

**Q. Will the wicked really suffer eternal punishment in hell? It seems to me that the Bible may teach that they are merely executed.**

A. The belief that the wicked will be executed after the resurrection is called annihilationism. Seventh-day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the followers of Herbert W. Armstrong all believe this doctrine. A number of other theologians in more mainstream churches have also promoted annihilationism, or at least believed it to be a legitimate possibility based on their understanding of Scripture. Perhaps the most well known of these was the Anglican evangelical, John Stott. I believed a form of this teaching for many years when I was in the Worldwide Church of God. I no longer believe it to be the correct understanding, and I will try to briefly explain why.

We commonly associate the word death with the cessation of physical life and/or with oblivion. But the Bible defines death in other ways, as well. The Scriptures teach us that God gave Adam a command and warned of the punishment for breaking the command: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16–17). If our first parents had remained in their state of innocence, they would not have died. But they did sin, and they died "in the day" they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. But, while the sentence for physical death occurred "in the day" they sinned, did they also experience death that day?

In Matthew 8:22, Jesus calls people who are physically alive "dead." Paul also writes:

And you hath he quickened [made alive], who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh

Copyright © 2012 wordofhisgrace.org

Permission is granted to reproduce this article only if reproduced in full with no alterations and keeping the copyright statement and this permission statement intact.

hellqa.pdf

in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation [conduct] in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;).

Ephesians 2:1-5

So we see that, because of their sin, Adam and Eve spiritually died on the day they disobeyed. And this spiritual death is passed on to all of their descendents. Thus, we see that a biblical definition of death is spiritual death, a state we can be in even while we live our physical lives.

Now, if people can be spiritually dead, even while walking around on the earth right now, they can be dead while being in an eternal state of existence after the judgment. That state of death is eternal death. It is not an unconscious oblivion.

Now notice Revelation 14:9-11: "And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name." This certainly sounds like eternal punishment and agrees with Matthew 25:46: "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal." The words "everlasting" and "eternal" are from the same Greek word. As the righteous have eternal life, so the wicked have eternal punishment. Some try to say that being executed is an eternal punishment. But it is not. It is a one-time punishment followed by oblivion. That is not eternal punishment.

In 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, we read that those who have been disobedient to the Gospel will "be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." Again, it is claimed that this everlasting destruction is annihilation. But the word for "destruction" here is also used in 1 Corinthians 5:5, where Paul ordered the church to "deliver such an one

unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." Certainly, Paul did not mean that this man should be executed. In 2 Corinthians 2:7, we read that this man came to sorrow and Paul said the church was to forgive him. So, Paul meant that the man was to undergo some sort of conscious punishment, which he called the destruction of the flesh. Thus, we should see the "everlasting destruction" in 2 Thessalonians 1:9 as a conscious punishment.

Some think that Matthew 10:28 teaches the annihilation of soul and body in hell. This verse says, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." The Greek word for "kill" used twice in this verse is *apokteinō* (which literally means to kill off) and the word for "destroy" here is related to "destruction" in the verses I have mentioned in the previous paragraph. It is *apollumi*. It is also translated "lost" in Matthew 15:24 of the "lost sheep of the house of Israel"; in Luke 15:4-6 of the lost sheep; in Luke 15:8-9 of the lost coin; and in Luke 15:24 and 32 of the lost son. In all of these cases, the thing lost continues to exist and living things continue to live (even though the prodigal son is figuratively said to have been dead). Thus, we should see that Jesus is using one word for both kill the body and kill the soul, but He uses another word for destroying the soul and body in hell. If He intended us to understand this as annihilating the soul and body in hell, why not use *apokteinō*? Instead, He uses a word that commonly means "lost." In other words, it is likely Jesus is here saying, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to lose [or "make lost"] both soul and body in hell."

A valuable lesson here is that it is important to consider how the Bible defines concepts (such as death) rather than impose our contemporary, popular understanding. And it is also essential to look into the meaning and use of the Greek words behind the English translations.

**Peter Ditzel**