

THE ANNIHILATION THEORY

Question #1: What does the word “destruction” in 2 Thess 1:9 mean? Paul writes, “These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power . . .” (2 Thess 1:9).

Answer: There are four primary words that are used to convey the concept of destruction. They are: *olethros* (“corruption, destruction”); *olethreuo* (“to corrupt, destroy”); *olethreutes* (“destroyer”); and *exolothreuo* (“to destroy completely”).

- *Olethros* means “corruption,” especially “death,” or “that which brings corruption.” It is quite common in the Greek Old Testament (LXX); the prophets often use it to describe eschatological “destruction” (Jer 48:3). The sense is clearly eschatological in two New Testament instances: In 1 Thess 5:3, at the time of the day of the Lord, destruction will come upon those in darkness. In 2 Thess 1:9, eternal destruction will come on those who reject the gospel when Christ is revealed from heaven. In 1 Tim 6:9, the conscience of those who seek wealth is seared and they are thus in danger of falling into temptations that will plunge them into utter ruin. The point is rather different in 1 Cor 5:5, where Paul seems to be saying that physical destruction (i.e., discipline or death) will follow when the incestuous man in the Corinthian church is delivered over to Satan.
- *Olethreuo* is a term that means, “to corrupt,” “to destroy.” Philo uses it for the corruption of the soul. It occurs 18 times in the LXX in its usual sense. The only New Testament instance is in Heb 11:28, where by faith Moses sprinkles the blood so that the “destroyer” might not touch his people.
- *Olethreutes* means “destroyer” and only occurs in 1 Cor 10:10, where the reference is to the Old Testament angel of destruction. This may be a specific avenging angel (there’s a definite article), or it may be an angel of Satan (2 Cor 12:7).
- *Exolothreuo* means, “to destroy completely.” It is very rare except in the LXX, in which it refers to God’s complete destruction of sinners or the disobedient. The only New Testament use is found in Acts 3:23, where Peter, after healing the lame man, quoting Lev 23:29 and Deut 18:19, tells the people that those who will not listen to the predicted prophecy of the Messiah will be rooted out from among the people.

Interestingly, 2 Thess 1:9 echoes the LXX of Isa 2:10, 19, and 21. That Jewish literature often describes God turning His “face” (literally) or “presence” from the wicked and may be theologically significant, but Paul directly takes over the Jewish idiom (“from the face of” means “from before,” “from the presence of”) as the LXX of Isaiah rendered it. “Eternal destruction” in the Dead Sea Scrolls and elsewhere usually meant that the wicked were completely destroyed, but in the context of many of these passages they also suffered eternally. This leads me into a second question:

Question #2: What does the word “eternal” mean throughout Scripture?

Answer: The Hebrew word *olam* and the Greek word *aionios* are translated as “eternal,” “everlasting,” and “forever.” And while these terms can be used on rare occasions to refer to an age or long period of time, the context must clearly show this because their normal meaning is an unending duration of time. The term *aionios* occurs 71 times in the New Testament. Sixty-four of these refer to God Himself and divine plans or realities. In almost every one of these cases, an unending period of time is clearly in view.

This term is used seven times in regard to perdition and should be understood in an everlasting sense there as well (see Matt 18:8, 25:41; Jude 6-7, 13; Rev 14:11, 20:10).

Daniel 12:2 says, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to **everlasting** life, but the others to disgrace and **eternal** contempt.” In Matt 25:41 and 46, Jesus announces, “Then He will say to those on His left, ‘Depart from me, accursed ones, into the **eternal** fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels’...And these will go away into **eternal** punishment, but the righteous into **eternal** life.”

Now from what I understand, the majority of annihilationists will take these passages and agree that the punishment is eternal but the punishing supposedly isn't. Apparently, they believe that the punishment is extinction, and the results of this judgment will last forever, with smoke and fire as symbols of the everlasting result of being consumed. However, the passages in Daniel and Matthew make it clear that the final states of the just and the unjust are exactly the same—both are conscious, continuous modes of living—except for their particular locals!

