

CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

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Hughes' views are included here as providing an articulate and scholarly defence of conditional immortality by an evangelical student. The following articles reflect the different perspectives adopted by evangelicals on this subject. It is to be hoped that this issue of *Evangel* highlights the issues and gives some guidance as to possible resolution of the debate.

The Question

In St. Jude's brief letter the cities of the plain are said to 'serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire' (Jude 7). Even though this was not the final judgment, the obliterating fire is described as *eternal* fire. The reason for this, no doubt, is that it was *divine* fire, the fire of judgment sent by the Lord; for obviously in the case of these cities the fire was not eternally endured by their inhabitants. It was fire that struck and left devastation from which no restoration could follow. This consideration may reasonably raise the question whether the eternal and unquenchable fire of the final judgment (Mt. 8:18; Mk. 9:44) will be eternally endured by those who are consigned to it. Is this what is meant by 'everlasting punishment' (Mt. 25:46) and by the assertion regarding those who suffer it that 'smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever' (Rev. 14:11)? Such terminology can certainly bear the inference that the torment of the damned in hell will be endlessly continued; and this inference has been thought, to provide an appropriate balance for the doctrine of the everlasting life which, as is universally agreed, the redeemed are to enjoy without end or term. It is a balance on which, for example, Augustine insisted. Referring to Matthew 25:41, he exclaimed: 'What a fond fancy it is to suppose that eternal punishment means long continued punishment, while eternal life means life without end!' Both destinies, he maintained, 'are correlative—on the one hand punishment eternal, on the other hand life eternal'; consequently, to say that 'life eternal shall be endless, punishment eternal shall come to an end, is the height of absurdity.'¹

The logic of this interpretation is sound enough so long as it is *punishment* that is spoken of as being endless. But, as we have seen, the ultimate contrast (as was also the original) is between everlasting *life* and everlasting *death*, and this clearly shows that it is not simply synonyms but also antonyms with which

we have to reckon. There is no more radical antithesis than that between life and death, for life is the absence of death and death is the absence of life. Confronted with this antithesis, the position of Augustine cannot avoid involvement in the use of contradictory concepts, for the notion of death that is everlastingly endured requires the postulation that the damned be kept endlessly alive to endure it. Thus Augustine was forced to argue that for those in hell 'death will not be abolished, but will be eternal,' and that 'the living bodies of men hereafter will be such as to endure everlasting pain and fire without ever dying',² and he depicted the wicked as everlastingly doomed to 'drag out a miserable existence in eternal death without the power of dying.' It would be hard to imagine a concept more confusing than that of death which means existing endlessly without the power of dying. This, however, is the corner into which Augustine (in company with many others) argued himself.

By way of further illustration we will turn to a famous sermon preached by another notable Christian divine of a more recent period, Jonathan Edwards, who described the endlessness of God's wrath in the following terms:

It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity. There will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery. When you look forward, you shall see a long forever, a boundless duration before you, . . . and you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all. You will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance; and then when you have so done, when so many ages have actually been spent by you in this manner, you will know that all is but a point to what remains. So that your punishment will indeed be infinite.⁴

It is only right to point out that, while they firmly believed in the endless torments of hell, Augustine was intent on refuting the notion that future punishment would lead at last to universal restoration (universalism), which was connected with the philosophy of the Platonists and the thought of Origen, and that the purpose of Edwards in this sermon was compassionately to urge his hearers to flee from the wrath to come and all its terrors by taking refuge in the redeeming grace of the gospel.⁵

Reinterpreting Death

The difficulty (if such it is) of equating everlasting death with everlasting existence was compounded in the case of Augustine by reason of the fact that he took the unquenchable flames of eternal fire to be meant in a literal sense. In facing the question how it would be possible for resurrected persons of body and soul to be kept from being consumed by these flames he invoked the support of scientific fact, as he thought it to be, that certain lower creatures, and in particular the salamander, 'can live in the fire, in burning without being consumed, in pain without dying.' It was decidedly shaky support, however, because the naturalists known to him of his own and earlier periods reported this competence of the salamander with skepticism as a traditional or legendary notion. But in any case the supposed ability of the salamander was irrelevant, because it is not a capacity shared by human beings with salamanders, and Augustine had perforce to resort to the hypothesis that in the flames of hell the wicked would in this respect become salamander-like: 'Although it is true,' he wrote, 'that in this world there is no flesh which can suffer pain and yet cannot die, yet in the world to come there will be flesh such as there is not now, as there will also be death such as there is not now.'⁶

