

Everlasting Torment or Eternal Punishment?

Hey, if Dr. Robert Peterson can do it, so can I. Beg the question, that is, from my article's outset—in its very title, “Everlasting Torment or Eternal Punishment?” By setting the traditional view of hell up against the biblical phrase “eternal punishment,” the question I ask in the title assumes that eternal torment is not the fate Jesus warned awaits the lost, and it subtly influences my readers to assume the same before they've had a chance to consider the case for the view I'm critiquing. But if Peterson is allowed to similarly beg the question and poison the well in his article, “[Annihilation or Eternal Punishment?](#)”, featured in the [February 2014 issue](#) of *Tabletalk* magazine, certainly I should be forgiven for doing it.

Perhaps, then, I could also be forgiven if I were to begin my article by misrepresenting the view I'm critiquing, saying, “The traditional view is that lost people in hell will be maliciously and capriciously abused and tortured for eternity, as payment for their sins.” After all, Peterson opens his article by similarly misrepresenting annihilationism. Our view is not that “lost people in hell will be exterminated after they have paid the penalty for their sins” (emphasis added). We believe that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23, emphasis added), not that it precedes death.¹ Edward Fudge made that clear in his written debate with Peterson (who therefore knows better), *Two Views of Hell*. “We do not measure capital punishment,” Fudge wrote, “by the time required to carry it out but in terms of its lasting consequences.”² Annihilationism is thus the view that lost people will be exterminated as the penalty for their sins.

I ought likewise to be forgiven if, like Peterson, I chose not to provide the strongest evidence typically offered by those I'm attempting to represent. Imagine, for example, that I were to write, “We are told that the unsaved will be resurrected to face an eternity of torment (John 5:29; Acts

24:15).” While these texts support the orthodox belief—shared by evangelical conditionalists—that the lost will one day be resurrected and judged, neither hints at a subsequent eternity of torment, and traditionalists would understandably complain that I hadn’t at least cited Daniel 12:2 which reads, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”³ Were I to do so, I’d be in good company; after all, alleging to represent annihilationists, Peterson writes, “We are told that fire consumes what is thrown into it, and so it will be for the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8),” yet none of the texts he cites explicitly mentions the consumption of the wicked—indeed, one of them records John’s having seen the devil, beast, and false prophet “tormented day and night forever and ever,” albeit in apocalyptic, symbolic imagery.⁴ A faithful representation of the conditionalist argument would have cited Isaiah 33:14 (“Who among us can dwell with the consuming fire?”), Malachi 4:3 (“you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet”), Matthew 3:12 (“he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire,” NASB, emphasis added), Hebrews 10:26-27 (“For if we go on sinning . . . [there remains] a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”), or Hebrews 12:29 (“for our God is a consuming fire”). Peterson is certainly familiar with these texts, having been challenged with them by Fudge in their book.⁵ The case for annihilationism is based, not merely on our consistent and uniform experience that “fire consumes what is thrown into it,” but on Scripture’s explicit testimony that the fires of hell will do precisely that.

Next, perhaps I could describe the weakest, most seemingly laughable variation of the traditional view as if it’s representative of all who believe in eternal conscious punishment. I should be forgiven for that too. “Traditionalists,” I might write, “believe that the reason the resurrected lost will be capable of eternal life in flames, never consumed, is because the fire that melts the flesh off their bones simultaneously restores it.”⁶ Few traditionalists today believe that, but neither do most annihilationists believe eternal “means only pertaining to ‘the age to come’ and not

‘everlasting’” (emphasis added). As Fudge explains—once again, in the book he co-authored with Peterson—many annihilationists believe “[eternal punishment] is called ‘eternal’ because it will last forever.”⁷ If the penalty to be paid is death, and if that death is forever, then it is an eternal punishment, not merely one pertaining to another age.

Of course, I won’t actually do any of these things. Whereas Peterson is apparently comfortable erecting a straw man easily consumed by far less than unquenchable fire, I am not. But Peterson’s paper tiger aside, what of his responses to the arguments he imagines are ours?

He responds first to the argument annihilationists make from the biblical imagery of fiery judgment. He writes, “Many passages use this language without interpreting it.” This is true in many cases, although in Matthew 13:24-43, Jesus first offers a parable in which a landowner instructs his servants to “gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up” (v. 30, NASB, emphasis added), and then interprets the parable, saying, “Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace” (vv. 40-42).⁸ Peterson continues, “we do not want to read our ideas into the Bible, but to get our ideas from the Bible.” This is laudable, but he insists that when we do so, “we find that some passages preclude an annihilationist understanding of hellfire.” Yet the first passage he points to is Luke 16:28 and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, whose scene isn’t set in hell to begin with; it’s set in Hades, the so-called “intermediate state.” What’s more, the rich man and Lazarus are both dead, not resurrected, and the rich man’s brothers are still alive on this side of eternity.⁹ The only other text he offers as support for his claim is Revelation 14:10-11, a highly symbolic passage reusing apocalyptic imagery from the Old Testament in which ever-rising smoke communicates the utter destruction of Edom (Isaiah 34:8-10), as Peterson well knows.¹⁰