Question #3: Will the wicked be annihilated or suffer conscious, eternal punishment?

Answer: This can be a very difficult question to answer. In some passages of Scripture, the Bible speaks of the wicked being “destroyed” by God, suffering the “second death” (Rev 20:14), or going to “perdition” (2 Pet 3:7). Yet in other places, it speaks of them suffering conscious torment (e.g., Luke 16:22-28). Which one is it?

Is it possible that 2 Thess 1:9 and other assorted passages support annihilation? From the testimony of other passages, taken in their context, this seems highly unlikely. In the case of the verse in question, “destruction” cannot mean “annihilation.” A simple clue is the fact that Paul included the word “eternal, everlasting.” The fact that their punishment is “eternal” indicates that they too must be eternal in their existence. Annihilation only takes a millisecond, and then—it's over. If someone were to undergo “eternal/everlasting destruction” then it would only make sense that they would have to exist eternally. One cannot suffer punishment unless a person exists to be punished.

With regards to Rev 20:14, “death” cannot mean annihilation, but separation. Adam and Eve died spiritually the minute they sinned; yet they still existed and could hear God's voice (Gen 2:10). Likewise, before one is saved, he is “dead in trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1), and yet he is still in God's image (Gen 1:27) and is called on to believe (Acts 16:31). In the same way, when the wicked are said to go into “perdition” (2 Pet 3:7), and Judas is called the “son of perdition” (John 17:12), it does not mean that they will be annihilated. The word “perdition” (*apoleia*) simply means, “perish or come to ruin.” It does not connote the idea of “destruction.”

The same word used to describe the wicked perishing in the Old Testament (*abad*) is used to describe the righteous perishing (Isa 57:1; Mic 7:2). The same word is used to describe things that are merely lost but then later found (Deut 22:3), which proves that “lost” does not here mean to go out of existence. So if perish means to annihilate, then the saved would be annihilated too.

Many theologians use this excellent but a bit overused illustration: Junk cars have perished in the sense of being ruined but they are still cars, ruined as they may be, and they are still in the junkyard. They have just come to ruin.

Jesus spoke of hell as a junkyard or dump where the fire would not cease and where a person's resurrected body would not be consumed. Where do I get that? One of the primary places this concept is found is Mark 9:48. In Mark, Jesus said that hell is a place, "where **their** worm does **not** die and the fire is **not** quenched." It is clear from Jesus' description that He is not speaking of your typical earthworm. On the contrary, He is talking about the human body. Notice, He did not say, "where the worm does not die" but rather, "where **their** worm does not die." The antecedent of "their" is a human being who sins and dies without trusting Christ (9:42-47). The term "worm" is just Jesus' way of using figurative language. "Worm" is simply a way to refer to the human "worm" or shell, known as the body. This interpretation goes perfect with the context of this passage, where Jesus is speaking of the parts of the body such as "hands" and the "foot" (9:43-45).

Another great example that seems to validate eternal torment and consciousness is my absolute favorite evangelistic sermon: The story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). In this story the rich man who died, immediately went to hell and was in conscious torment (16:22-28), and there is absolutely no indication in the text that it was ever going to cease.

Upon doing a survey of the biblical terms used to speak of the eternal destiny of the unregenerate, I have become more convinced that eternal separation from a holy God is a better option than the annihilation theory. Just look at a few of the words that the authors of Scripture use: separation from God, destruction and death, fire, darkness, the worms that will not die, trouble, distress, torment, agony, shame and everlasting contempt, everlasting chains and gloomy dungeons, futility, and the wrath of God. WOW!!! I think the authors of Scripture are trying to say something here.

