

The Eternal State

The eternal state is divided between eternal punishment and the new earth. Some people wonder how the final state is not the intermediate state. The Bible's big subject is God. Second, the Bible is interested not in God's creatures, the angels, but in human beings, whom God has created. Furthermore, the Bible's concern is much more for the righteous than the unrighteous. And concerning the righteous, our main hope is not the intermediate state but the resurrection of the dead. Less than any of those concerns is that of the intermediate state for the wicked. Therefore, we have less in the Bible about the resurrection of the wicked than we do about the righteous. Paul implies judgment in 1 Corinthians 15, for example, but he does not talk about the resurrection of the wicked, although a number of passages in the Bible do. Thus the main things the Bible says about hell are not concerning the intermediate state but the final state.

At least one passage, Luke 16, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, talks about the intermediate state of hell. Depending upon how one translates a verse in 2 Peter 2, there may be one more passage on the topic. Usually references to hell, however, are about the final and not the intermediate state. Hell follows the second coming. In Matthew 25:31 it says the Son of Man will come in His glory, sit on His throne, and will divide the sheep from the goats. He tells the goats, "Depart from me you wicked, into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Thus hell follows the resurrection. That makes sense. People have to be raised both in order to enter the new earth and in order to be thrown into a lake of fire. It therefore also follows the last judgment. That makes sense since God is just and will manifest His justice.

The master of hell is not Satan, but is God Himself. Satan will have no rule in hell. He neither does have nor will have lordship in hell. God is the Lord of the heavens, the earth, hell, and anywhere else we can think of. He is the master of hell. The devil receives the worst punishment in hell. There are degrees of punishment, and woe unto him according to Revelation 20:10.

To define hell as separation from God is not wrong, according to 2 Thessalonians 1, but it is incomplete. Certainly if God is everywhere present, then there is a sense He is present in hell. As Revelation 14:10 says, the wicked will suffer eternal torment in the presence of the angels and in the presence of the Lamb. "Lamb" is a symbol for Christ in Revelation every time except one, and that one is very obviously not a symbol of Christ.

The 2 Peter passage that is potentially about the intermediate state of the wicked is 2 Peter 2:9. It depends upon how one translates a participle to determine the reference. The one Revelation passage where "lamb" does not speak of Christ is Revelation 13:11. It says, "I saw another beast coming out of the earth. He had two horns like a lamb but he spoke like a dragon." That is obviously not Christ. Everywhere else, "lamb" is a reference to Christ. Revelation 14:10 says that the idolater from the last days will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. Is Christ present in hell in the same way that He is present in heaven? No, for He will manifest His glory, His grace, and His love in heaven, and He will have fellowship with the people of God in the new earth. In hell He will manifest His holiness, justice, power, and wrath. There will be no fellowship. Rather, the wicked will experience what Revelation calls "the wrath of the Lamb," which is an ironic expression indeed.

The New Testament paints at least five pictures that supply descriptions of hell. Darkness and separation speaks of being cut off from the fellowship of God. Matthew 22 is another text that uses a banquet scene to speak of blessing and judgment in terms of a wedding banquet. Some are put out of the banquet and thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, which means to be cut off

from the joy and love of God's fellowship. It means the opposite of what the feast connotes. The feast speaks of enjoying the presence of God and of the people of God. Jesus will sit with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the saints. He said it is going to be a big table. The picture is one of warmth, fellowship, and communion. It speaks of all the blessings of a festive holiday feast with family and friends. Being put out of it is not a good thing. That would mean being disowned by one's maker and separated from His fellowship forever.

Contrary to the annihilationist claims, fire imagery does not speak of consumption. Sometimes fires indicate consumption in the Bible. But the question is what does fire speak of in the hell passages in the Bible? It speaks of pain torment, as passage after passage bears witness. Matthew 25:41 says, "Depart, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." A few verses later Jesus says, "...these will go away to eternal punishment." Revelation 20:10 tells what the fire into which the devil and his angels will be cast is like. They will suffer forever, every night and day forever and ever. They will be tormented. Fire most frequently speaks of torment and of the suffering of pain in these different texts. Luke 16 is referring to the intermediate state, but still the imagery holds true. The wicked rich man is in torment in those flames. The Bible speaks of the place of torment again and again.

