

Voices: What's the best understanding of hell?

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The doctrine of hell recently has become a hot topic within evangelicalism. The publication of Rob Bell's book *Love Wins* in 2011 ignited a storm of controversy and served as a sort of watershed moment for debates occurring over the past few decades.

Although "universalism" has been the primary focus of debate in recent years, another non-traditional view of hell also has enjoyed increasing popularity: annihilationism.

What is annihilationism? Why has it suddenly become relatively popular, even within evangelicalism? Is it correct, mistaken or heretical? And why does it matter?

Defining annihilationism

The traditional doctrine of hell held by most Christians throughout the ages claims all who reject Christ ultimately will suffer eternal conscious torment. That is, people in hell continue to exist for all eternity, they continue to be conscious for all eternity, and during this time, they suffer horrific pain as punishment for their sins.

Annihilationism, by contrast, claims the wicked who reject Christ ultimately are destroyed, ceasing to exist. While there is a time of conscious torment in hell, perhaps a very long time, the eventual result of this torment is complete destruction.

In this way, annihilationism is more like the traditional doctrine of hell than

it is like any form of universalism. Those who reject Christ in this life will suffer God's punishment in hell and forever will be separated from him with no chance of entering eternal life.

Why believe annihilationism?

There are many reasons some embrace this doctrine of hell instead of more traditional views. One obvious appeal of annihilationism is it simply is less horrifying than the traditional perspective. Annihilationism removes what many find to be the most gruesome and extreme aspect of the traditional view: eternal conscious torment.

However, it would be a serious mistake to assume annihilationists only embrace their view of hell for emotional reasons. There are three primary [biblical arguments](#) annihilationists marshal in favor of their view.

First, much of the New Testament language about the final judgment of the wicked centers on destruction (Matthew 7:13; Romans 9:22; etc.). Frequently, when the New Testament talks about the fate of unbelievers, the text says they will be destroyed or uses imagery that suggests destruction, not perpetual conscious pain (e.g., Matthew 3:12).

Second, the Bible teaches that humans are not inherently immortal. We do not automatically live forever. Many Christians have believed in an "immortal soul" that lives forever in heaven or hell, but the idea of an intrinsically immortal soul is [hard to sustain](#) from Scripture. God certainly would be capable of killing or destroying such souls, regardless.

Third, the Greek word for "eternal" (*aionios*) doesn't necessarily mean "perpetual duration." It also can mean something more like "permanent" or "of the age to come." So, even when the Bible says the phrase "eternal punishment," it could mean simply punishment that is permanent or punishment characteristic of the age to come.

Challenges to annihilationism

We've seen annihilationism cannot be dismissed simply as wishful thinking prompted by sentimentality or a weak stomach. There are cogent biblical arguments in its favor, but these arguments [are not airtight](#).

First, the language of destruction, including how it often is used in the Bible, doesn't necessarily require non-existence. It sometimes means something more like "ruin" or "irreparably damaged and non-functional" (Matthew 9:17). So, we could speak of those suffering eternally in hell as being "destroyed" while still technically existing.

Second, even if there is no such thing as an "immortal soul," this does not render the traditional doctrine of hell impossible. There are biblical references to the "resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29), which could mean God grants a form of "immortality" to those suffering eternally in hell.

Third, there are cases where *aionios* does, in fact, mean something like perpetual duration. For example, Matthew 25:46 uses this word to establish an important parallel: "These will go away into eternal (*aionios*) punishment, but the righteous into eternal (*aionios*) life." This parallel would suggest the punishment is "everlasting" in the same way the life is.

Fourth, there are some biblical references to the fate of unbelievers being eternal conscious torment (Revelation 14:9-11, for example). Much of New Testament language may be "destruction," but the language of eternal conscious torment is there, too.

Why does it matter?

I am persuaded the traditional view of hell is the best reading of Scripture. I think the fact "destruction" doesn't have to mean "complete non-

existence” undermines annihilationism’s strongest biblical argument and helps us harmonize the New Testament’s language of both destruction and eternal conscious torment.

I would say annihilationism is an error and would stop short of calling it an outright heresy. The Bible never presents this precise issue as an essential part of the gospel, and embracing annihilationism is very different than denying final judgment or hell altogether.

That being said, this still is an extremely important issue. I can think of few doctrinal questions more serious and somber than the fate of those who reject Christ. The doctrine of hell also is tied deeply into the doctrine of God’s justice and righteousness. We should never discuss hell lightly, nor should we act as though disagreement on the subject is insignificant.

I have no doubt that evangelical annihilationists genuinely are trying to be faithful to Scripture, and I commend that. But I believe that faithfulness is expressed best through adherence to the traditional view of hell, not alternative perspectives.

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