The Old Testament speaks bluntly of the eternal destiny of the ungodly. The key word is (*sheol*), a term which appears 64 times. Sometimes the word is used for the grave and sometimes for eternal punishment. The Old Testament concept of *sheol* seems to be a dark and distant eternal dwelling that separates one from God.

Annihilationists seem to believe that extinction is a punishment for sin and immortality is a reward for faith. But in Scripture, while death is punishment for sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 5:12), it is more importantly viewed as "separation from God," *not* extinction. Death and its cognates signify the ruin and loss of happiness, not non-being. The main contrast is two different kinds of eternal life, not existence versus non-existence. Further, nowhere in the Bible is there any kind of teaching that suggests continued existence is a reward of faith. The eternal life received by believers is not mere endless existence as opposed to extinction, but rather a certain quality of life together with God and others in the kingdom. It is a certain caliber of life that is contrasted to life separated from God and His kingdom.

I found these particular comments by David Wells very interesting. He demonstrates that biblical words do indeed have a wide range of meaning. Here are his observations: "Sinners are 'cut off' (Ps 37:9, 22, 28, 34, 38), but so is the Messiah (Dan 9:26); sinners are 'destroyed' (Ps 143:12), but so was Israel (Hos 13:9; cf. Isa 9:14) and so were the sheep and coins (Luke 15:4, 8) that were then found; unbelievers are said to 'die,' but then all of us have always been 'dead' (Rom 6:13; 7:4; Eph 2:1, 5; cf. Rom 7:10, 13; 8:2, 6; 1 Tim 5:6; Col 2:13; Rev 3:1), and that surely doesn't mean we have been without existence/consciousness.

Question #4: Doesn't the punishment have to fit the crime?

Answer: I think the strongest argument in the annihilationist's camp is this one: "The doctrine of unending consciousness in hell is unjust and immoral. It serves no purpose, it amounts to an infinite punishment for a finite life of sin and thus, it is a disproportionate punishment, which contradicts divine justice." The problem with this understanding is that it isn't so much the length of time that we're talking about. What's really at stake is the seriousness of the acts themselves (especially in light of God's holiness).

I believe the greater issue is the comparison between extinction and hell. Although hell is a gruesome reality, it does seem clearly more immoral to extinguish humans with intrinsic value than to allow them to continue living in a state with a low quality of life. Of course, we don't think that way at all, but if we look at this from God's perspective, through His holy eyes, it makes a bit more sense.

Consider these analogies that have helped me: infanticide and euthanasia. Although many people believe that the intentional taking of life in these situations is justifiable and are often even acts of mercy and benevolence, who are we to judge? How can we, as finite human beings, judge what is a low quality of life and when to pull the plug? That's God's job (even though WA and OR don't agree).

The bottom line for me is: I believe 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). For God to annihilate His image in man would be to attack the reflection of Himself. Annihilation would be demeaning both to the love of God and to 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'll kill you! I'll snuff out your very freedom and existence!"

I am very sympathetic to the emotions that have been aroused in this argument. Yet, the one thing I do know is God is this: "Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25) I know that Jesus Christ is the only way to God (John 3:18; 8:24; 11:25-26; 14:6; Acts 4:12). I also know that God the Father desires all men everywhere to be saved (Ezek 18:23, 32; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). Yet, fortunately all humans have some light from creation and conscience that God exists and through their response to that knowledge He will grant further revelation (Rom 1:18-20; 2:11-16). Unfortunately, the Bible is very clear about the state of those who reject Christ and refuse to trust Him (John 3:18; 5:21-24).

The Bible is very clear on the majority of things, but regarding this particular confusion there is great confusion. I think the reason is because God only gives us one option to enter heaven and that's through Jesus. He doesn't want to even address these other controversial issues that we as humans struggle with. (He leaves that up to finite scholars and theologians, who really don't know one way or another—but God bless them anyway.)

What Abraham said so long ago still holds true, "Shall not the Judge of the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25) I'm counting on that because all my knowledge could be placed in one of God's thimbles.