

Why Annihilationism Is Wrong:

by J. I. Packer

The doctrine of hell is the most difficult aspect of the Christian faith for many people. It is for me. I feel acutely the unremitting sadness of this doctrine. But to be a Christian is—at the very least—to confess Christ the Son of God, and to confess Christ the Son of God is—at the very least—to submit to his teaching. And this includes his teaching on hell (which was quite copious and colorful). Saint Anselm once said we should give thanks for whatever of the Christian faith we can understand with our minds; but when we come to something we don't understand, we should "bow our heads in reverent submission." That seems like godly and wise advice to me. We simply don't have the option to pick and choose from what the Bible teaches: we are called to *submit* to its authority over us. The traditional doctrine of hell is currently undergoing significant challenges from both within and without the church. Many question the reality of hell outright, while many others opt toward annihilationism—the belief that the damned won't suffer eternally but will instead have their consciousness extinguished at some point. In 1997 J. I. Packer wrote [a brief article](#) in *Reformation and Revival* magazine reviewing the debate over annihilationism among evangelicals. In his historical summary, he defines annihilationism as follows:

What is at issue? The question is essentially exegetical, though with theological and pastoral implications. It boils down to whether, when Jesus said that those banished at the final judgment will "go away into eternal punishment" ([Matt. 25:46](#)), he envisaged a state of penal pain that is endless, or an ending of conscious existence that is irrevocable: that is (for this is how the question is put), a punishment that is eternal in its length or in its effect.

Packer then describes some current variations within annihilationism in light of its 19th-century origins, and offers two pastoral caveats:

1. Hell should not be abstracted from the gospel.
2. Views about hell should not be determined by considerations of comfort.

He then proceeds to offer responses to four common arguments for annihilationism. Packer's counter-arguments are some of the more pithy and incisive points I've read regarding annihilationism, and are still relevant today. With my own added headings, they are as follows.



1. What Does 'Everlasting' Mean?

The first argument is of necessity an attempt to explain “eternal punishment” in [Matthew 25:46](#)—where it's parallel to the phrase “eternal life”—as not necessarily carrying the implication of endlessness. Granted that, as is rightly urged, “eternal” (*aionios*) in the New Testament (NT) means “belonging to the age to come” rather than expressing any directly chronological notion, the NT writers are unanimous in expecting the age to come to be unending, so the annihilationist's problem remains where it was. The assertion that in the age to come life is the sort of thing that goes on while punishment is the sort of thing that ends begs the question. Basil Atkinson, “an eccentric bachelor academic” according to Gordon Wenham but a professional philologist and mentor of Wenham and John Stott in this matter, wrote:

When the adjective *aionios* meaning “everlasting” is used in Greek with nouns of *action*, it has reference to the *result* of that action, but not the process. Thus the phrase “everlasting punishment” is comparable to “everlasting redemption” and “everlasting salvation,” both scriptural phrases. . . . The lost will not be passing through a process of punishment forever but will be punished once and for all with eternal results.

Though this assertion is constantly made by annihilationists, who otherwise could not get their position off the ground, it lacks support from grammarians and begs the question by assuming punishment is a momentary rather than a sustained event. While not perhaps absolutely impossible, the reasoning seems unnatural, evasive, and, in the final assessment, forlorn.

2. The Intrinsic Eternality of the Soul

The second common argument is that once the idea of the intrinsic immortality of the soul (i.e., the conscious person) is set aside as a Platonic intrusion into second-century exegesis, it will appear that the only natural meaning of the NT imagery of death, destruction, fire, and darkness as indicators of the destiny of unbelievers is that such persons cease to be. On inspection, however, this proves not to be the case. For evangelicals, the analogy of Scripture—the axiom of its inner coherence and consistency and power to elucidate its own teaching from within itself—is a controlling principle in all interpretation, and though there are texts which, taken in isolation, might carry annihilationist implications, others can’t naturally be fitted into any form of this scheme. But no proposed theory of the Bible’s meaning that doesn’t cover all the Bible’s relevant statements can be true.

Texts like [Jude 6](#), [Matthew 8:12](#), [Matthew 22:13](#), and [Matthew 25:30](#) show that darkness signifies a state of deprivation and distress, not of destruction in the sense of ceasing to exist. After all, only those who exist can weep and gnash their teeth, as those banished into the darkness are said to do.

