



QUESTION

“How long will the punishment of the wicked last?”



The subject of this month's 'Question Box' arises from what we considered in the June issue of the 'S.S.'

I must confess that when I first received this question I was rather puzzled, because I have always thought that the fate of the wicked is described in the Scriptures in such unequivocal terms as not to need discussion. But we live in a changing world, and it seems that at the present time, in both sacred and secular society, widely differing views are being advanced concerning the duration of the punishment that should be imposed, both on those who reject the Gospel of Christ, and on those who violate the laws of our secular society.

As I write this, the national press carries a further report concerning an offender upon whom a life-sentence has recently been imposed. You may have read the news-item and recall that it was stated that, although the judge recommended that the offender serve a prison-term of nine years, he may well only remain in prison for about four and a half years before being set at liberty. The reason? The judge had observed that these days, **'Life does not mean life'**.

Meanwhile, it is reported that in the theological world there are those who take a similar position in respect of the final punishment of the wicked and who claim that **'everlasting punishment'** will not be **'everlasting'**. The reason? They say that the fate of those on whom this sentence will be passed on the Day of Judgment is 'annihilation'. In other words, after the Judgment, the wicked will simply cease to exist. It is with this second, spiritual, question that we are concerned this month.

A wide spectrum of opinion,

It is interesting to notice how curiously wide-ranging are the denominational theories concerning the future of those who die outside of Christ.

The people known as 'Christadelphians' hold the theological view I have just described. They teach that the final punishment of the unsaved will be to have their existence – their life – terminated. It will be as if they had never existed. In the case of the 'Christadelphians', this notion is the natural consequence of their denial of **'the immortality of the soul'**. They do not believe that the soul of man is, in its very nature, immortal, and they claim that immortality will be **'bestowed'** as the final reward of the righteous on the Day of Judgment.

In stark contrast with this Christadelphian doctrine, there is the 'Mormon' notion of a **'second chance'** for those who did not accept the Mormon 'gospel' whilst in this life. According to Mormonism, when in the world beyond, those who die outside of the Mormon Church will be given another opportunity of hearing, believing and accepting its 'gospel'.

Of course, the matter of the **baptism** of these ultra-late converts might have been thought to create a problem, because – presumably – there is no water in the after-life. However, this also is conveniently managed, because those who have died will, when they accept the Mormon message, be able to undergo a **'baptism by proxy'**, by having a Mormon **'in good standing'** baptized on their behalf in a Mormon Temple. This is the Mormon doctrine of **'baptism for the dead'**, erroneously based on 1st Cor.15:29, and it is this doctrine which moved one early Mormon-leader to declare that the number of those who will finally be lost will **'be counted on the fingers of one hand!'** If only that were true!

Here is something to consider. In the light of Christadelphian and Mormon teaching, if one is wicked in this life, **what reason has he to fear when he dies?** On the one hand, the Christadelphians tell him that he will merely cease to exist – (something that many non-Christians already believe will happen to them anyway) – and this can hardly be called **'eternal punishment!'** And, at the other end of the spectrum, the Mormons tell him that, in the after-life, he will be given a second opportunity of accepting salvation; an opportunity of which, of course, he will gladly take advantage!

Does 'eternal' mean 'eternal'?

The question is, then, **does 'life' really mean life? Or, does 'everlasting punishment' really 'last for ever'?** In Matt.25:46, the Lord Jesus very plainly describes what will happen, when He declares; **"These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal."** The Revised Standard Version renders the verse: - **"And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life"**

This rendering is clearer and should be easier to understand, because it reveals that the two words, **'everlasting'** and **'eternal'**, are actually translations of the same Greek word, **'aionios'**, which qualifies both **'punishment'** and **'life'**.

In the overwhelming number of occasions in which **'aionios'** occurs in the Greek N.T., - (and this means in at least 66 places) - it refers to people, places and things **which can only be regarded as never ending**. For instance, the word is used:

- Of God Himself,
- Of His kingdom, His power, His glory.
- Of the Holy Spirit.
- Of the salvation that the sacrifice of Lord Jesus has made possible, the efficacy of which will remain **'for ever'**.
- In the Gospels, to describe the **'sin which hath no forgiveness' - 'an eternal sin'**, (Mark 3; 29), and
- In **2nd Thess. 1:7-11**, which refers to the return of the Lord in glory and power, there **'aionios'** declares that the punishment of the unbelieving and disobedient will be endless. It will be their final punishment, and the phraseology declares that the purpose of this punishment will not be remedial, but retributive. That is to say, it is not designed to **correct**. It is intended to **punish**.

Bear in mind that if a sin is not forgiven - or cannot be forgiven - because God's requirements are not met, the guilt remains eternally and the sentence also remains eternally.

An Early Statement.

