

“What We Believe about Our Response and Eternal Destiny”

John 3:16-21

June 11, 2017

Today is our final Sunday working our way through our 10-point Statement of Faith. One of the most gripping phrases in our entire 10-point SOF, shows up in this final article. Article 10 is about our Response and Eternal Destiny: We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will raise the dead bodily and judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth, to the praise of His glorious grace. Amen.

Article contains the phrase “eternal conscious punishment.” This is a really unsettling concept for us to consider. Grasping eternity in and of itself is difficult enough, but to consider an eternity of conscious punishment can be deeply uncomfortable. It probably feels to some of us like an unnecessary overreaction. It seems like more than anyone could ever truly deserve. Is this really what the Bible teaches? Is this really God’s intention for the unrepentant sinner? Would a truly loving God assign the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment? Well, among other things, we need to talk about this today.

1. We believe that Eternal conscious punishment is the destiny of some. A doctrine called “Annihilationism” is commonly suggested as an alternative to “eternal conscious punishment.” This view has been recommended by people such as John Stott and B.B. Warfield. Annihilationism is the belief that those who do not choose Christ will be annihilated or eliminated. They will simply cease to exist. It carries with it the idea that no one deserves eternal, conscious punishment.”¹ Proponents of this view do make a fair point that at certain times, the Bible seems to imply that the ungodly will be destroyed or cease to exist. They might point, for example, to Matthew 7:13, ““Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.” So, a typical understanding of the word “destruction” would lend itself more toward annihilation than ongoing punishment forever and ever.² However, the more we look at verses like these and also compare them with other verses, the more we realize that the Annihilation view does not hold up to scrutiny. For example, Matthew 25:46 says, “Then they will go away to **eternal** punishment, but the righteous to **eternal** life.” Annihilationists will sometimes argue that this verse is talking about *eternal* punishment, but not *everlasting* punishment. In other words, it’s nuanced. The punishment has eternal consequences but the punishment is not everlasting, going on forever and ever.

The weakness of this argument comes in its failure to honor the immediate context. The exact same word, “eternal,” is used twice-in-a-row in the same sentence. In the 2nd usage, it clearly communicates that the righteous will live for eternity, forever and ever. So, in the 1st usage, it seems pretty clear that it should also have the same meaning. The punishment will go on for eternity, for ever and ever. If we try to argue otherwise, we ignore a common hermeneutical practice of deciding on the meaning of a word based on its immediate context.³ I respect people who are drawn to the Annihilationist viewpoint, I am drawn to it too, but... I can’t agree with it. I empathize with why we might prefer not to hold to a doctrine of eternal conscious punishment. However, if we’re not careful with our beliefs, we might begin to think something’s true, because we want it to be true, not because it actually is true. This is never a good approach to theology. Whenever we begin a search for truth we need to attempt to hold off our preconceived assumptions. If we go out looking for something else to be true, we put ourselves in danger of not practicing intellectual honesty. In good conscience, this

¹ H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine*, Zondervan, MI, 1992, p. 139

² In a similar way, Matthew 10:28 says, “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.”

³ There is another intriguing argument from Annihilationists called “conditional immortality.” It contends that believers are granted immortality but unbelievers are not. This causes us to reflect on the nature of the human soul. Are human souls created as eternal beings or do they have a kind of “life span” unless they are born again. See the discussion on this in *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*, Free Church Publications, Minneapolis, MN, 2011 pp. 249-252.

honest approach should be applied for every issue of faith and doctrine. Each one of us has various opinions and strong feelings regarding particular issues. But, theology must be based on what Scripture teaches, not on what our personal opinion finds more appealing.

I remember listening to Francis Chan talk about hell once. He connected it with the fact that in Isaiah 55:8-9 God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” “Eternal conscious punishment?” I wouldn’t have thought to do that. But, according to Scripture, it appears that God did. And, clearly the eternal God of the universe has every right to think His own thoughts and to determine His own standards and punishments for evil. It’s very likely that we have not given proper honor and recognition to the holiness of God. We want to hold His love in highest regard, but we seem all too ready to dismiss or set aside His holiness when it pleases our human inklings. God is completely holy, infinitely perfect, and entirely beyond us. He is not like us and we should not think that His standards are anything like our standards.