Augustine, in short, found it necessary to introduce a change in the meaning of *death* if his belief in the endlessness of the torments of hellfire was to be sustained; and this is a necessity for all who understand eternal destruction in this way, whether or not they consider the flames of hell to be intended in a literal sense. Such persons can indeed claim to be in good company; but they should be aware that their interpretation is open to serious questioning. Apart from the fact that it involves a drastic change in the meaning of death so that, in this eschatological perspective, it signifies being kept alive to suffer punishment without the power of dying, some other considerations must be taken into account.

Other Considerations

First of all, because *life* and *death* are radically antithetical to each other, the qualifying adjective *eternal* or *everlasting* needs to be understood in a manner appropriate to each respectively. Everlasting life is existence that continues without end, and everlasting death is destruction without end, that is, destruction without recall, the destruction of obliteration. Both life and death hereafter will be everlasting in the sense that both will be *irreversible*: from that life

there can be no relapse into death, and from that death there can be no return to life. The awful negation and the absolute finality of the second death are unmistakably conveyed by its description as 'the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord' (2 Thess. 1:9).

Secondly, immortality or deathlessness is not inherent in the constitution of man as a corporeal-spiritual creature, though, formed in the image of God, the potential was there. That potential, which was forfeited through sin, has been restored and actualized by Christ, the incarnate Son, who has 'abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel' (2 Tim. 1:10). Since inherent immortality is uniquely the possession and prerogative of God (1 Tim. 6:16), it will be by virtue of his grace and power that when Christ is manifested in glory our mortality, if we are then alive, will be superinvested with immortality and our corruption, if we are then in the grave, will be clothed with incorruption, so that death will at last be swallowed up in victory (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 2 Cor. 5:1-5). And thus at last we shall become truly and fully human as the destiny for which we were created becomes an everlasting reality in him who is the True Image and the True Life. At the same time those who have persisted in ungodliness will discover for themselves the dreadful truth of Christ's warning about fearing God, 'who can destroy both body and soul in hell' (Mt. 10:28).

Thirdly, the everlasting existence side by side, so to speak, of heaven and hell would seem to be incompatible with the purpose and effect of the redemption achieved by Christ's coming. Sin with its consequences of suffering and death is foreign to the design of God's creation. The renewal of creation demands the elimination of sin and suffering and death. Accordingly, we are assured that Christ 'has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26; 1 Jn. 3:5), that through his appearing death has been abolished (2 Tim. 1:10), and that in the new heaven and the new earth, that is, in the whole realm of the renewed order of creation, there will be no more weeping or suffering, 'and death shall be no more' (Rev. 21:4). The conception of the endlessness of the suffering of torment and of the endurance of 'living' death in hell stands in contradiction to this teaching. It leaves a part of creation which, unrenewed, everlastingly exists in alienation from the new heaven and the new earth. It means that suffering and death will never be totally abolished from the scene. The inescapable logic of this position was accepted, with shocking candor, by Augustine, who affirmed that 'after the resurrection, when the final, universal judgment has been completed, there will be two kingdoms, each with its own distinct boundaries, the one Christ's, the other the devil's, the one consisting of good, the other of bad.'¹⁴ To this it must be objected that with the restoration of all things in the new heaven and the new earth, which involves God's reconciliation to himself of *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven (Acts 3:21; Col. 1:20), there will be no place for a second kingdom of darkness and death. Where all is light there can be no darkness; for 'the night shall be no more' (Rev. 22:5). When Christ fills all in all and

God is everything to everyone (Eph. 1:23; 1 Cor. 15:28), how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fulness and by its very presence contradicts it? The establishment of God's everlasting kingdom of peace and righteousness will see the setting free of the whole created order from its bondage to decay as it participates in the glorious liberty of the children of God (Rom. 8:21).

