

THE ETERNITY OF HELL TORMENTS



Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)

The doctrine of hell is under attack. The opposition to eternal punishment is more diverse than one might expect as unbelieving philosophers and some pastors in the emergent church seek to extinguish this doctrine once and for all.

In the 18th century, people opposed hell as well. Yet it was taught with more faithfulness and fervency than most pulpits in these days. Jonathan Edwards' sermon, ***The Eternity of Hell Torments*** is a fitting example of this faithfulness and fervency.

The text is Matthew 25:46 – ***These shall go away into everlasting punishment.*** Two initial observations are advanced:

- I. The duration of the punishment on which they are here said to enter: it is called everlasting punishment.
- II. The time of their entrance on this everlasting punishment.

The doctrine as also set forth:

The misery of the wicked in hell will be absolutely eternal.

With the presuppositions and doctrine in place, Edwards moves forward by advancing four key points.

1. It is not contrary to the divine perfections to inflict on wicked men a punishment that is absolutely eternal.

Edwards argues that sin deserves such a punishment, namely, “that sin is heinous enough to deserve such a punishment, and such a punishment is no more than proportionable to the evil or demerit of sin.”

It is not contrary to God’s mercy to inflict eternal punishment on sinful men. Indeed, “It would be a great defect, and not a perfection, in the sovereign and supreme Judge of the world, to be merciful in such a sense that he could not bear to have penal justice executed.”

2. The eternal death which God threatens, is not annihilation, but an abiding sensible punishment or misery.

The Scripture never hints at the God-dishonoring doctrine of annihilation – a doctrine that surfaces in Edwards day and is even more popular now. The argument against annihilation is clearly articulated here.

3. This misery will not only continue for a very long time, but will be absolutely without end.

Edwards utilizes several exegetical, grammatical, and biblical arguments to point readers to the reality of eternal punishment. “Such expressions,” says the Puritan divine, “are used to set forth the duration of the punishment of the wicked, as are never used in the scriptures of the New Testament to signify any thing but a proper eternity.”

4. Various good ends will be obtained by the eternal punishment of the wicked.

Edwards presents four *good ends* of eternal punishment:

Hereby God vindicates his injured majesty.

God glorifies his justice.

God hereby indirectly glorifies his grace on the vessels of mercy.

The sight of hell torments will exalt the happiness of the saints forever.

He notes, “The sight of the wonderful power, the great and dreadful majesty, and awful justice and holiness of God, manifested in the eternal punishment of ungodly men, will make them prize his favor and love vastly the more; and they will be so much the more happy in the enjoyment of it.”

Application

In typical Edwardsean fashion, the author concludes by setting forth three important points of application:

Be entreated to consider attentively how great and awful a thing eternity is. Do but consider how dreadful despair will be in such torment.

That you may effectually escape these dreadful and eternal torments, be entreated to flee and embrace him who came into the world for the very end of saving sinners from these torments, who has paid the whole debt due to the divine law, and exhausted eternal in temporal sufferings.

And Edwards directs the attention of every reader to Christ and his gospel: *Justice therefore never can be actually satisfied in your damnation; but it is actually satisfied in Christ. Therefore he is accepted of the Father, and therefore all who believe are accepted and justified in him. Therefore believe in him, come to him, commit your souls to him to be saved by him. In him you shall be safe from the eternal torments of hell.*