

## PAUL'S CONCEPT OF ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

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*Paul did not deal in as much detail with eternal punishment as did Jesus in the gospels and John in Revelation, but what he did write matches with their fuller descriptions in many points. This is to be expected because of Paul's strong commitment to Jesus Christ. In Rom 2:6-10 he wrote about God's anger in punishing the lost and the anguish they will suffer as a result. In Rom 9:22-23 he spoke of "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction," a destruction that consists of an ongoing grief brought on as a consequence of God's wrath. Second Thess 1:8-9 is a third passage that reflects his teaching on eternal punishment. There "eternal destruction" represents a different Greek expression, one that depicts a ruin that lost people continue to suffer forever as they are denied opportunity to be with Christ. Paul's failure to use a number of other words in expressions that could have expressed annihilation of the unsaved is further indication of his harmony with Jesus and John in teaching an unending punishment that the unsaved will consciously experience.*

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Paul's remarks about eternal punishment do not delve into as much detail as Jesus' in the gospels or John's in the Apocalypse. Paul is reasonably clear that this destiny is a process that never ends and is consciously felt. Still, some have argued annihilation from his words in a fashion that puts a strain on the words' natural, probable idea. Where his terms for eternal punishment do not in themselves immediately nail down the duration or conscious nature of divine retribution, his intent is most reasonably in unity with what Jesus his Lord taught more explicitly and what fellow believers wrote in other New Testament books.

This study will show how Paul is consistent with Jesus<sup>1</sup> and John.<sup>2</sup> Then

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. in this issue Robert L. Thomas, "Jesus' View of Eternal Punishment"; also cf. Robert Peterson, *Hell on Trial* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. in this issue Trevor Craigen, "Eternal Punishment in John's Revelation"; Peterson, *Hell on Trial*.

it will review Paul's three clearest passages (Rom 2:6-10; 9:22; 2 Thess 1:8-9) and correlate his stance in further references.

### **Paul's Unity with Jesus and John**

Jesus and John spell out the fullest detail in the NT on the duration and nature of punishment. Jesus said of the unsaved regarding retribution, "Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:44). The natural force of those analogies is that the worm continues to be active while death as a process continues and that as the fire is never put out, the suffering which it is causing never ceases. In the condition that the analogy illustrates, the reality is far worse. This also seems plain enough in Jesus' direct contrast: He distinguishes those cast into *eternal* damnation from those who enter into *eternal* life (Matt 25:46). As the eternal life never ends, it is natural on the other side in the verse that the eternal punishment never terminates. Many reason the greater probability that such passages convey unceasing, consciously felt retribution.<sup>3</sup> Their arguments are more conclusive on what the words really mean than are attempts to construe annihilation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>E.g., Peterson, *Hell on Trial*.

<sup>4</sup>For annihilation, e.g., Clark Pinnock, *Theological Crossfire* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); John R. W. Stott, *Essentials: A liberal-evangelical dialogue*, by David L. Edwards and John Stott (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1988) 312-20; Stephen Travis, *Christian Hope and the Future* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1980) 133-36; also idem, *I Believe in the Second Coming of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 198-99, where the author reasons strangely that a relation to God or non-relationship to Him is what matters, as if details with which Scripture fills out the destiny, including heaven or hell, can simply be set aside (cf. 199). "And if hell means being without Christ, that is an enormous tragedy, and the New Testament writers [sic., writers shaving off part of the NT claim, such as Travis] see little point in asking whether the lost continue to be conscious or are annihilated" (198). Cf. Travis for a fuller discussion in his work "The Place of Divine Retribution in the Thought of Paul," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Cambridge, England, July 1970, 116-42, particularly 136; cf. also Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* (Fallbrook, Calif.: Verdict, 1982), and idem, "The Final End of the Wicked," *JETS* 27 (1984):325-34, and "Putting Hell in its Place," *Christianity Today* 20 (Aug. 6, 1976):14-17.

John, one of the twelve whom Jesus disciplined and the writer of the Book of Revelation,<sup>5</sup> adds further clarity in a consistent picture. Punishment that engulfs the unsaved has smoke that keeps rising up forever. The most persuasive inference is that the fire itself keeps burning perpetually (Rev 14:9-10). John in the same passage writes that the punished “have no rest day or night.” The picture is natural to claim that the anguish never at any time abates. Later, John depicts the unsaved, at their final judgment, being cast into the “lake of fire” in which they experience a “second death” (20:12-15). John also articulates the distinct idea that unsaved people continue to exist “outside” the eternal New Jerusalem (22:15), but in a place and state distinct from the blessed environment that all the redeemed share (21:1–22:5). He also relates that the “beast” and “false prophet,” apparently unsaved humans, join the rest of the lost in the “lake” (19:20). Later he tells about Satan also being cast in where these two humans yet exist, enduring punishment in that state (20:10). John never gives any hint that the punishment reaches a termination point.

Paul does not detail all this in full. But that he stands in unity with Jesus and John is most probable because of his commitment to Jesus Christ and because his conciseness is true to Scripture detail elsewhere.

### **Paul's Commitment to Jesus Christ**

One can draw up a list of doctrinal details from Jesus' teachings that Luke, Paul, James, Peter, John, or Jude does not mention. He can also list facets any one of these include that one or more of the others never explicitly touch upon. The diversity of emphasis is natural even when these hold the same position as to details on various doctrines. A reader soon sees that most aspects of belief do expressly appear in several or all of them.