It’s also likely that we have not grasped a full understanding or proper disdain for sin. It seems that we are all too ready to lull ourselves into some delusion that sin isn’t really that bad after all. “Why all the fuss? Didn’t Jesus pretty much take care of all that?” A healthy understanding of the love and grace of God will avoid any attempt to make less of sin. It’s an evil and rebellious transgression against God. Sin is the greatest problem in our universe, we dare not take it lightly. God certainly does not take it lightly. This is why we can say in Article 10 that when God “judges the world” it is “to the praise of His glorious grace.” “God is glorified even in the display of his wrath.”⁴ The book, *Evangelical Convictions* states it well: “It is Jesus above all who forces us to affirm the dreadful truth that those who stand alone before God as sinners on the day of judgment will face condemnation into a state of eternal punishment called hell.”

Jesus stresses the seriousness of our sin in Matthew 13:49-50, “This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”⁵ It would be wrong for us to dismiss the doctrine of hell as some “primitive remnant of a medieval age,” because it is “rooted in the teaching of Jesus himself.”⁶ And Jesus is not the only one who spoke of hell. Romans 2:7-8 teaches that there are two destinations for human beings, “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” God is not vindictive nor petty. But, He is holy and just. His love is revealed in his kind patience but He is not a pushover; nor is He soft on sin. He is no one to be trifled with or placated with some insincere excuse. Hebrews 9:27 says that, “people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” There will be no second chances. We need to respond to God now, in this life... without delay. This leads us to another very important truth in Article 10...

2. God commands everyone to repent & receive. Acts 17:30 tells us, “In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.” The Good News is that, through Jesus, God has made a way for us to be forgiven and to begin a relationship with Him. There is great hope in this; hope for this life and the hope of heaven for eternity. REPENT means to turn from our sin. It’s about changing our way of thinking and our way of behaving. In Acts 26:20 the Apostle Paul “preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.” And in Luke 13:5 Jesus proclaims, “...unless you repent, you too will all perish.” This isn’t a gentle suggestion. God, because He is our God, commands us to repent of our sinful ways and to receive Jesus as our Savior and Lord. Ezekiel 33:11 is an important declaration from God, “Say to them, ‘As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the

⁴ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 252.

⁵ Jesus describes hell in Matthew 8:12 as a place of “darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

⁶ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 248.

death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!...”⁷

As humans, we have a freewill.⁸ We can choose to say “no.” We can go our own way and God won’t stop us, BUT... there are eternal consequences to disobeying God’s command.⁹ God has done all that He possibly can to save us by sacrificing His one and only son Jesus. Now, the choice is up to each of us whether or not we will receive His gift of salvation. Each one of us needs to come to a point where we believe the gospel for ourselves; not for our parents or for our friends, or for our spouse.

We need to **admit** that we ourselves are sinners and that we are in need of a Savior. We need to **believe** that Jesus died on the cross for us; understanding that His death and resurrection can take care of our sin problem and restore us to a right relationship with God. And, finally, we need to **choose**, to make a personal decision to trust Jesus with our entire lives. We choose to rely on Him and give Him our allegiance as our personal Savior and Lord.¹⁰ This is not just about being sick of life’s problems and trying Jesus for a while. This is not just about feeling sorry for the wrong things we’ve done and wanting to feel better for a while. This is about full surrender; a place of desperately knowing that we fall short and that our only hope is Jesus. 2 Peter 3:9 reminds us that, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” But, God will not wait forever, there is only so much time to make your choice. Romans 10:13 promises us that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

Right now would be a good time to set this sermon transcript aside and do one of two things:

- 1) If you are not yet a believer in Christ, won’t you consider trusting Him today? Talk to God about that right now.
- 2) If you are already a believer in Christ, is there someone you care about who is not yet a believer? Take this time to pray for them by name right now. Let’s ask God to rescue lost sinners before it’s too late.

3. Sharing the gospel brings God glory. One of the greatest, sobering realities about hell is that it gives us tears for the lost. A thorough discussion of the gospel reveals the seriousness of hell but also the beauty of the Good News! The beauty of heaven with God, of joy with the Lord forever. 2 Corinthians 5:20 says, “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” The fate of anyone is ultimately known only to God. In a sermon like this morning’s, it’s common for some of us to wonder about the fate of people who are NOT ABLE to respond to the gospel.

What is the eternal destiny of the unborn and young children who die prematurely? What about those with significant intellectual limitations? These are very good questions. These are questions that find good answers in the mercy and justice of God. We can count on Him to do the right thing in every situation.¹¹ When Abraham was pleading for the people in Sodom, he expressed his faith in God’s justice, Gen. 18:25, “...Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Abraham knew the answer, of course God would do the right thing; He’s God! A righteous God will do the right thing. Throughout

⁷ Learn more at <http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-god-delight-in-destroying-sinners>

⁸ This need to respond to God reveals that we are responsible moral agents. There is a high honor and dignity to being human. We are made in God’s image and, as image bearers, we are held to a higher standard than any other part of God’s creation. “[O]ur choices have eternal consequences.” (See discussion on p. 246 of *Evangelical Convictions*.)

