

The Last Enemy

By

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The apostle Paul wrote that “the last enemy that shall be abolished is death” and that after the Son has subjected all things to himself, He will then be subjected to the Father, “that God may be all in all” (I Cor. 15:26–28). John wrote that after judgment and the “second death” for those not found written in the book of life, death would “be no more” (Rev. 20:14–21:4).

In spite of all this, there persists the belief that sinners will never die, but will continue to live in some form in order that they might be punished forever by Almighty God. Some have called this a “living death,” certainly a classic oxymoron, and other define this death as “separation” from God. In either case, it denies the writing of Paul and John, that there is to be nor more death after the death implemented at Judgment.

The philosophy of immortality of the soul an perpetual torture of sinners was developed by Plato, and introduced into the church late in the second century by the philosopher Athenagoras. Up until then ALL the church leaders, whose writings are still extant, taught that immortality would be conferred ONLY upon the redeemed*. At the end of the fourth century and into the beginning of the fifth, Augustine, another avid follower of Plato, in defiance of Paul’s warning against such philosophy, convincingly linked it to certain scriptures (Co. 2:8).

Let us examine some “proof-texts” used by Augustine and also by some who have written to me on this subject.

One that is often called to my attention is Mark 9:44–48, where Jesus solemnly declares that the lost are to be cast into “Gehenna (erroneously called *hell* in the KJV) where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched.” This is said to prove that immortal worms will feed on the sinner, and he will be burning forever in a fire that never goes out! Is this what Jesus meant?

The expression was not original with Jesus, but is found in Isaiah 66:24. Speaking of the redeemed, Isaiah said, “They shall go forth and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me; for their worm shall not die neither shall their fire be quenched, and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.” Note that the worm and the fire are external to and distinct from the subject upon which they prey, also that what both prey upon are NOT the living but the *dead carcasses* of men.

The allusion here is to dead bodies which furnish food for the worms and fuel for the fire. Jesus gave a local setting to Isaiah’s description by His reference to Gehenna, the garbage dump of Jerusalem, where trash and carcasses were cast out from time to time to be consumed by fire. The fearful image conveys the idea, not of life, but the opposite, death, and of the final cleansing of God’s world by the utter death and destruction of the rebellious. This fits perfectly the statement of John the Baptist, who said that Jesus would “thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:12).

These words of Isaiah and John, endorsed by Christ, assert a state of eternal death and destruction—not of eternal life—as the wages of sin. The verses plainly refute the traditional teaching that the lost are to have a life of perpetual suffering.

Another favorite Augustinian verse is Revelation 14:10–11, which speaks of men being tormented with fire and brimstone, “and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest day and night...” The word for “torment” comes from a word which means to be put to the test. It is the smoke that goes up “for ever and ever,” imagery taken from Isaiah 33:9–10, which describes the judgment brought by God upon the land of Idumea: “Therefore the land thereof shall become burning pitch: it shall not be quenched day or night, the smoke thereof shall go up forever.” This is a poetical figure of a terrible destructive fire with ever-ascending smoke to convey the idea of total desolation, not of endless life or pain. What happened to Edom explains the figure: its cities were destroyed and the land became a desert. There was no fire continuing to burn, and no literal smoke continuing to ascend, but the intention of the prophecy was fulfilled in the total destruction of the country.

The apostle Peter was no poet, and uses simpler terms to describe the fire of judgment and the destruction of the present world (II Peter 3:7–12). There is no way to reconcile the idea that the fires will continue to burn, with the fact of a “new heaven and new earth wherein dwells righteousness” (Vs. 13).

Many claim proof of a never-ending fire in the terms “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment.” Jude 7 says, “even as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities about the...are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” This passage does not refer to supposed suffering in Hades, but to a punishment open to human sight, when fire consumed those cities. The destruction was final and eternal, and an example of what awaits those who imitate Sodom. It is frequently referred to in the older scriptures as an event known to all (Isa. 1:9, 13:19; Jer. 49:18, 50:40; II Peter 2:6). The fire itself was not eternal (and went out thousands of years ago) but its result was eternal. The cities are gone forever!

Eternal punishment is not the same as eternal punishing. The punishment is death, which is final and eternal. Life given the redeemed will be eternal, and the death of the unredeemed, as “the wages of sin,” will also be eternal. This will be *eternal punishment*, but not *eternal punishing*.

Recent articles in religious magazines in support of perpetual and everlasting torture of the lost have followed the Roman Catholic (Platonic) tradition on the subject, with little concern for what scripture teaches. Terms used, such as *severe suffering*, *eternal suffering*, *spend eternity in darkness*, *total separation*, *eternal hell* and *endless punishment* are not found in the Bible. Generally ignored are terms used by Jesus and the apostles, such as: *cut down*, *destroy*, *die*, *grind to powder*, *kill*, *slay*, *put to death*, *lose life*, *never see life*, and *perish*. These biblical terms consistently indicate that the punishment is the complete loss of life. Not one of them means torture or perpetual life in misery.

What of the view of some that death, the cessation of life, is too mild a punishment? Of course, they are thinking of extremely evil people, and not of any of their loved ones who might be lost. The death penalty is strongly opposed in our country because so many think it is too cruel and not mild at all. It is significant that in God’s Old Testament judicial system there were NO prisons nor torture. Criminals, no matter how evil, were simply executed.

Some argue that if there is no ongoing suffering, then they might as well enjoy the sins of the world. It would appear that they have no desire to follow Christ in purity and righteousness, nor to live in His presence in a new and glorious creation. If sin is what they really want, then they can hardly claim to be redeemed and cleansed by Christ and His death.

Does the teaching of a perpetual torture of sinners cause sinners to cease from sin? Obviously not, for that has been the doctrine of mainstream churches for centuries. The power of the gospel is not in the threat of torture (a kind of hideous torture one would not inflict on a bad dog) but in the offer of life to those who otherwise would die.

When Jesus asked, “What will a man give in exchange for his life?” he was implying that life is our most precious possession, and if losing this present life is bad, there is no way to measure the tragedy of losing it forever!

It is said (by an, not by God) that sin against God is so great it would require eternity to punish the sinner. In this case, justice would never be satisfied. Having billions of unrepentant sinners in some kind of prison undergoing perpetual suffering would serve no purpose whatever.

When all sin is eliminated from God’s creation, by the final death of unrepentant sinners, “then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” and ‘God will be all in all’ (Mt. 13:41–42, I Cor. 15:28).

*Following is a list of Church Fathers who held to this truth, and their year of death: Clement of Rome, A.D. 100; Ignatius, martyred A.D. 107; Barnabas, A.D. 140; Hermas, A.D. 154; Polycarp, martyred A.D. 147; Justin Martyr, A.D. 164; Theophilus of Antioch, A.D. 180; Irenaeus, martyred A.D. 202, and Amobius, A.D. 330.

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