

Sermon Notes



Speaker: Patrick Mead

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This Is Why It Is Called Good News... part 7

Romans 11:28-36

With all the time we've spent talking about God's love reconciling all to Himself in Christ, we've mentioned another idea called annihilationism. If you are from the tradition called Churches of Christ and, to a lesser extent, the Independent Christian Churches, you might have heard about an elder and lawyer named Edward Fudge who wrote a book about annihilationism called "The Fire That Consumes." It was later turned into a movie called "Hell and Mister Fudge," which is still available via a few streaming services in the US.

Annihilationism is sometimes called Terminal Punishment or Conditional Immortality. It teaches that, as God is a God of love, even those who never heard of Him or of His Son will be, after their death, given the chance to receive Him. Those who refuse are permanently annihilated. Some teach that the thoroughly evil will also be annihilated rather than given a purging to clean them before heaven.

There is Biblical support for this, and that is why I always leave room for it when I tell people that I believe God will reconcile all things to Him in Jesus. It seems contradictory because it is, but the scripture does not tell just one story, and we need to look at this other voice that comes into play from time to time.

The largest hurdle annihilationists have to overcome is the assumption that all humans will live forever in the afterlife. (CS Lewis said, "You have never met a mere mortal.")

But the immortality of the disembodied soul isn't a claim endorsed by the Bible. Immortality appears to be something God can grant or withhold. The idea of an eternal soul comes more from Plato and Socrates than it does from the Bible.

1st Timothy 6:13-16. God alone is immortal. Did you ever notice that before? Immortality, then, is a gift that God can give or withhold. Check out Romans 2:7-8, "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."

Annihilationists will often point back to Genesis 3:17-20. The cost of eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was death, not eternal torture after death.

Throughout the NT, we read, "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23) and "whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1st John 5:11-12). We are warned in Matthew 10:28, "to be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body." 2 Peter 2:6 says that God condemned Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes and extinction (NRSVue and modern translations). James, the brother of Jesus, says, "sin gives birth to death" in James 1:15.

Perhaps you've never noticed it before, but one of the most famous passages in the NT also seems to speak of annihilation. John 3:16 says that we should not perish. It doesn't mention punishment and certainly not eternal punishment. Jesus warned that the broad path led to destruction. He didn't mention eternal pain, either. The Psalmist tells us in 37:38 that "All sinners will be destroyed."

Annihilationists believe that there will be a bodily resurrection of some sort. Followers of Christ will then be ushered into the New Heavens and the New Earth, but enemies of the Lord will face judgment. Paul describes it in 1st Thess. 5:3 as "Sudden destruction." The writer of Revelation calls it "the second death." (Rev. 21:8)

Annihilationists say that annihilation IS eternal punishment, eternal in its finality. Words such as "destruction" and "burned up" indicate an ending, not an ongoing punishment.

Annihilationism is very attractive to many people, especially those raised in evangelical churches. It allows God to still be a God of justice and vengeance while doing away with the concept of an eternal torture pit.

As attractive as annihilationism is, it is not the only story told in the Bible. Universal Reconciliation is taught extensively in scripture but most of us have never been trained to see it or, more troubling, taught not to see it.

Universal Reconciliation is not religious pluralism. We don't say that all roads lead to heaven, and it doesn't matter if you come to Jesus or not. Universal Reconciliation never claims that hell does not exist. God's wrath against sin is real, and so is the fire that cleanses. Of course, it matters what you believe. Of course, it matters how you live your life. The fire is real, but so is the love of God and the power of the blood of Christ.

Universal Reconciliation magnifies the work of Jesus on the cross. 1st John 2:2 says that the death of Jesus is "the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. 1st Timothy 2:4-6 tells us that Christ gave himself as a sacrifice for all people. 2nd Peter 3:9 says that God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to eternal life.

Hebrews 2:9 says that Jesus "suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." In Romans 5:18, we are told that Jesus's death "leads to justification and life for all people." Romans 11:32 tells us that God will have mercy on all of the disobedient.

We have already looked at 1st Corinthians 15. Verse 14 says, "We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died." Verse 22 says, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."

In the Gospel of John, we see Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (1:29). In John 3:17, he came "not to condemn the world but to save the world." In John 12:32, he says he will draw all people to himself. BTW, the word for "world" in those verses is *cosmos*, the whole of creation.

In Acts 3:21, we see *apokatastasis*, the redemption of all things.

Even the Book of Revelation teaches us that heaven is always open to receiving even those who have been judged. In chapter 20:11-15, everyone whose name is not found is thrown into the lake of fire. The next chapter reinforces this by naming "the cowardly, unbelieving, vile, liars, murderers, sexually immoral, and idolaters." Sounds final...but the wicked keep showing up.

The final picture in Revelation is of New Jerusalem, heaven, the capital city of the restored *cosmos*, which "no one who is shameful or deceitful" can enter (Revelation 22:27). That seems redundant since they are already in the lake of fire...but there's more. Revelation speaks of those who "continue to do wrong" (v.11). We are told about the immoral outside the gates in 22:14-15, even going so far as to name all the ones we already named in the previous chapter.

Remember the rich man and Lazarus? The rich man was asking for a drop of water to cool his tongue. Abraham said it was impossible. Then look at Revelation 22:17. Look at 22:1-2. Why would he offer such relief? Because of 21:24-25. Heaven is a city where the gates are NEVER shut.

Remember Gehenna? It was outside the city. This lake of fire is outside the city, but the gates are not shut, and Jesus is saying, "Come, get some water, be healed."

THIS is why they call it Good News.