
ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

This statement is the report of the committee to study eternal punishment. The report was adopted by the Assemblies of God General Presbytery, August 17, 1976.

The position of the Assemblies of God concerning eternal punishment is set forth in its “Statement of Fundamental Truths” as follows:

Section 15. The Final Judgment. There will be a final judgment in which the wicked dead will be raised and judged according to their works. Whosoever is not found written in the Book of Life, together with the devil and his angels, the beast and the false prophet, will be consigned to everlasting punishment in “the fiery lake of burning sulfur: This is the second death” (Revelation 21:8; compare Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:43–48; Revelation 19:20; 20:11–15).

Here we note that the punishment is with the devil and his angels, that it is everlasting, and that it is in the lake of fire which is called the second death. This paper will attempt to give further definition and explanation to each of these points.

The Wicked Share Satan’s Doom

The Bible makes it clear that the lake of fire was not intended for people but for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). God’s purpose and desire for humanity has always been good. The first heaven and earth were created good (Genesis 1:31). The Law was given for the good of humankind (Deuteronomy 6:24). God does not will that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9). In fact, God works in all things for the ultimate good of those who love Him and respond to His call (Romans 8:28). Nevertheless, God will not allow Satan to spoil the new heaven and the new earth which are to come. God will shut him off in the lake of fire. Those who follow Satan must share Satan’s doom (John 16:8,11), for they have Satan, not God, as their father (John 8:44).

Those who share Satan’s punishment are further referred to as the “wicked” (Matthew 13:49,50). This is a general term for all who are actively evil and worthless. They include the cowardly (cowardly because of lack of faith), the unbelieving, the vile (the disgusting, detestable), murderers, sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts (those who use enchantments, harmful drugs), idolaters, and all liars (Revelation 21:8). (See also Matthew 8:12; 13:41,42; 22:13; 23:15; 25:30,33; Luke 13:27; Revelation 21:27; 22:15.) Paul sums it up by including all who do not know God with a personal knowledge of salvation plus all who do not keep on obeying the gospel (2 Thessalonians 1:8).

The Punishment of the Wicked Has No End

The first Bible reference given in the “Statement of Fundamental Truths”—Matthew 25:46—uses the phrase “everlasting [Greek, *aionion*] punishment.” Some have denied that this means eternal in the sense of absolutely unending. In the same verse, however, Jesus used the same word of life “eternal” (*aionion*) in a manner that is directly and exactly parallel. In other words, the punishment will be as eternal as the eternal life. This leaves no room for any later restoration of the wicked. In Matthew 25:41 the punishment is defined as “everlasting [Greek, *aionion*] fire.”

Jesus characterized the intermediate state of the wicked after death (hell, Hades) as one of fire (Luke 16:23,24), but this is to be distinguished from the eternal fire. Jesus’ words in Luke 16 show us that the wicked remain conscious and are aware of their state and of what they have missed. But the eternal fire is to be identified with what Jesus called Gehenna or literally “the gehenna of fire” (Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:8,9; 23:15; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5). This fire is not only to be eternal, but is also said to be of such a nature that it can never be quenched (Mark 9:43). This clearly indicates that there can be no possible end to the fire or the punishment. The punishment is as eternal as the fire. If the fire brought an annihilation of the wicked, there would be no reason for the fire being eternal.

Jesus also referred to the same fire as a “fiery furnace” (Matthew 13:42,50) where there will be terrible remorse shown by weeping and gnashing of teeth. But remorse is not repentance. The remorse of Judas did not save him from eternal loss as the “one doomed to destruction” (John 17:12; Acts 1:16–20). Jesus identified this weeping and gnashing of teeth as taking place in “outer darkness” (Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30, KJV et al.). This darkness indicates a final separation from God and from the Lamb who is the light of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:23).

Another New Testament passage refers to eternal punishment as “eternal judgment,” that is, a judgment that is valid eternally (Hebrews 6:2). Still another passage speaks of “ruin” (literally, “death,” “separation”) and “destruction” (eternal loss) (1 Timothy 6:9). This “everlasting destruction” (or separation) is “from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In these passages the word “death” is thus used in the sense of spiritual death or separation from God. The sinner is even now dead in trespasses and sins and therefore without Christ, or separated from Christ (Ephesians 2:1,12). Eternal judgment brings a final and eternal separation from God and from Christ.

The Second Death

The Bible calls this final separation from God “the second death.” In the Book of Revelation the lake of fire is so described (Revelation 20:14). Jesus also identified Gehenna as a second death when He warned: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]” (Matthew 10:28; see also Luke 12:4,5). This clearly refers to

another death after the physical death of the body. It is also clear that this death is different in order and in kind. As physical death is separation from the body and from the environment of this life, so the second death is a final and eternal separation from God and from the life to be enjoyed in the new creation. Among those consigned to this second death will be all who take the mark of the beast (Revelation 14:9–11). These will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the angels and Christ. That is, though shut off from the new creation in the lake of fire, they will be able to see the Lamb of God they rejected, just as Lazarus was able to see across the great gulf between Hades and Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:23). Again, they will not be annihilated, for "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night" (Revelation 14:11). They will be forever denied the rest promised to the saints.

None of these passages indicates any promise of rehabilitation or restoration once the final judgment is pronounced. No sanctifying agent is revealed in connection with the lake of fire or Gehenna. The fire is parallel to the "worm" of Mark 9:44,46,48 (KJV). It is looked at as punitive, not purifying. There will be no second chance. This should stir the Church to proclaim the message, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

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1445 North Booneville Avenue
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E-mail: info@ag.org

Phone: (417) 862-2781