

IS HELL FOREVER?

Brian H Edwards

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*In conversation with a young Christian, pastor and author **Brian Edwards** emphasises the terrifying alternative to trusting in Christ which is clearly taught in the Bible, and that our response to the reality of Hell should not be emotional, but add compassion and urgency to our evangelism.*

IS HELL FOREVER?

Pastor. Andy, you look a little 'off-colour'; I mean, not so much ill, but just not yourself. What's wrong?

Andy. To be honest I've been fighting with a problem and it's really worrying me. It was something you said in a sermon last Sunday. You must have said it before, and I suppose I've always believed it, but suddenly the reality of it hit me and I just didn't like what I was hearing.

Pastor. Come on then, out with it; what did I say?

Andy. You were preaching about the cross, and that was great; but then right at the end you said everyone was faced with a terrifying alternative to trusting in Christ—that is, going to hell. You then described hell as a conscious separation from God and that unbelievers would have all eternity to regret their rebellion against him. But almost your last words were: 'hell is punishment, and hell is for ever'. I just can't get those words out of my mind. I think of my friends and relatives and tremble at the thought that if they don't repent they will be in hell for ever. Some of them are so nice and I don't feel it's fair. Emotionally I find the whole idea intolerable. Pastor, is hell really for ever?

Pastor. I'll try to help you with your problem, Andy, but I must be honest and say that I won't be aiming to make you feel any better; I'll just be trying to make you think better.

Andy. Perhaps I'll understand the difference as you go along.

Pastor. I hope you will. Let me start by saying that this is one of those subjects that is especially important to think about from God's viewpoint and not ours. You said just now you found the idea of an everlasting punishment 'emotionally intolerable'. That's a dangerous way to start a discussion because you have almost allowed your heart to make up your mind before we start.

Andy. To be honest that's just how I feel at the moment, so what's wrong with that?

Pastor. Well, Andy, I suggest there are quite a number of things in the Bible that you might find emotionally intolerable...

Andy. ...Like what, for example?

Pastor. You remember the story of Achan in Joshua 7? One man sinned, and all his family including his sons and daughters and cattle, died for it.

Andy. But perhaps they all had a hand in it?

Pastor. Maybe, though I don't reckon the animals were too aware of what was going on! However, in the very next chapter God commanded his people to capture the city of Ai and put everyone in it to death, not just the soldiers. And they did. Don't you find that 'emotionally intolerable'?

Andy. Well, it was a bit rough I admit, but then God commanded it so I guess he must be right?

Pastor. Why do you say that?

Andy. Because God must be right or else he ceases to be God—I suppose.

Pastor. You suppose right. But can you see what you have just done? You don't like what you read, but instead of saying: 'It couldn't have happened like that', you said: 'God is always right, even if it doesn't look like it from where I am.' You see Andy, I know of people who think animal sacrifice in the Old Testament could never have been commanded by God because they consider it to be a barbarous practice. And some Christians say Christ could not have taken our punishment on the Cross because the Father would never have punished his own specially loved Son. And others say God could never have chosen who is going to be saved because that's just not fair—the rest don't get a chance. And what about...

Andy. ...All right, I take the point. If we start our argument from what we find emotionally intolerable we are putting our feelings above God's revelation.

Pastor. I couldn't have put it better. But let's take that a little further. If you reject what is emotionally unacceptable how can you argue against a man who rejects the resurrection of Christ because he finds it intellectually unacceptable? If the argument fits one it must fit the other. The Christian must always start with God's revelation rather than man's opinion.

Andy. Of course I accept that. But can it really be just for God to punish for ever and ever sins that were done only in the space of seventy or eighty years? We have a rule in our civilized societies that the penalty should be in proportion to the crime. I can't see how eternal conscious torment is proportional to eighty years of sin. Doesn't the Bible itself teach us the principle of proportional punishment?

Pastor. Yes it does.

Andy. Well then?

Pastor. Well then, have you ever thought that since everywhere else the Bible teaches that punishment should fit the crime, perhaps that is exactly what the Bible is teaching us on this issue too?

Andy. You mean God says eternal punishment is the proper punishment for the sin of unrepentance?

Pastor. If the Bible clearly teaches that hell is eternal conscious punishment, then it must be proportional in God's eyes. Who are we to judge what is fair and just? Do we dare to put God on trial, and to assess his guilt or innocence in this matter? In Romans 11:33-34 Paul writes: 'How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' Perhaps we all need to see God and his decisions in that light. I suggest we begin by agreeing that for the Christian who believes the Bible to be God's revelation without error there is only one question we need to answer on this subject...