The early Church had no doubts on this subject, and the doctrine was set out in the following words. **"The duration of the punishment corresponds to the duration of the fault, considered not so much as an act but as a stain; so long as that remains, the debt of punishment remains. The bitterness of the punishment corresponds to the gravity of the fault. An irreparable fault, of its very nature, endures for ever; hence it is due eternal punishment"**. (Thomas Aquinas, in 'Summa Theologica')

Two thoughts arise here:

1st. If the **existence** of the wicked is to be terminated after the Judgment, and they no longer exist, surely their **punishment** will also be terminated. How, then, can that be described as either **'eternal'** or **'punishment'**?

2nd. Since the word **'aionios'** qualifies the duration of both the **punishment** of the wicked and the **life** of the saved, it means that the punishment of the wicked will last as long as the life of the redeemed, and if the punishment of the wicked does not last **'aionia' = 'for ever'**, neither does the life of the redeemed.

What does the word 'destruction' mean?

When the word **'destruction'** is encountered in the scriptures, as in 2nd Thess. 1:9, it is often misunderstood. The Greek word **'olethros'**, which occurs just four times in the Greek New Testament and, in the A.V., is each time translated as **'destruction'**, does not mean **'annihilation'** and cannot be accurately translated by the use of any of the words which, in modern English, are synonymous with **'destruction'**.

The wicked are not said to be 'exterminated' or 'destroyed' or 'wiped out'. According to the Greek scholars Moulton and Milligan, in the first century **'olethros'** was used to speak of **'ruin; the loss of all that gives worth to life'**. Thayer, whose Greek Lexicon is probably more widely used by Bible students, gives its meaning as; **'The loss of a life of blessedness after**

death. Future misery'. In other words, the word describes a condition of existence, or a quality of life.

Indeed, simple logic alone should convince us that the wicked will not simply be **annihilated**. If that were to be their destiny, they would experience neither a future nor suffer a punishment. After the final Judgment, their future will be **'destruction'**, in the sense just described. They will suffer the loss of everything that makes life worthwhile, a punishment defined as a state of **'banishment from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might'**.

'Second death'

This eternal state of the wicked is also described in the scriptures as **'the second death'**; that is a 'death' which follows the **physical** death of the body; a **spiritual** death. Here, again, it is unfortunate that the meaning of the word **'thanatos'** = **'death'**, is also often misunderstood. In the scriptures it **never** means **'the cessation of existence'**. Its essential meaning is quite simply **'separation'**.

For example, separated from his father, the Prodigal was said to be **'dead'**, (Luke.15: 24), but restored to his father's fellowship, the prodigal was described as **'alive again'**. This is just one of many examples of the way the word is used in scripture, and, if we think about it for just a moment, it is easy to understand.

Indeed, we may ask the question: When the Lord died on the cross, did He cease to exist? He certainly 'died', because He **'dismissed his spirit'** – sent it away. That was, for Him, the moment of **'death'** – the separation of the soul from the body. But He did not cease to exist.

For us also, physical death will be the separation of the soul – the true personality – from the body; hence, Paul could speak of being **'absent from the body'** but **'at home with the Lord'**. (2nd Cor. 5: 1 - 9) The **'second death'** which the unsaved will suffer, is eternal separation from the Presence of God; Who Himself is both the Source and Sustainer of all true life.

So, the destiny of the righteous is to enjoy eternal life, whilst the fate of the wicked is to suffer eternal death, and this difference in their final destinies is stated clearly in 2nd Thess.1: 7-10, where we read that when Christ returns, He will:

'be glorified in His saints and marvelled at in all those who believe', whilst those who **'do not know God and who do not obey the gospel, shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power'**.

An interesting question remains.

Why, in view of the plain teaching of God's Word, should anyone seek to tone down the obvious severity of the language in which the final destiny of the wicked is described? Let me offer two suggestions.

- 1st. It is because men fail to realize the depth of a holy and righteous God's hatred of sin. Because we ourselves are sinners, we are inclined to more lenient in our attitude towards the violation of His law. We hear sin describes as 'a mistake', 'a fault', 'a weakness', when the Bible speaks of **'the exceeding sinfulness of sin'**. We have no real idea how great affront sin is, in the eyes of God, because none of us is perfect.
- 2nd. More serious than this; I suggest that just as in the secular world today there is a mindset that has been described as 'political correctness', which seeks to challenge and change the standards and attitudes that our society has accepted for generations – perhaps for centuries – so in some theological circles there is a kind of 'spiritual correctness', which think that what the scriptures say about eternal punishment is too harsh, and so they seek to emphasize the grace and love of God, at the expense of His holiness and justice.

Conclusion

When the Lord Jesus offers eternal life to all who believe in Him, He promises that those who follow Him shall live eternally in the Presence of God, whilst those who reject His offer of salvation must, because they remain unforgiven, be banished eternally from God's Presence. I repeat: the **duration of the 'punishment'** of the wicked is the same as the **duration of the 'life'** of the redeemed. **Both are declared to be 'eternal'- 'everlasting'**.