How can some good men say otherwise? They want hell to be annihilation rather than eternal torment. Thus their interpretation is an example of wish fulfillment. They can make certain verses fit. Some of the passages that speak of perishing and destruction could fit that view. But annihilation does not work once you take all the data into account, which is what you have to do both in science and in theology, in order to make a proper model. You must take all the data into account. You cannot make your experiment work out in science by excluding some of the data. And it is the same way in theology. You cannot pick and choose some passages and take a partial sample. You must make sense of what all of the passages say about any given topic. Theology is more than a scientific process, but it ought not to be less than scientific.

Hell is weeping and the gnashing of teeth. It is crying and the grinding of teeth. I am struck by the fact that this is used in conjunction with fire imagery, with darkness imagery, and with the terrible image of human beings being cut in pieces. None of this is literal. Nobody says people are going to be cut in half. But the imagery is horrendous. It all speaks of unimaginable suffering of pain at the hands of Almighty God. And the worst of it is that it lasts forever.

Francis Schaeffer's ministry of teaching at L'Abri was almost always in a context of unsaved people being present there. When he was asked one time about what the Bible says about hell, he did not give a verbal answer immediately. Rather, he just wept for some minutes and then he gave an answer, turning to a few Scripture passages. We do not turn that kind of emotion off and on. He was not playing. He was feeling the truth of the matter in the depths of his being. Sometimes we coldly say some of these things about hell. If we do, we are certainly missing the purpose of the teaching of hell. It is enough to move one to tears. It ought to move us to tears in our prayers and in our concern for lost ones.

Hell is also punishment. In Matthew 25:46 it says the goats will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. Other places, too, speak of it as punishment. It is death and destruction. Matthew 10:28 tells us not to fear those who can destroy the body, but rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. That is not referring to the devil as some have said. It is God who can destroy soul and body in hell. Does this perhaps fit with annihilationism? Yes. Does it teach annihilationism? No. It cannot teach that if we take into account all the Bible has to say about hell. What does it mean to destroy the soul and the body in hell? It means to ruin eternally. It is to waste all that is meaningful in a human life and existence.

The grinding of teeth speaks of people gnashing their teeth in pain. We say that because of the connection of the two ideas, weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is perhaps a reference to funeral images. I saw some funerals from the Near East and the widows and other bereaved people were wailing. If you have seen people trying to cope with excruciating pain, you know they grind their teeth. I think that is the image's connection to hell. It indicates trying to cope with that which cannot be coped with. It speaks of human beings in horrible suffering and their response to it. It is only an image, but remember, these will be resurrected whole human beings capable of suffering physical and spiritual pain forever.

Sometimes it is asked how we reconcile the eternity of hell with the fact that Christ took our punishment in a finite period of time. It is a great question. Of the four major books written from the annihilationist perspective, three teach that Christ was annihilated in His death. The fourth one implies He was annihilated. What these people argue is that Christ suffered the pains of hell. He is thus an example of eternal punishment. They think they are defending the traditional view by saying that, emphasizing that He is not still on the cross. He is not suffering everlasting punishment on the cross. Therefore their view states Jesus was annihilated on the cross. Giving them the benefit of the doubt, they are not saying His divine nature was extinguished. They are saying His human nature ceased to exist. Such teaching borders on Christological heresy, however, because in the great Christological Council of Chalcedon in 451, the church fathers agreed that our Lord's incarnation was permanent and that His two natures are inseparable. The language they used was "without division, without separation," in referring to Christ's divine and human natures. If the annihilationist understanding of the work of Christ is true, then not only are His divine and human natures potentially separable, but they were separated, and His human nature ceased to exist. I am not simply drawing out logical conclusions of the annihilationist view and merely claiming that they would teach Jesus was annihilated. It is their own claim in the attempt to strengthen their case. One theologian clearly says Jesus was totally destroyed on the cross. Again, giving him the benefit of the doubt, he does not mean Jesus' deity was destroyed, but rather His human nature.