Nowhere in Scripture does death signify extinction; physical death is departure into another mode of being, called *sheol* or *hades*, and metaphorical death is existence that is God-less and graceless; nothing in biblical usage warrants the idea that the “second death” of [Revelation 2:11](#); [20:14](#); and [21:8](#) means or involves cessation of being.

Moreover, [Luke 16:22–24](#) shows that, as in a good deal of extrabiblical apocalyptic, fire signifies continued existence in pain. The chilling words of [Revelation 14:10](#) with 19:20 and 20:10, and of [Matthew 13:42](#), [50](#), confirm this. In [2 Thessalonians 1:9](#) Paul explains, or extends, the meaning of “punished with everlasting [eternal, *aionios*] destruction” by adding “and shut out from the presence of the Lord”—which, by affirming exclusion, rules out the idea that “destruction” meant extinction. Only those who exist can be excluded. It’s often been pointed out that in Greek the natural meaning of the destruction vocabulary (noun, *olethros*; verb, *apollumi*) is “wrecking,” so that what’s destroyed is henceforth nonfunctional rather than annihilated altogether.

Annihilationists respond with special pleading. Sometimes they urge that such references to continued distress refer only to the temporary experience of the lost before they’re extinguished, but this is to beg the question by speculative eisegesis and to give up the original claim that the NT imagery of eternal loss naturally implies extinction. [Robert Peterson quotes](#) from Stott, which he calls “the best case for annihilationism,” the following on the words “And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever” ([Rev. 14:11](#)):

The fire itself is termed “eternal” and “unquenchable,” but it would be very odd if what is thrown into it proves indestructible. Our expectation would be the opposite: it would be consumed forever, not tormented forever. Hence it is the smoke (evidence that the fire has done its work) which “rises for ever and ever.”

“On the contrary,” Peterson replies, “our expectation would be that the smoke would die out once the fire had finished its work. . . . The rest of the verse

confirms our interpretation: 'There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image.'" There seems no answer to this.

So at every point, the linguistic argument simply fails. To say that some texts, taken in isolation, might mean annihilation proves nothing when other texts evidently do not.

3. Divine Justice

The third annihilationist argument is that for God to visit punitive retribution endlessly on the lost would be disproportionate and unjust. Stott writes: "I question whether 'eternal conscious torment' is compatible with the biblical revelation of divine justice, unless perhaps (as has been argued) the impenitence of the lost also continues throughout eternity." The uncertainty expressed in Stott's "perhaps" is strange, for there is no reason to think the resurrection of the lost for judgment will change their character, and every reason therefore to suppose their rebellion and impenitence will continue as long as they themselves do, making continued banishment from God's fellowship fully appropriate; but, leaving that aside, it is apparent that the argument, if valid, would prove too much, and end up undermining the annihilationist's own case.

For if, as the argument implies, it is needlessly cruel for God to keep the lost endlessly in being to suffer pain, because his justice does not require this, how can the annihilationists justify in terms of God's justice the fact that he makes them suffer any postmortem pain at all? Why would not justice, which on this view requires their annihilation in any case, not be satisfied by annihilation at death? Biblical annihilationists, who cannot evade the expectation of the final resurrection to judgment of unbelievers alongside believers, admit that God doesn't do this, and some, as we have seen, admit too there will be some pain inflicted after judgment and prior to extinction. But if God's justice requires no more than extinction, and therefore doesn't require this, the pain becomes needless cruelty, and God is in effect accused of the very fault of which annihilationists are anxious to prove him innocent and condemn the Christian

mainstream for implying. If, however, God's justice really does require some penal pain in addition to annihilation, and continued hostility, rebellion, and impenitence Godward on the part of unbelievers remains a postmortem fact, there will be no moment at which it will be possible for either God or man to say that enough punishment has been inflicted, no more is deserved, and any more would be unjust. The argument thus boomerangs on its proponents, impaling them inescapably on the horns of this dilemma. Wiser was Basil Atkinson, who declares: "I have avoided . . . any argument about the final state of the lost based upon the character of God, which I should consider it to be irreverent to attempt to estimate." No doubt he foresaw the toils into which such argument leads.

4. Can Hell Deflate Heaven?

The fourth argument is that the saints' joy in heaven would be marred by knowing that some continue under merited retribution. But this cannot be said of God, as if the expressing of his holiness in retribution hurts him more than it hurts the offenders.

And since in heaven Christians will be like God in character, loving what he loves and taking joy in all his self-manifestation—including the manifestation of his justice (in which indeed the saints in Scripture take joy already in this world)—there is no reason to think their eternal joy will be impaired in this way.