Andy. I know... What does the Bible teach?

Pastor. Exactly, because we mustn't put our reason above the Bible any more than we should put our emotion above the Bible. God determines what is just and fair—not us.

Andy. I agree with that.

Pastor. Good. So let's start with what the Bible says and then meet some of the objections. Perhaps the clearest description of hell is found in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 where Paul says that those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus 'will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power'. The key word here is 'destruction'; which some people take to mean annihilation into nothingness or oblivion. But nowhere does it mean that. The word actually means ruin or death. A good example of its use is found a few pages on in your Bible in 1 Timothy 6:9 where Paul warns that a longing for wealth leads to temptations that 'plunge men into ruin and destruction'. Paul is talking about ruining our lives here on earth. You see, the word doesn't mean the destruction of being, but the destruction of well-being.

Andy. That's a helpful distinction. Isn't the devil somewhere called 'The destroyer'? Is that the same word as his name 'Apollyon'?

Pastor. No, not quite. In Revelation 9:11 the devil is called 'Apollyon', and that Greek word does mean 'destroyer'; but it's a different word from the one used in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, although the meaning is similar. As a matter of fact 'apollyon' is a word that is often used in the New Testament, so we'd better look at it for a moment. You will find it for example in 2 Thessalonians 2:10 where it is translated 'perishing'. It can mean 'to die', as in Matthew 26:52 where Jesus refers to those who 'die by the sword'. But it can also mean 'to perish' in the sense of being spoiled; so in Matthew 9:17 Jesus speaks of the old wineskins that 'will be ruined'. In Matthew 10:6 the same word is even used of sheep that are 'lost'; they are not annihilated but separated from the shepherd. So you can see that nowhere does this word speak of being blotted out into nothingness; it speaks of things that are killed, spoiled, ruined or lost.

Andy. So when the devil is called 'Apollyon' I suppose it refers to the one who ruins or spoils the image of God in man?

Pastor. That's right. The devil cannot annihilate anyone into oblivion; the final result of his evil work is that many remain lost and ruined for ever—and that's exactly what Jesus meant in Matthew 10:28 when he said: 'be afraid of the one who can destroy (ruin) both soul and body in hell'.

Andy. Isn't there any word for 'annihilate' in the New Testament?

Pastor. There is a word that refers to something disappearing out of sight. In Matthew 6:19 Jesus uses it in the sense of moth and rust 'destroying' and Peter uses it in 2 Peter 3:10 of the end of time when 'the heavens will disappear with a roar'.

Andy. Well, that looks like a word for annihilation.

Pastor. Not really, Andy, because it is also used in James 4:14 to remind the businessmen in the congregation that they are 'a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes'. And it's Christians he is writing about! They don't cease to exist, they simply vanish from sight. The word is only used half a dozen times in the New Testament and its meaning is more like 'disappearance' than 'annihilation'. For example, you may remember that verse in Hebrews 4:13 which warns us that 'nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight'; it's the same word and you can see that it means nothing is invisible to God.

Andy. So there's no word for 'annihilate' in the New Testament? But doesn't the Bible use the word 'death' to describe the eternal state of those who disobey God? For example: 'The wages of sin is death...', 'The soul that sins will die'. And I think hell is described in Revelation as 'the

second death'. Surely death is more like a description of unconsciousness than consciousness, isn't it? So death could be a good description of eternal unconsciousness or oblivion.

Pastor. Not if you start where the Bible starts. Do you remember the first reference to death in the Bible?

Andy. Yes, it's in Genesis 2 where God warned Adam that if he ate the forbidden fruit he would die.

Pastor. That's right, but in fact Adam lived a long time after the Fall. Death for Adam was twofold. Spiritual death followed immediately because Adam at once lost his friendship with God; he was separated from God. But eventually there was also physical death when Adam's soul was separated from his body. That's the way James 2:26 describes death: 'The body without the spirit is dead.' Death is never an unconscious nothingness, but a conscious separation, both in this life and in the life to come. We are back to 2 Thessalonians 1:9. The picture of hell, as death, is an awareness of separation from God.

Andy. What about the picture of fire that the Bible uses to describe hell? Doesn't fire mean that something is burned up and annihilated?

Pastor. Not necessarily. Fire is just as vivid a picture for suffering and pain. We talk about 'the fires of persecution', and people say: 'He really went through the fire with all his suffering'—nobody means he was annihilated! In fact, if you turn to Revelation 14:11 the reference to fire is in the context of 'the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever'.

