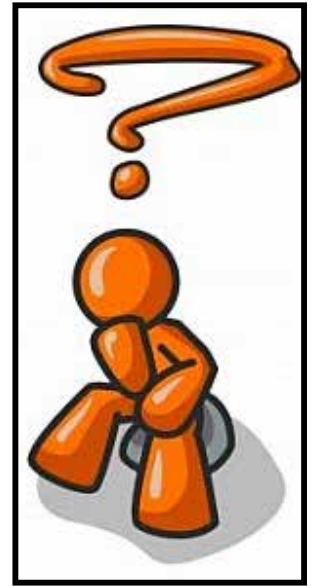


What About ... Annihilationism?

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Annihilationism is the belief that after the final judgment, the human soul (or spirit or consciousness) of unbelievers will be totally extinguished, in the sense of being destroyed so as to no longer exist. Some believe the soul ceases to exist immediately after death, some say it's immediately after judgment, others say it's after a time of suffering that justly pays for their sin. Forms of annihilationism have appeared throughout Christian history. It is taught by Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. But it was more recently brought into mainstream Christianity by British Anglican theologian John Stott (1921-2011). Stott wrote,

"...the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment" [John Stott and David L. Edwards, "A Liberal-Evangelical Dialogue," pages 319-20].



1. Annihilationists say the Hebrew and Greek words for *forever* do not always mean forever.
 - **Psalm 104:5** *He established the earth upon its foundations, so that it will not totter forever and ever.* [But the earth will eventually be destroyed/annihilated (2 Peter 3:12; Revelation 21:1).]
 - **Jeremiah 7:7** *then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.* [But here, *forever* only lasts 1000 years after the Second Coming (Revelation 20).]
 - **Revelation 19:3** *Her smoke rises up forever and ever.* [But this is the smoke of the tribulation destruction. It is unlikely it will last throughout eternity.]

However, it's true that the Greek and Hebrew words for *forever* do not always have an eternal meaning. But they usually do have an eternal meaning, most of the time. *Forever* usually means eternally.

- **Psalm 33:11** *The counsel of the LORD stands forever.*
- **Psalm 45:6** *Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.*

- **1 Peter 1:25** *But the word of the Lord endures forever* (from Isaiah 40:8).
 - **Matthew 25:46** *These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.*
2. Annihilationists say hell is called *the second death*. Just as the first death means bodily life and consciousness end completely, at the second death, consciousness and the soul will end completely.
 - **Revelation 20:14** *Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.*

However, the phrase *second death* is used four times in Revelation (2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:18) to refer to *the lake of fire, the lake that burns with fire and brimstone*. Nowhere in the Bible is bodily death connected to an end of human existence or consciousness. Death is the separation of the soul from the body (Genesis 35:18; James 2:26), not the end of consciousness. Every glimpse we get into the afterlife has people alive and conscious of their surroundings (1 Samuel 28:15; Luke 16:23; Matthew 17:3; 1 Peter 3:18-20; Revelation 6:9-11; 20:4).

3. Annihilationists say Peter and Paul call the punishment of unbelievers *destruction*. Something that is destroyed goes out of existence and is not conscious.
- **2 Thessalonians 1:9** *These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.*
 - **2 Peter 3:7** *But by His word the present heavens and earth are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.*

However, the New Testament concepts of destruction, Paul's *eternal destruction*, Peter's *day of judgment and destruction*, refer to the condemnation of unbelievers, not to their postmortem condition. Jesus described the condition of the unbeliever as *cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth* (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) and those who *go into hell, into the unquenchable fire* (Mark 9:43). These warnings would hardly be relevant if destruction was annihilation. The same is said of Satan (Revelation 20:10). Would they say Satan is annihilated?

4. Annihilationists say the Psalmist describes the Lord's enemies as vanishing like smoke, implying nothingness.
- **Psalms 37:20** *But the wicked will perish; and the enemies of the LORD will be like the glory of the pastures, they vanish—like smoke they vanish away* (also in Psalm 68:2; 112:10).

However, the Old Testament statements of the Lord's enemies vanishing like smoke, as in Psalm 37, are about their being eliminated from the land. *Those blessed by Him will inherit the land of Israel* (verses 9, 22, 29) and *those cursed by Him will be cut off from the land of Israel* (verses 22, 28, 34, 38). This is about living in the land of Israel, not their postmortem condition.

5. Annihilationists say God is merciful (Exodus 20:6 *showing lovingkindness*), and it is not merciful to allow people to suffer forever.

However, the concept that it is merciful to terminate punishment does not understand the Biblical concept of mercy. Mercy is unmerited compassion. It is for those who repent, not something we deserve after a certain amount of punishment. An argument that asked, "Would God release people from hell if, after a time, they repented?" might have some merit. But that is not the annihilationist argument. One might also ask, "What if those in hell continue to blaspheme, rebel, and not repent? Wouldn't their ongoing sin require ongoing judgment from a holy God?" Sin is a godless perspective, not just an isolated act. The evidence from those suffering judgment from the tribulation period is that they continued in, if not increased, their sin when under judgment. Four times Revelation says, *they did not repent so as to give Him glory... And they blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pain and their sores; and they did not repent of their deeds* (Revelation 16:9, 11, also 9:20-21).

6. Annihilationists say God is just (Genesis 18:25 – *Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?*). Eternal punishment is not justice for a 70-to-80-year life of sin.

However, the idea that a just God would not eternally punish sin assumes we can judge the judgment of God. The whole motivation for annihilationism seems to be to defend a humanist perspective. But from the perspective of a holy God, His justice requires His wrath. Why would God send Jesus to pay for our sin (2 Corinthians 5:21), thus satisfying the wrath of God, if the wrath of God could be satisfied by simply annihilating some people and not annihilating others?

7. Annihilationists claim that saints could not be happy in heaven, knowing their unbelieving friends were suffering eternally in hell.

However, as to the idea that the saints would not be happy in heaven if their unbelieving friends were suffering in hell, God said, *For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former things will not be remembered or come to mind* (Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:4-5).