⁹ Our world would be absolute chaos and meaninglessness without divine judgment on evil. “Judgment brings glory to God by displaying his holy nature.” (*Evangelical Convictions*, pp. 246-247.) We would not want to live in a world without a Ruler and without any standards for moral boundaries and a sense of right and wrong.

¹⁰ See p. 238 of *Evangelical Convictions*.

¹¹ Another common concern is the Fate of the unevangelized; these are people living in very remote areas of our planet. People who may not even have the Bible in their own language. The Bible also gives a good answer to this question. Let me just share a few brief thoughts on this. First of all, verses like Revelation 5:9 say, “...with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.” So, Scripture indicates that there is going to be an incredible diversity of people in heaven. Second of all, read the story of Cornelius in Acts 10. He didn’t know Jesus but he did fear God as he understood him. God then gave him a vision telling him to call for the Apostle Peter. Ultimately, Cornelius and his entire family hear and respond to the Gospel. There is no person anywhere on our planet who is too far away for God to reach. 2 Chronicles 16:9 tells us, “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”

Scripture we learn about God's compassion for the helpless.¹² God will do the right thing in every situation. Romans 14:12 says that each one will have to give an account to God. Understandably, an infant or a person with limited intellectual capabilities could not give an account. So, we stand on the mercy and kindness of God for these situations.¹³ In fact, Isaiah 7:15 makes reference to when a child, "...knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right." This lends evidence to the idea that God will only hold us accountable for that which we know and understand. Therefore, Scripture and the justice of God do seem to allow for an "age of accountability." Thus, young children and those with significant intellectual challenges will likely be judged less strictly.¹⁴

God's primary plan for reaching the lost is the witness of Christ-followers.¹⁵ That includes those of us sitting right here in this room today. Our efforts in witnessing and world missions should be informed by an understanding of the eternal consequences that hang in the balance. Two years ago, I was in standing at the hospital bedside of my biological father, David. He was unresponsive and it was clear that he was not going to make it and that he would soon pass away. The hospital was down in Las Vegas and I was the only family member who was able to be there. I remember sitting at his bedside and praying over him. I was reflecting on the times that I'd shared Christ with him and talked to him about God over the years. He had always been somewhat receptive but never seemed to fully commit himself to Christ. In those moments, you can't help but wonder if you're loved one is ready to meet their Maker. And, frankly, I just wasn't sure.

I did know that my father would want a priest to administer last rites so I had the hospital call in a priest. I stood there as the priest spoke and I began to catch on to the regular intervals of repeating "God have mercy, God have mercy, God... have mercy." That was my prayer, that God would have mercy on his soul. But I'll tell you something, the thing that brought me the most hope that day was something that had happened a few weeks earlier. My dad had bumped into a street evangelist in Las Vegas. He had heard the gospel one last time. I know this because the street evangelist had called my cell phone and left a message that he'd talked with my dad and that they'd prayed together. It wasn't clear if my dad had responded to the gospel or not. But, it was clear that someone had shared the Good News with him again. So, I hold on to the hope that perhaps, in those final days or minutes of my dad's life, that he did repent of his sin and fully commit himself to Christ. I'm so thankful for the street evangelist who tried one last time.

"[I]t is not within our power to know who will respond to the gospel."¹⁶ But it is within our power to declare the gospel to those around us. Back in Ephesians 6:19-20 Paul shared this prayer request, "Pray also for me, that whenever I speak, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. **Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.**"

May every Christ-follower pray this kind of prayer!

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 11, 2017 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson.

¹² See Exodus 22:22-23, Psalm 68:5, Matthew 9:36, and James 1:27.

¹³ There's a comforting verse from the life of King David. After the death of his first child through Bathsheba David confidently states, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me." (2 Samuel 12:23)

¹⁴ Consider Matthew 18:21-35, Luke 12:47-48, John 15:22, Romans 2:5-6, and James 2:13.

¹⁵ Consider also each person is born with a conscience, sensing his or her need for God (Romans 2:13-16; I Timothy 1:5). The majesty of creation bears witness to the existence of God despite anyone's geography or language (Romans 1:18-20; Psalm 19:1-4). Further, God has given us His written Word, the incarnational ministry of His Son Jesus, the witness of the Church, and His law revealed through the lives and history of the Jewish people.

¹⁶ *Evangelical Convictions*, p. 237.