Andy. What does that word 'torment' mean?

Pastor. It is used in the New Testament of both physical and mental suffering, and in 2 Peter 2:8 it even refers to Lot's soul tormented by the moral filth of Sodom. Perhaps that will be the suffering in hell of which fire is a picture—minds and souls tormented by sin unforgiven and opportunities lost. Anyway, the word always means conscious suffering, and I don't say that lightly; it's a terrible thing.

Andy. I have heard it argued that when the Bible says the unbeliever's punishment is eternal, it means that his annihilation goes on for ever. In other words, the unsaved will be raised from the dead, judged by God, and then condemned to a period of conscious punishment which would be long or short depending upon how sinful they were. After this they would be blotted out, annihilated. In this way it is the final punishment of annihilation that is for ever, not the conscious suffering.

Pastor. It's a clever argument, Andy, but after referring to the smoke of their torment rising for ever and ever, that verse in Revelation 14:11 goes on: 'There is no rest day or night...' That sounds like conscious punishment for ever, doesn't it? The important thing to discover is what the word 'punishment' means. Our Lord used it in Matthew 25:46 where he spoke of eternal punishment. Both in the Bible and in Greek and Roman society, the word always means a consciousness of suffering. Outside the Bible it even refers to torture. In 1 John 4:18 the apostle uses it in its normal way: 'Fear has to do with punishment.' The word never meant oblivion or annihilation, but always suffering for wrongdoing. And remember, that's exactly what the word torment and the picture of fire suggest.

Andy. But could the word 'eternal' just mean 'for an age' rather than for ever and ever? So there was punishment for a period, an age, and then annihilation?

Pastor. Yes it could, but do you see what you've done? Just a moment ago you admitted that the word 'eternal' meant for 'ever and ever' but you suggested it was only the punishment of annihilation that was for ever, not the painful awareness of it. Having lost that argument you now suggest that perhaps 'eternal' doesn't really mean 'for ever' after all! It is dangerous to

switch horses too often! But to be fair, the Greek word used for 'ever' does have two meanings: it means either time without end, which we call eternity, or it means a segment of time, such as when we talk of 'this present age'. It is used in both ways in the New Testament, but the context tells us which way is meant. When John doubles the word in Revelation 20:10 he literally says: 'day and night for the ages of the ages' which is the clearest way possible to express eternity in the Greek language. In Hebrews 1:8 exactly the same phrase 'for ever and ever' describes the sovereign power of God himself. How long will God be on the throne? Surely, for ever and ever! Besides, the same word is used for the joys of heaven, in Matthew 25:46 for example; if the punishment of hell is only for an age, or a limited time, so are the joys of heaven. Eternal life is as long or as short as eternal punishment! Do we want John 3:16 to become: 'whoever believes in him shall not perish but have life for a limited period of time'?

Andy. I seem to be losing the argument on words, but I do find it hard to imagine Jesus sending people into everlasting punishment. Did he have much to say about this subject?

Pastor. As a matter of fact some of the Bible's strongest language about hell came from our Lord during his earthly ministry. Listen to some of the words and phrases he used: 'hell', 'hell fire', 'condemned to hell', 'place of torment', 'darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth', 'hell where the fire never goes out', and 'eternal punishment'. Do you recall the verse I referred to a moment ago in Revelation 20:10? We are told there that the devil, the beast and the false prophet were thrown into the lake of burning sulphur where: 'They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever'—a terrifying picture of hell and a very clear statement that the conscious suffering lasts for ever. It is this very place of conscious suffering that Christ refers to in Matthew 25:41 where those who do not submit to his Lordship are banished 'into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'. As I said earlier, I'm afraid we are twisting Scripture if we try to make fire just a symbol of destruction into oblivion. The Bible clearly refers to it as conscious eternal punishment. Don't go soft in your view of Christ, Andy. The Bible makes it clear that he is a holy Judge, as well as our gracious Saviour.

Andy. All right, Pastor, I can see that my argument is more emotional than biblical. However, I do have another shot in my locker. But before I come to that, can you clear up one difficulty for me? I was talking with some people recently who spoke about 'conditional immortality' and 'annihilation'. I know that annihilation is the idea that we are blotted out into nothingness where there's no awareness, or consciousness, and therefore no more suffering. But is conditional immortality the same thing?

