

A Universalist Perspective On The Doctrine Of Endless Torment

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The definition of universalism carries with it a rejection of the idea that God will cast sinners into a place of torment and punish them forever. For this reason, when confronted with the parable of the sheep and goats Matthew 25:36-41, or the reference to the lake of fire in Revelation 20, the evangelical universalist will generally seek to escape the trust of these passages by re-translating the word “ionian” from “everlasting,” “eternal” or “for ever and ever” to “age long” or “for ages upon ages.”

There are few who would deny that the Greek word “ionios” *can* be so translated. Most translations, including the King James Translation, *do* render the word in that way *in some* of its occurrences. Its basic meaning is “age” and not “eternal” Furthermore, the present writer does, in fact, believe that at least in the case of Matthew 25:41 “age-long” *is* a better rendering than the usual word choices, “everlasting” or “eternal.”

The reason for this conviction, however, is not because the traditional translation precludes the possibility of universalism but because the context in that particular case demands it. The passage is part of the Olivet Discourse which is a pronouncement of doom upon the land of Israel and all the nations dwelling within it, for its apostasy. In Matthew 24:18 Jesus explicitly states that these events would occur during the life-time of his audience. How then, can that parable be a reference to a final judgment at the end of history, an event that has not yet occurred, almost two thousand years later? Answer: it can't! The Olivet Discourse is a prophetic passage and as such it certainly does speak of future judgment, but not *the* final judgment. The future judgment in view is the impending future condemnation of Israel and *not* the end of the world.

But is it necessary to the Universalist case, to *always* reject the rendering “everlasting” or “eternal?” The answer is no! Scripture is clear that the punishment of the wicked involves being cast from the presence of God. The reason given is that God cannot look upon sin. Thus the wicked, as wicked, are forever banished from the presence of God never to return to plague the godly.

This truth holds great comfort for the people of God. It gladdens our hearts to know that we will not have to contend with Satan and his followers forever. But, the fact that the wicked are cast away from the presence of God does not mean that He cannot redeem them whenever he so chooses. It simply means that they cannot redeem themselves. The lost cannot ever reverse the sentence of condemnation on their own. It would require an act of divine intervention.

The question at hand is, what is meant by such phrases as “forever and ever.” Do these refer to God’s intention toward the persons of particular individuals he created or rather do they refer to the exercise of his judicial will in response to the condition of their hearts at the time of sentencing. If the latter is the case, which I firmly believe the Bible will bear out, then the “everlasting” sentence only holds true for as long as the conditions remain unchanged. In other words, the wicked, so long as they remain wicked must forever remain under condemnation. Should they never repent and receive the atoning blood of Christ they must remain in hell forever and ever. But should they repent, they would, cease to belong to the category of “the wicked” and would from thenceforth become part of the category known as the “justified.” They would no longer be “covenant breakers” but “covenant keepers.”

Thus the word “eternal” may be understood in a *conditional* sense as applying only to those who are in the state that pertains to that condition. Should the state of the subject change so would the subjects’ situation.

If this is true then it would make sense that during the time Jesus’ body was dormant in the grave, he preached to the condemned in hell. It would also explain why some Christians were being baptized for dead relatives who had never heard the gospel. A practice which Paul mentions but does not condemn.

It further helps us to understand how, all could be made alive in Christ who died in Adam, even though we are told elsewhere that many are called to salvation but only few are chosen for regeneration, at least so far as this life is concerned. Those who are called in this life are the “elect” or chosen of God. We have been set aside to be a light to the rest of the world, and a testimony of God’s grace and his love for all humanity. We are a city of God set upon a hill. A light set in a window, which must never be hidden under a basket. This is the calling of the elect of God, chosen unto salvation in this life. We are called to be witnesses to the Gospel of Christ.

So while we may acknowledge that the wicked may be cast into the eternal fire that consumes the devil and his servants and that while there they will be tormented day and night, for ever and ever, and while it may be true that they will “go away into everlasting torment” yet these may in fact refer to the state they go away into and not to an absolute and unchanging decree of God respecting the final disposition of these individuals.