

---

## THOUGHTS ON ANNIHILATIONISM

---

Thank you for sending me the talk by Boswell (not his real name). With my heart I agree with him that it is strange for a merciful God to confine unrepentant sinners permanently in hellfire. His opinion, and that of some others, is that after a period of time in the fires of hell they will be utterly destroyed, that is, literally go out of existence – annihilated. But the Scriptural evidence, I believe, shows otherwise.

**1** Boswell appeals to the fact that God is love and therefore cannot do anything even His creatures consider cruel. This ignores how the Lord has revealed Himself in the pages of the Bible. For instance, He told Moses that He is compassionate, gracious and forgiving (Exodus 34:6, 7) yet will not leave the guilty unpunished. This is in character with His holiness and sense of divine justice. It is ‘His strange work’ to punish the obstinately unrepentant (Isaiah 28:21). The New Testament speaks of those who ‘always heap up their sins to the limit’ so that ‘the wrath of God has come upon them at last.’ (1 Thessalonians 2:16)

**2** It is the rejection of the holy God by the emboldened wicked refusing to repent that brings such punishment upon themselves. There is nothing contradictory about this consequence. God respects the free will He has given to man to obey or disobey His laws. His Son, our Lord Jesus, exercised His free will in taking our place and for our sins went to the Cross. Nothing else testifies more of divine grace and justice. Not just His mercy but His holiness. Not just forgiveness but retribution shown so clearly by the Cross. Is God patient with willful sinners? Yes! Does He not say that He “is not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone should come to repentance”? (2 Peter 3:9) Consider Jezebel who over a long period led Christians in the church of Thyatira badly astray. Even she received mercy that should have led to her repentance but she willfully refused and had to face the consequences (Rev 2:20-23). It is no small thing to turn down God's gracious offer of salvation. God knows very well the eventual dreadful fate of the stubborn and willful. Therefore no one is denied mercy who turn from wicked ways, not even a Jezebel. The fires of hell are not something that is unannounced as if it is meant to take anyone by surprise. Mankind has been duly warned not to have a light view of sin. All men, religious or otherwise, have this notion of retribution after death and consequently fear it. Hence the search for immortality by any means in

order to escape death. It is a short step from denying the eternal nature of hellfire to denying the existence of hell itself.

**3** There are points of exegesis by Boswell which I find questionable. For instance he asks whether 'hell' always refers to a place of punishment. Apart from Tartarus, which has a single mention in 2 Peter 2:4, he lists Gehenna, Hades and Sheol. He considers that these refer to 'hell'. Not true. Gehenna is that deep valley south of Jerusalem where the city's refuse and dead bodies were burnt. It was also notorious as the place where idolatrous practices were carried out, such as the terrible crime of infant sacrifices in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh. Quite appropriately Jesus himself used the term 'Gehenna' as the place of final punishment for the unrepentant wicked. (Matthew 5:22, 10:28, 18:9) Hades and Sheol are dark, gloomy, not fiery, places. These two locations stand for the grave - the fate of all living where they wait for the Judgment Day. The exception are those who have been forgiven of their sins through faith in Jesus. They go to be with the Lord when they die. (2 Corinthians 5:8) Gehenna with Hades and Sheol are not interchangeable words.

**4** He asked whether the fires of Gehenna in Jerusalem are still burning today. Obviously they are not - simply because Gehenna is no longer in use. From this he draws the unwarranted conclusion that neither will the fires of hell (Gehenna) of the afterlife be eternal. They will burn out like any fire. His premise is that just as fires today don't last forever, neither will hellfire. Just as fire today reduces matter to ash the wicked will be burnt to ashes and the righteous will literally tread on them! He believes that this will happen according to Malachi 4:3. He even lights a match to illustrate the point of a temporary flame and the ash produced. Throughout his talk he suggests that the physical matches spiritual realities, often twisting Scripture in the process.

**5** Some people have found support for the total annihilation of the wicked after they have spent some unspecified period in hell, the length depending on the severity of their judgment. He says that even Satan himself will be annihilated after a much longer period of time because he is the most deceitful and wicked of all creatures. Scripture, however, says: "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night **forever and ever.**" (Revelation 20:10)

6 There are some who find the possibility of annihilation in the following verses: "... Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These will be punished with **everlasting destruction** from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when he comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed." (2 Thessalonians 1:7 – 10) Admittedly, the Greek word 'olethros' (**destruction**) found in this verse has a range of meanings. Basically it means ruin or death. Its meaning in this verse is provided by the context which centers on one being either in the presence of the Lord or away from Him. This terrible loss is eternal separation from Him and does not imply annihilation.

7 Many other 'explanations' are offered for this theological position. He argues, for instance, that the English words 'eternal', 'forever' or 'everlasting' translating the Greek 'aeon' (plural 'eons') means an indefinite period of time. That is its colloquial use. For instance, one speaks of not having seen a friend for 'eons of time.' Its technical use is determined by the context. He concludes, nevertheless, that hellfire will not last forever, as Scripture says hellfire will last for 'eons'. On this Scripture is clear: "They will be punished with **everlasting destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of His power on the day He comes to be glorified in His holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed." (2 Thessalonians 1:9, 10)

### Concluding remarks

Consider the words of the Lord Jesus in Mark 9:43 in regard to the nature and therefore the time element of hellfire. "And if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell (Gehenna), into the **unquenchable fire.**" And again, in Matthew 25:46. "And these will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into **eternal life.**" The **same Greek word** for both cases is translated as '**eternal**'. If life eternal is truly eternal then so must also be eternal punishment. This same Greek word is translated '**everlasting** life' in John 3:16.

That leaves us with the problem of appropriate punishment. The punishment should fit the crime, we all agree. Among those who go to hell does God have a

single uniform punishment for everyone regardless of what sins they have committed? My thoughts on this dismal and difficult problem are:  
Firstly, we have no idea of the real nature of hell apart from what is revealed. "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we might follow all the words of this law." (Deuteronomy 29:29) Secondly, I think we must keep in mind God's omniscient and perfect insight and understanding of human motives and intent. We can trust Him to be fair in His judgments and not try to alter their consequences. This is boldly proclaimed in both Old and New Testaments. "For I proclaim the name of the LORD; ascribe greatness to our God! The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He." (Deuteronomy 32:3, 4) "And I heard the altar respond: 'Yes, Lord God Almighty, true and just are your judgments,' " (Revelation 1:7)

Based on these two considerations, I am personally willing to believe what the Bible teaches about the loving and righteous nature of our God as well as the existence of the eternal fiery place the Bible calls 'hell'.

Furthermore:

"The Lord is not slow about keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

"Say to them, As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel!?" (Ezekiel 33:11)

"This is love; not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins." (1 John 4:10)

What more can a loving and merciful God do to keep us out of that dreadful place?

Swee Eng