Next Peterson responds to what Dr. Glenn Peoples has called “The Biblical Language of Destruction.”¹¹ Peterson writes concerning biblical texts promising “destruction” or “perishing” for the wicked that “some passages are impossible to reconcile with annihilationism.” His first example of such a passage is 2 Thessalonians 1:9 (incorrectly cited as verse 8), but he fails to explain how “the punishment of eternal destruction” is irreconcilable with the view that the lost will be destroyed forever.¹² Next he argues that “the Beast’s ‘destruction’ is everlasting torment,” failing to distinguish between biblical symbols and their interpretation. The beast’s eternal torment takes place in the imagery (Revelation 20:10), but the destruction of that which the beast represents is foretold in the angel’s interpretation (Revelation 17:8, 11). Therefore “destruction” can’t be argued to mean “eternal torment” any more than “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” means the water atop which is seated a vampiric, blood-drunk prostitute (Revelation 17:15, cf. 17:1, 6).

Peterson moves on to respond to the straw man he has constructed in place of the annihilationist’s real arguments concerning the word translated “eternal.” Pretending our case hinges upon its meaning “pertaining to ‘the age to come,’” he argues that “the age to come lasts as long as the life of the eternal God Himself,” and that in Matthew 25:46, “The punishment of the lost in hell is coextensive to the bliss of the righteous in heaven—both are everlasting.” This is true, but as explained above (and to Peterson by Fudge), if the punishment is death, and if the lost die forever, their punishment is eternal. Peterson doesn’t explain, however, why only the saved are promised “eternal life” when in his view the risen lost will likewise live forever, having been rendered immortal.¹³

Responding next to the argument from justice made by many annihilationists, that the penalty of eternal torment is not proportionate to a finite lifetime of sins, Peterson is right to suggest that “We would do better to determine from [God’s] Holy Word what He deems just and unjust.” He

goes on, however, to cite Matthew 25:41 as if the “eternal fire” of which Jesus speaks clearly supports the traditional view, seemingly oblivious to the other two places in Scripture in which the phrase is used. Jesus himself uses the phrase earlier in Matthew 18:8, setting it in parallel to “Gehenna,” a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase, “valley of [the sons of] Hinnom.” Once a place where idol worshipers burned up children as sacrifices to their gods, Jeremiah 7:32-33 says Gehenna would become “the Valley of Slaughter” where “the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth.” In Isaiah 30:33 the valley is likened to a funeral pyre, a pile of wood for burning up corpses. The phrase “eternal fire” is used in quite a similar way in Jude 7 to refer to the fire which came down from heaven and destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, and which killed their inhabitants. If Jude’s words weren’t clear enough, the parallel in 2 Peter 2:6 says that “by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes [God] condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” Jesus’ reference to “eternal fire,” then, quite the opposite of supporting Peterson’s traditional view of hell, serves as powerful evidence in favor of annihilationism.

Peterson is absolutely right when he insists toward the end of his article that “We have no right to rewrite the biblical story.” Conditionalists concur, and we wish traditionalists like Peterson would simply let that story inform their understanding of the language it uses, instead of reading into the story the meanings they imagine.

Notes:

- 1 Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Copyright © 2000; 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ↩
- 2 Robert A. Peterson & Edward W. Fudge, *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue* (InterVarsity, 2000), Kindle edition, p. 45. ↩

- 3 Visit our [Explore](#) section for a conditionalist response to the traditionalist argument from Daniel 12:2. ↩
- 4 Visit our [Explore](#) section for a conditionalist response to the traditionalist argument from Revelation 20:10-15. ↩
- 5 Peterson & Fudge, pp. 31, 33, 38, 59. ↩
- 6 Marcus Minucius Felix argued this very thing in the third century, writing, “The clever fire burns the limbs and restores them, wears them away and yet sustains them, just as fiery thunderbolts strike bodies but do not consume them.” See Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, chapter 35; quoted in Williams A. Jürgens, trans., *The Faith of the Early Fathers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), 1:110. ↩
- 7 Peterson & Fudge, pp. 45-46. ↩
- 8 Visit our [Explore](#) section for a conditionalist response to the traditionalist argument from passages like this one which warn of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” ↩
- 9 Chris Date, “Lazarus and the Rich Man: It’s Not About Final Punishment.” *Rethinking Hell* [blog], posted June 23, 2012, <http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2012/06/lazarus-and-the-rich-man-its-not-about-final-punishment> (accessed August 11, 2014). ↩
- 10 Peterson & Fudge, p. 28. Visit our [Explore](#) section for a conditionalist response to the traditionalist argument from Revelation 14:9-11. ↩
- 11 “Episode 4: The Case for Annihilationism with Glenn Peoples,” *Rethinking Hell* [podcast], hosted by Glenn Peoples, September 4, 2012, <http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2012/09/episode-4-the-case-for-annihilationism-with-glenn-peoples> (accessed August 11, 2014). ↩
- 12 Visit our [Explore](#) section for a conditionalist response to the traditionalist argument from 2 Thessalonians 1:9. ↩
- 13 Peterson & Fudge, p. 88. ↩

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<http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2014/08/everlasting-torment-or-eternal-punishment>