Pastor. Not quite. Those who believe in conditional immortality believe that when unbelievers die, that is the end; there will be no resurrection to judgement but they go at once into oblivion. On the other hand, Annihilationists, maintain that unbelievers will be raised from the dead at the end of time and will be called to account by God; they will be made fully aware of the evil of their sin and the opportunities lost, and may have to suffer actual punishment for a time as you suggested earlier, before being destroyed in oblivion or annihilation. But we need not argue about this distinction, because not everyone will agree that it is valid; and anyway, both views are wrong because they have no support from the Bible!

Andy. All right, but that leads us right into my last problem. I can see that if man has a soul that is immortal, he will live for ever, whether or not he is a Christian. But the Bible seems to teach that immortality is an added gift, given only to believers, rather than something we possess by nature. Doesn't the Bible say that immortality is something only God possesses? I'm thinking of 1 Timothy 6:16, 'God alone is immortal', and 2 Timothy 1:10 where we are told Christ 'brought life and immortality to light through the gospel'.

Pastor. The word translated 'immortal' in these two verses is literally 'deathlessness' and in that sense only God cannot be defeated by death. Man, as we all know to our cost, is subject to death; and that's the way Paul uses the same word in 1 Corinthians 15:53 when he is writing of

the day of resurrection. He says our mortal body—that is our body subject to death—will be clothed with immortality; it will never be defeated by death again. Going back to your verse in 1 Timothy 6, just three verses earlier Paul tells us that ‘God gives life to everything’. That is obviously true in that everything receives its physical life from God; but it is a life that has a beginning and will one day end in death. God alone has eternal life as his own by nature. That’s why Peter tells us in Acts 2:24 that it was ‘impossible for death to keep its hold on Christ’; as God, he had to rise from death. On the other hand we rise from the dead as a gift of God in the gospel. Only God can never die, physically or spiritually. Our resurrection, or death-defeating experience, is brought to light, not to existence, in the gospel.

Andy. Then what did God mean in Genesis 3:22 when he said that Adam ‘must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever’? That looks as though God was afraid Adam might obtain immortality.

Pastor. Well, you need to remember that the judgement on Adam’s sin, according to Genesis 2:17, was death; and, we said earlier, that this meant spiritual death immediately and physical death eventually. Do you recall the difference?

Andy. Yes, spiritual death is the separation of the soul from God and physical death is the separation of the soul from the body.

Pastor. Right, so when you turn over to Genesis 3:22 God is not talking about something new, like the soul’s ability to live for ever and ever. He is saying: we must not allow Adam to avoid the judgement of death; as a punishment his fellowship with us must be broken, and his body must be defeated by death; he must not be allowed to live on for ever.

Andy. From what you have said, it seems the Bible doesn’t actually talk about the immortality of man’s soul.

Pastor. No it doesn’t, not in so many words. It just assumes it. For example, Daniel 12:2 speaks of multitudes being raised from death, ‘some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt’, and both are taken for granted as conscious conditions. Similarly in Ecclesiastes 12:7, we are reminded that the body returns to the ground from which it came, ‘and the spirit returns to God who gave it’. There is an assumption that, unlike the body, the spirit is not capable of final destruction. And while we are in Ecclesiastes, the fact that God has ‘set eternity in the hearts of men’, chapter 3:11, is strong evidence that mankind is aware that he will live for ever.

Andy. That’s an interesting point. As a matter of fact, do we find that people all over the world believe in the immortality of the soul?

Pastor. Yes, we do. Everlasting life after death is something most people believe. We find it held by primitive people and advanced religions. Where do you think the idea comes from? We can go further: the Jews of our Lord’s day all believed the soul to be immortal, with the exception of the Sadducees who didn’t believe in angels or the resurrection. In the first few centuries of its history, the church had no doubt about it either; the leaders even viewed ‘conditional immortality’ as heresy! But in addition, immortality and eternal punishment were accepted by both Greek and Roman pagan religions in the first century. So don’t you think we would expect some very clear teaching by the New Testament writers if they intended to contradict all this?

Andy. I suppose so. But there isn’t any teaching in the New Testament against this widespread belief in the immortality of the soul; in fact all the evidence goes the other way. I have to admit that the Bible teaches that everyone lives for ever and that hell really is eternal punishment, but I must say it still leaves me feeling troubled about the implications.

Pastor. And so it should, Andy! The judgement of God is a terrifying thing for those without faith in Christ; and the penalty for sin is one of unimaginable horror. That must add compassion and urgency to our evangelism. On the other hand, Paul reminds us in Romans 11:33 that God’s

wisdom and knowledge are deep, his judgements unsearchable, and his ways are beyond our understanding. We cannot grasp all there is to know about God, or about his dealings with men and women, but we can trust his wisdom and justice.

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