

Matthew 10:28

How can your ministry adhere to an ongoing punishment for the condemned in the Lake of Fire, when Yeshua Himself clearly says that the condemned will be destroyed?

In Matthew 10:28 Yeshua says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (NASU). The emphasis of His remark is clearly that we are to fear God, versus fearing human beings. While human beings might have the power to kill a person, God has the power to do something much worse. What this something actually is, however, is debated among expositors.

The traditional view of eternal punishment is often that the unrighteous condemned will be eternally tormented in a literal Lake of Fire, concurrent with Revelation 14:11, “And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever; they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (NASU). Many evangelical interpreters believe that the unrighteous condemned will be punished in a literal Lake of Fire, with literal fire and smoke and brimstone. Many others, however, believe that the images of fire, smoke, and brimstone are only representative, and that they were the worst images that a First Century Jew could conjure up in regard to God’s punishment on sinners. A metaphorical view of eternal punishment, *while adhering to the Lake of Fire as an ongoing punishment*, holds that the images of the Lake of Fire are often representative of the separation that the unrighteous will experience, not to be pressed too literally. What both a traditional and metaphorical view of eternal punishment have in common is that they consider the condemned to suffer a judgment that never ends.

Annihilationism is the idea that the process of being eternally condemned is not something that is ongoing. Rather, what is ongoing is only the effect of being eternally condemned, and the unrighteous are merely snuffed out of existence. The primary Scripture that annihilationism is based on is Matthew 10:28, and annihilationists make the strong point of indicating that Yeshua says to fear Him “who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Since it would seem that God will *destroy* the condemned, it is assumed that this means that rather than punish them indefinitely forever, that He will simply obliterate them from existence. Hence, this is why proponents of this view are often called *annihilationists*. There are annihilationists present in the Messianic movement, but there are also annihilationists in evangelical Christianity and liberal Christianity as well.

Advocates of annihilationism pay particular attention to the English word “destroy,” and insist that God will “destroy” sinners in the Lake of Fire, when in English itself “destroy” has a wider variety of definitions than just “wipe out of total existence.” Indeed, the main English definitions of destroy include: “to tear down, demolish,” “to ruin,” “to do away with,” and “to kill.”¹ “Destroy” in an entirely English context need not be what annihilationists insist it means. “Destroy” can very well mean existing in a completely decrepit and demolished or ruined state—as opposed to meaning completely extinct.

Not surprisingly, the Greek verb *apollumi* (ἀπόλλυμι), used in Matthew 10:28, likewise has considerable variance. Some possible definitions of this verb include: “To destroy, ‘kill,’ in battle or prison;” “to suffer loss or lose,” “to perish,” and “to be lost.”² A related noun, *apōleia* (ἀπόλεια), likewise means “destruction,” “ruin,” “perishing,” or “loss.”³ AMG notes that in many cases, “the verb must not be thought of as indicating extinction, but only change from one state of being to another. Nothing actually becomes extinct, but everything changes.”⁴ So,

¹ Webster’s New World Dictionary and Thesaurus, 170.

² A. Oepke, “*apólymi*,” in TDNT, 67.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Zodhiates, *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 230.

when we apply the definition of “ruin, destroy” (BDAG)⁵ for *apollumi*, we cannot insist on a strict definition of “destroy” as meaning “obliterated out of existence.”

On the contrary, when we take into consideration the varied usages of *apollumi* throughout the Greek Apostolic Scriptures, including references to ruined wineskins (Matthew 9:17), lost sheep (Matthew 15:24), and rotten food (John 6:27), it is perfectly valid for one to interpret Matthew 10:28 as meaning something *other than* complete and total annihilation. Synthesizing all of the varied applications of *apollumi*, Matthew 10:28 can be rendered with “fear Him who is able to **utterly ruin** both soul and body.” With this rendering, the reality of an ongoing, eternal punishment is maintained—while recognizing that the condemned sinner is going to undergo a severe change for the worst.

Many are agreed that the closest Hebrew equivalent for *apollumi* is the verb *avad* (אָבַד), as *avad* is typically rendered with *apollumi* in the Greek Septuagint. *Apollumi* is rendered as *l'avdan* (לְאָבְדָן) in the UBSHNT in Matthew 10:28, and gives us some clues as to what Yeshua may have orally spoken.

In the Qal stem (simple action, active voice), *avad* can mean “**become lost**,” “**go astray**,” “**perish**,” “**be ruined**,” or “**be carried off**” (CHALOT).⁶ In the Piel stem (intensive action, active voice), *avad* can mean “**give up** as lost,” “**let perish**,” “**destroy**,” and “**dissipate**” (CHALOT).⁷ These definitions provide us with the same array of options that *apollumi* gives, regarding how we are to consider the “destruction” of the wicked as either a complete annihilation, or utter ruin/devastation. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *avad* is used to represent utter defeat (Joshua 1:7), the overthrow of a nation (Deuteronomy 28:51), as well as the taking of a life (Exodus 10:7; Leviticus 23:30; Deuteronomy 7:10, 20; 2 Kings 10:19). *Avad* can likewise refer to the enslavement or loss of a people (Numbers 21:29), as well as broken objects (Psalm 31:12).

Avad has the same basic array of meanings as does *apollumi*. From this connection and the uses of *avad*, must we likewise insist upon an annihilation of the unrighteous condemned?

While exegetically, both the verbs *apollumi* and *avad* allow for the “destruction” of the wicked to be something other than annihilation (namely being “utterly ruined” for eternity), the question of what will actually occur **is ultimately one of ideology**. If one believes that a loving God could never eternally torment sinners in some way or another, then one’s examination of the Scriptures will reflect this belief. Likewise, if one believes that a loving God would not allow sinners to only be “snuffed out,” and that an ongoing punishment is the only just punishment, then one’s examination of the Scriptures will reflect this belief. But note that the One who will dispense such punishment is God Himself. The punishment that is meted out upon the unrighteous condemned *can only be* something that an Eternal Being can deliver. Are there things worse than being dead for eternity, meaning snuffed out of existence and annihilated? This is a question that will continue to be debated, as each interpreter has to decide which value judgment to make.

The message of the gospel, though, is that no one has to experience such punishment. All of us can eternally commune with the Lord and be spared from the eternal fate that awaits those who reject Him.

⁵ BDAG, 115.

⁶ CHALOT, 1.

⁷ Ibid.