” and “there will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil.” (Romans 2:5-9) While the wrath of God falls universally on those in their sin, this does not suggest that all will suffer to the same degree; in fact, the opposite seems to be the case. It seems apparent that the tribulation and distress each person will experience will be related to the evil they have done. Louis Berkhof observes, “Evidently, there will be degrees in the punishment of the wicked. This follows such passages as Matthew 11:22,24; Luke 12:47,48; 20:17. Their punishment will be commensurate with their sinning against the light which they had received.”

More specifically, Scripture indicates there is a physical/bodily aspect to the torment of the wicked, as well as a spiritual facet. As we’ve already considered, the eternal torment of the wicked follows their “resurrection unto judgment” (John 5:29). In Mark 9 and Matthew 18, Jesus speaks of people being cast into hell with their two hands, two feet, and two eyes intact. And while the “fire” that is repeatedly connected with Hell may not be the exact equivalent to our experience of fire on earth (e.g. in that it burns without consuming), the imagery of “fire” seems plainly chosen to communicate the experience of extreme suffering. J.P. Boyce expresses it well:

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“So far from men drawing comfort from any conviction they may have that there will not be literal fire, they should only the more be filled with dread and apprehension of some fearful condition, which the Scriptures here attempt to describe by terms which express the severest anguish men can endure in the body; the statements made evidently falling far short of telling the nature of a punishment which our present condition forbids that we should understand.”

Although Revelation speaks plainly of an unquenchable fire, it has been argued that “it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proved indestructible.” Yet we find this very image of physical, burning agony—which has no end—described in graphic detail in Revelation 14:9-11:

If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.

Here a sulfurous fire is said to torment the wicked, their smoking affliction rising up forever and ever, and there is no reprieve to their anguish. Passages such as these are so clear and so prolific in Scripture that it has led Packer to refer to annihilationists as taking part in “avalanche-dodging.”

There seems clearly to be a physical suffering, then, in the eternal torment of the wicked. Yet, that is not the only—or even the most acute—agony that they experience. The Bible indicates that there is also a spiritual aspect to the punishment in Hell. Again contrasting the joy of the righteous with the suffering of the wicked, Paul informs us that when Jesus returns to be admired and glorified by his saints, the same event will result in the banishment of unbelievers. Jesus will inflict vengeance on them “in flaming fire”, and “they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10)

Just as Jesus’ greatest suffering in his death was not the scourge, or the thorns, or the public humiliation—but the rejection of his Father (Mark 15:34)—the chief agony of Hell is that it is completely devoid of the favor of God. Here on earth, even the wicked benefit from the benevolence of God (Matthew 5:45; Luke 6:35; Acts 14:17; Psalm 145:9) and from the unconditional love of Christians who are walking in obedience to Christ. But Hell will be a place without even the least

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modicum of peace, joy, beauty, hope, or light — because all these things are the overflow of the gracious presence of God. The human soul, created to find its pleasure and security and fulfillment in the worship of its Creator, will in Hell be forever bereft of these things. It seems Peter refers to this hopeless, graceless state, more than to a physical absence of light, when he describes the end of the wicked: “For them the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved” (2 Peter 2:17).

The Recipients of the Torment

The subject of who is saved and not saved belongs most directly to the doctrine of soteriology; yet, it is impossible to properly review the nature of Hell without considering how the Bible describes the recipients of this punishment.

Returning to Mark 9 and its parallel in Matthew 18, Jesus warns that any unrepentant sin may result in being thrown into the eternal fire. Jesus expressed numerous times that unrepentant sin could result in being sentenced to hell (Matthew 5:22; 23:33). In his description of the final judgment, Jesus explicitly states that he and his angels “will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” (Matthew 13:41-42). Jesus refers to these law-breakers as “the evil” and contrasts them with “the righteous” (Matthew 13:49).

Peter and Jude are both speaking about false teachers when they describe their eternal punishment. Jude speaks of “ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (4). Peter likewise describes false teachers: “speaking loud boasts of folly, they entice by sensual passions of the flesh those who are barely escaping from those who live in error” (2 Peter 2:18). Clearly those who deny Jesus Christ, pervert his gospel, or encourage lascivious living are among those in danger of eternal punishment.

John describes those who are “thrown into the lake of fire”, which is “the second death”, as those who are judged “according to what they had done” and whose names are not in the book of life. (Revelation 20:12-15) Later John provides a more specific description of the kinds of deeds and lifestyles that lead to the lake of fire: “As for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

Remember in Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, that he describes Jesus “flaming fire” of vengeance falling on “those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (Revelation 1:8) and contrasts them with those who glory in Jesus at his coming because they had believed the apostolic testimony concerning Jesus (Revelation 1:10).
Put in positive terms, then, we might summarize those who have biblical assurance of their salvation from the eternal punishment of God. The saved are those who submit to the gospel's teaching concerning Jesus Christ, and then display their faith in Christ with on-going repentance and good works.

Conclusion

Many mysteries surround the details of human existence after death. There are a plethora of questions that the Bible does not even try to address or reveal. Yet, in relation to both eternal life and eternal punishment, the Bible does provide us with sufficient and clear enough description to make some dogmatic claims. The New Testament plainly teaches that there is a real place called Hell, and that it is a place where the wicked suffer unending, conscious torment.

Yet, the biblical truth regarding Hell is never provided for merely informational purposes. In every passage we have considered, the doctrine of Hell is taught in order to warn sinners to repent and believe on the Savior who is presented in the Christian gospel. His name is Jesus Christ. Thus, as Wayne Grudem concludes: "The decisions made by people in this life will affect their destiny for all eternity, and it is right that our hearts feel and our mouths echo the sentiment of the appeal of God through Ezekiel, 'Turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:11)." 14

Bibliography


14 Grudem, 459.

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