



An Overview of Final Judgement in Matthew's Gospel

When arguing for their perspective of final judgement in Matthew's gospel, advocates of the conventional view of endless conscious torment (ECT) will typically argue in the following manner:

Matthew 25:41,46 teaches the endless conscious torment of the finally unrepentant. Therefore, Matthew 10:28 cannot teach annihilationism.

What if we (annihilationists) were to reverse the argument?

Matthew 10:28 teaches the final annihilation of the lost. Therefore, Matthew 25:41,46 cannot teach endless conscious torment.

I do not know how or why advocates of ECT are permitted to slide with this kind of non-argument. My personal approach to resolving the matter is rather simple. I ask myself: "How does Matthew treat the end of the unrighteous throughout his gospel?"

A broad overview of Matthew's understanding of the fate of the unrighteous reveals the following:

1. Jesus and John the Baptist warn the unrighteous (or rather, the unfruitful) will be chopped down as fruitless trees and cast into the fire. (3:10; 7:19; cf. Luke 3:9; John 15:6)
2. John the Baptist declares that the righteous will be preserved as wheat at harvest time, and the unrighteous burned up/consumed

(katakaio) as useless chaff in an unquenchable fire. (3:11,12; cf. Luke 3:10,17)

3. Jesus contrasts destruction (apoleia) and life (zoe) as the two destinies of humankind. (7:13,14)
4. Jesus warns his disciples that they should rather fear God than human beings, for God is ultimately sovereign over life and death. Though humans may kill (apokteino) the body (soma), God is able to destroy (apollumi) both life/soul (psuche) and body (soma) in Gehenna (10:28; cf. Luke 12:4,5). (Contrary to popular belief, Jesus is not warning his disciples that God will torment persons endlessly if they fail to endure in the faith.) Those disciples who fail to acknowledge Christ under persecution will be denied by Jesus before the Father (10:33). The unfaithful being denied by the Lord at the judgement will not entail their undergoing unending torment, but loss of life (10:39; 16:25,26).
5. Jesus urges his twelve disciples to lose/"destroy" (apollumi) their present lives in order to ultimately gain life (psuche, 10:39; cf. 16:25,26; Mark 8:35,36; Luke 9:24,25; 17:33; John 12:25).
6. Similar to John the Baptist's contrast between the wheat and the chaff in Matthew 3:12, Jesus teaches his disciples that the righteous will be separated from the lawless at the end of the age as wheat being separated from pesky weeds at harvest time. The unrighteous will be burned up/consumed (katakaio) as weeds in a fiery furnace (cf. Daniel 3) and the righteous will inherit the kingdom of the Father to shine like the sun. (13:24-30,36-43; cf. Daniel 12:3; Malachi 4:1,2)
7. Jesus informs his disciples, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up {ekrizoo}" (Matthew 15:13 ESV).

8. In an exhortation to his disciples, Jesus compares entering life (zoe) to being thrown into the age-lasting/Gehenna of fire¹ (18:8,9; cf. Mark 9:43-47). In this passage the image or symbol of fire appears to point to destruction, as a few verses later Christ indicates his Father's concern that not "one of these little ones should perish" (apollumi, 18:14 ESV²).
9. In Matthew 25:31-46 Jesus indicates that faithful disciples will be welcomed into the kingdom at his reappearance (v.34). The righteous will inherit age-lasting life (zoe aiōnios, v.46b). (In this text entrance into the kingdom and age-lasting life appear to be more or less equivalent to each other.) Conversely, unfaithful disciples will be banished from the King's presence into the age-lasting fire (to pur to aiōnion, v.41) prepared for the devil and his angels. The punishment (kolasis) of those on the left will be every bit as irreversible and "age-lasting" (aiōnios) as the fate of the righteous (v.46).³

The question remains: What function does the fire in Matthew 25:41 serve? In other words, is the fire's purpose to

- a. preserve and perpetually torment that which is cast in it, or
- b. will the fire (whether literal or metaphorical in nature) serve as an agent of destruction or annihilation in purging the kingdom of all that is contrary to the rule of Christ (cf. 13:40-42)?

Admittedly, both "traditionalists" and annihilationists must make an inference at this point. The precise nature of the fire in this text is not elaborated upon. We must ask ourselves the following question, then: Based on Matthew's treatment of final punishment and fire as an agent of destruction throughout the gospel, whose inference seems more sound? **If there is no precedence in Matthew for a fiery divine judgement consisting of unending torment prior to chapter 25,⁴ what reason would we have to believe it would suddenly emerge toward the very end of Jesus' teaching ministry in the**

gospel—especially when all preceding evidence points to final annihilation?

Conclusion

The question I wish to pose to advocates of the conventional view of ECT is basic: In Matthew's gospel, what is the exegetical basis for the lost undergoing a divine judgement consisting of unending torment at the end of the age?^{5,6}

Due to the ambiguity of the text, the age-lasting fire and age-lasting punishment of 25:41,46 cannot legitimately be used as definitive “proof” for the teaching of endless torment. Based on our survey of the fate of the unrighteous in Matthew, it is not at all obvious that the doctrine of ongoing torment is anywhere present in the gospel. On the contrary, the various images and metaphors employed by John the Baptist and Jesus point to destruction or loss of life. The following Matthean texts are particularly instructive:

Whoever finds his life {psuche} will lose {apollumi} it, and whoever loses {apollumi} his life {psuche} for my sake will find it. (10:39 ESV)

For whoever wants to save his life {psuche} will lose {apollumi} it, but whoever loses {apollumi} his life {psuche} because of Me will find it. What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses {zemioo} his life {psuche}? Or what will a man give in exchange for his life {psuche}? (16:25,26 HCSB⁷)

By James D. Gallé

References:

¹ Matthew's age-lasting/Gehenna of fire (18:8,9) parallels Mark's “unquenchable [Gehenna] fire” (pur asbestos, 9:43). In Mark's account, entering life (zoe) is equated with entrance into the kingdom of God (9:43,45,47).

² English Standard Version.

³ In my judgement, this text—along with Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the wheat and tares—is seriously problematic for any doctrine of eventual universal reconciliation.

⁴ Or, some may argue, chapter 18, verse 8

⁵ Of course we must not forget Revelation 20:10 where the devil, the beast and the false prophet are said to be tormented day and night “to the ages of the ages” (Young’s Literal Translation). I refer to this as “The Matthew 25:41/Revelation 20:10 Loop”, as Revelation 20:10 is almost invariably invoked by advocates of ECT in order to “prove” the nature of the aiōnios fire we read of in the Matthean text ad nauseam. This issue lies beyond the scope of this article.

⁶ I have deliberately avoided the “outer darkness” and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” texts prevalent in Matthew for the simple reason that these passages indicate nothing of (a) the duration of suffering the lost will endure, or (b) how long the unrighteous will survive upon their banishment from the presence of Christ and the kingdom of heaven. (Presumably their survival will be relatively short-lived considering they will have been cut off from the source of life himself, Jesus the King {25:41}).

⁷ Holman Christian Standard Bible.