If their view is true, then Chalcedon was wrong, and the human and divine natures of Christ can come apart. If they are right, His humanity ceased to exist for a time. Furthermore, unless they are prepared to deny that He is God and man now, then according to their view His resurrection must have actually been another incarnation. You may sense not that this argument does not work. You might think they should not use that as one of their arguments. But is Jesus still on the cross? No. Well did He suffer eternal conscious punishment? No, He did not do so literally. But Christians have held from the beginning that Jesus suffered a substitutionary death. He suffered the equivalent of hell. So how can we come to a reasonable understanding?

My understanding is that in three hours on the cross, the infinite/finite God-man suffered as our substitute. He endured the equivalent of eternal conscious punishment. In that way God substituted the work of His infinite-finite Son for our debt. Jesus is infinite in His divine nature and finite in His human nature. What I am trying to say is that an infinite person can suffer an eternal punishment in a finite period of time. That is apparently the case since Jesus said, "it is finished," and "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." But there is no annihilation there. Death is the same for Jesus as it is for every other human being, except He is the God-man. Death is the abnormal separation of soul and body. His body remained on the cross. His human nature inseparably joined to His divine nature immediately went into God's presence when He died. He said to the dying thief, "Today I will be with you in paradise." The dying thief was not there in his body after he died and neither was Jesus.

Jesus is not on the cross still. If he were, he could not save anybody. It was the Father's will for the Son to die as our substitute, as our vicar. He died as a vicarious atonement. Because He is a divine person, He was qualified in three hours to make atonement for everyone who would believe in Him, for His people. He did so and He suffered the pains of hell, as is evident by His asking that the cup of God's wrath be removed. But it was not the Father's will for it to be removed. Jesus drank it to the bottom as is evident by His cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Thus He suffered the wrath of God. He drank the cup. He suffered separation from the Father's love. He was abandoned by the Father.

Let me briefly talk about the new earth. We already talked about eternal punishment in the eternal state. There is a lake of fire in Revelation 21 and 22. That relates to one of my arguments against universalism and annihilationism. If either of those views is true, that everybody is saved or that the wicked are exterminated, then we need a Revelation 23. If the last two chapters of the Bible tell us about the end, and it sure seems that they do, we do not read about the wicked ceasing to exist. Revelation 21:8 speaks of a lake of fire and people in it. Revelation 22:15 speaks of people being outside the city. So apparently they still exist. If universalism is true, then Revelation 21 and 22 are misleading, because they do not have everybody saved in the new earth. Likewise if the annihilationist view is true, then we need a Revelation 23 telling us that. But we do not. Thus those two views are not true. And it is not true that for God to be victorious, evil must be absolutely annihilated from His universe. That is not the case according to God's Word. Evil only needs to be banished from the new heavens and new earth and condemned in a lake of fire.

We have some passages in both Testaments of the Bible that speak of the new earth. Isaiah 65 and 66 speak of a new heavens and a new earth. Romans 8 speaks of the removal of the curse and the creation itself being redeemed. We are told in 2 Peter 3 of the destruction of the present earth and the renovation of a new heaven and earth. And John says in Revelation 21:1 that he "saw a new heaven and a new earth."

Here is the issue: is the present earth renewed, and thus is continuity emphasized between present earth and new earth? Or is the present earth totally destroyed in order to exist no more, and is the new earth to be understood as numerically and totally new and different? There has been a debate in the Reformed tradition about those questions. J. Oliver Buswell taught the destruction and recreation theme, while Anthony Hoekema taught the renewal theme. It is hard to be absolutely dogmatic, but I would agree with Hoekema and with my colleague David Jones that Romans 8:20-21 teaches that the present creation will be set free from corruption. There is discontinuity. But there seems to be an underlying continuity. I would also suggest an analogy between our resurrection bodies and the new earth. Even as there is both continuity and discontinuity between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies, so there will be continuity and discontinuity between the present earth and the new earth. Those would be my reasons for agreeing with Hoekema. If my view is true, then we can be confident in the whole notion of redeeming culture, which has played a big part in the Reformed tradition, which I celebrate. I think it is a tremendous notion.