Fourthly, the glorious appearing of Christ will herald the death of death. By his cross and resurrection Christ has already made the conquest of death, so that for the believer the fear and sting of death have been removed (Heb. 2:14f.; 1 Cor. 15:54-57), the passage from death to life is a present reality (Jn. 5:24), and the resurrection power of Jesus is already at work within him, no matter how severely he may be afflicted and incommoded outwardly (2 Cor. 4:11, 16). We do not see everything in subjection to the Son (Heb. 2:8); but nothing is more sure than that every hostile rule and authority and power will finally be destroyed, including death itself. Hence the assurance that 'the last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor. 15:24-26). Without the abolition of death the triumph of life and immortality cannot be complete (2 Tim. 1:10). This is the significance of *the second death*: it will be the abolition not only of sin and the devil and his followers but also of death itself as, in the final judgment, not only will Death and Hades give up their dead for condemnation but Death and Hades themselves will be thrown with them into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-15). Hence the clear promise that 'death shall be no more' (Rev. 21:4).

Getting off lightly?

Though held by many, it is a hollow contention that if the death sentence pronounced at the final judgment against the unregenerate meant their annihilation the wicked would be getting off lightly and would be encouraged to regard the consequence of their sin without fear. (It may be interposed that far more does the expectation of the never-ending torment of finite creatures raise the question of the purpose that might be served by such retribution.) There is altogether no room for doubting that, first, at the last judgment God will mete out condign punishment in accordance with the absolute holiness of his being, and, second, the Scriptures allow no place whatsoever to the wicked for complacency as they approach that dreadful day when they will stand before the tribunal of their righteous Creator. This ultimate Day of the Lord is depicted as a day of indescribable terror for the ungodly, who will then be confronted with the truth of God's being which they had unrighteously suppressed and experience the divine wrath which previously they had derided. They will then learn at first hand that 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:31). There is nothing light or laughable in the terrible scene witnessed by St. John in his apocalyptic vision: 'Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the

generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?' ' (Rev. 6:15-17).

The horror of everlasting destruction will be compounded, moreover, by the unbearable agony of *exclusion*. To be inexorably excluded from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his kingdom, to see but to be shut out from the transcendental joy and bliss of the saints as in light eternal they glorify their resplendent Redeemer, to whose likeness they are now fully and forever conformed, to be plunged into the abyss of irreversible destruction, will cause the unregenerate of mankind the bitterest anguish of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. In vain will they have pleaded, 'Lord, Lord, open to us!' (Mt. 25:11f.; cf. 7:21-23). Too late will they then wish they had lived and believed differently. The destiny they have fashioned for themselves will cast them without hope into the abyss of obliteration. Their lot, whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life, is the destruction of the second death. Thus God's creation will be purged of all falsity and defilement, and the ancient promise will be fulfilled that 'the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind' as the multitude of the redeemed are glad and rejoice forever in the perfection of the new heaven and the new earth (Is. 65:17f; Rev. 21:1-4).

Footnotes

1 Augustine, *The City of God* xxi.23.

2 *Ibid.* xxi.3, 5.

3 *Enchiridion* 111.

4 Jonathan Edwards, Sermon on 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,' in *Works*, Vol. II (London, 1840), p. 11. The sermon was preached on 8 July 1741.

5 Thus Edwards wrote: 'The gospel is to be preached as well as the law, and the law is to be preached only to make way for the gospel, and in order that it may be preached more effectually. The main work of ministers is to preach the gospel. . . . So that a minister would miss it very much if he should insist so much on the terrors of the law as to forget his Lord, and neglect to preach the gospel; but yet the law is very much to be insisted on, and the preaching of the gospel is like to be in vain without it. . . . Some talk of it as an unreasonable thing to fright persons to heaven; but I think it is a reasonable thing to fright persons away from hell. . . . Is it not a reasonable thing to fright a person out of a house on fire?' ('The Distinguishing Marks of a Work of the Spirit of God' i.9 [*Works*, Vol. II, p. 266]).

6 Augustine, *The City of God* xxi.2, 3, 9.

7 *Enchiridion* 111.

An Anglican clergyman, until his recent death. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes was a prolific writer. His previous books include two magisterial commentaries on 2 Corinthians and the Epistle to the Hebrews.

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