For example, Paul's letters delve into many matters not expressed in such detail, some not even mentioned, by Jesus or the others. Instances of this come to mind: the focus that all sinned in Adam (Rom 5:12 ff.), circumcision (2:25-29; Col 2:14), a detailed portrayal of human struggle with sin (Rom 7:14-25), specifics on the Spirit's help in prayer (8:26-27), massive correlation on God's plan for Jews and Gentiles (Romans 9–11), principles for dealing with “doubtful practices” (Romans 14; 1 Corinthians 8-10), and considerable detail about the believer's future resurrection (1 Cor 15:12 ff.).

Where checking is possible, these followers of Jesus stand in harmony, allegations of disagreement notwithstanding. Explanations in response to the allegations have been quite convincing.

Paul is deeply committed to Jesus Christ who turned his life around on the road to Damascus (Acts 9). He styles himself a “bondslave” of Christ (Rom 1:1),

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<sup>5</sup>So Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1992) 2-19; Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Tyndale, 1969) 25-34.

regards all things but loss that he may win Christ (Phil 3:4-10), expects Christ to judge even his motives (1 Cor 4:3-5) and the quality of his work (3:10-15; 2 Cor 5:10), and is careful to build on Christ the foundation (1 Cor 3:10-11). He counsels others to think what is true (Phil 3:8), celebrates that Christ within believers is the hope of glory (Col 1:27), and estimates Christ as the fulness of the Godhead in a bodily state (Col 2:9). Paul thinks it ever so important to speak the truth about God (Rom 3:4).

Paul's doctrine testifies to his fidelity to Christ. His emphases catch the eye as boldly as streaming banners. They claim Christ's atoning death (Rom 3:23-32) and faith as the means to gain justification through Christ's work on the cross (Romans 3-5). They teach believers' death and resurrection with Christ (Romans 6), and Christ as made to believers wisdom (1 Cor 1:30). They show that Christ is speaking in Paul (2 Cor 13:3). Paul was zealous that "the word of Christ" dwell richly in saints (Col 3:16). He testified that he delivered doctrine he had received from Christ (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3), and fervently anticipates being conformed to Christ (Phil 3:10). He sharply warns against false teaching (Rom 16:17). To him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are in Christ (Col 2:3).

So utterly devoted to Christ was Paul that it is quite improbable that he was out of step with Jesus on the very crucial point of eternal punishment, a point that relates to those who reject the gospel which he championed so passionately (1 Cor 9:19-23). He maintained integrity with this gospel (cf. 2 Cor 4:2, 5; 13:8), and contemplated judgment for any who distort it (Gal 1:6-9). He honored the message that Christ entrusted (1 Thess 2:3-4). Likewise he appealed to others to rally steadfastly to the teaching (2 Thess 2:15).

Paul also is in concord with Peter, as at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), and agrees with Christ's leaders on matters relating to the gospel (Gal 2:2). On points of doctrine Paul was right down the line with what all those loyal to Christ hold. He rebuked those who differ from what is properly taught about Christ (1 Cor 15:12).

Paul's expectations for the future were in accord with Christ about Christ giving reward to believers (Luke 19:12-27; 1 Cor 3:12-15), judging the unsaved (Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:8-9), giving eternal life to the justified and rendering eternal judgment to the unsaved (2 Thess 1:8-9).

In view of Paul's stalwart commitment to Christ, he would have been insincere and disloyal to pose a meaning on the destiny of the unsaved different from what Jesus taught or His other followers maintained. The consistent position is to see Paul in complete harmony with the view coming from the one he made it his ambition always to please (2 Cor 5:9), the One to whom his every thought was captive (2 Cor 10:4-5).

Hopefully Paul's unity with Christ clears the air about the concept he most probably means to convey on future punishment, just as on any issue.

### Paul's Conciseness Is True to Scripture Detail Elsewhere

Where Paul or any biblical writer, inspired by God, is more brief than another, this does not suggest conflict. Two writers can agree in essence on truth even if one is more definitive. If they are truthful channels relating what the God who masterminds His Word directs them to write, He helps them have their act together.

The following sections will develop Paul's expressions about eternal punishment. These integrate with other Scripture about ultimate retribution. Paul's words at a given point harmonize with others' words and his own writings elsewhere. Attention will focus on three passages where Paul says the most about eternal punishment.

#### ***Romans 2:6-10***

The context of Rom 2:6-10 reasons that all in the human race are guilty of sin (cf. 3:23). They need justification through grace (1:17–3:20). Those who fault others while guilty themselves only register a self-indictment; they themselves are ripe for God's judgment. Those who oppose God, rather than humbly seeking His merciful salvation, keep heaping up a "treasury" (θησαυρός, *thesauros*) of wrath (v. 4).<sup>6</sup> Their guilt stores up wrath, and God will hold them liable in final judgment.

Paul makes the point in Rom 2:6 that God will judge every human according to his/her works. True to Scripture, he writes what others have testified (Ps 62:12; Prov. 24:12). Works never save, but they become an index—even an out-flowing expression—of heart realities in faith or in a lack of faith. An illustration is the hands on a clock; they reflect the way the hidden mechanism is set within. This is true in respect to faith. God can indict sinners for their sin, provide for their salvation, actually save them, and after this enable them to have works that are the outworking of faith's transformation as His grace is a dynamic effectively at work within them (1 Cor 15:10). On the other hand, unbelief fosters works reflecting a sinful nature, its values and its motivations.

The OT has many examples of works of both saved and unsaved. Passages refer to the produce of the life that is, in faith and with God's blessing, good fruit (Ps 1:1-3; Mic 6:8; Zech 4:6). The just person, made and declared just by God's merciful gift (cf. Gen 15:6; Rom 4:1-5), exhibits faith's faithfulness to some degree in behavior. This is a product of God's enabling grace; it shows the reality of the salvation received as God's gift (Rom 6:22 f.). Those who have faith in God are of a genuine circumcision that is of the heart (Deut 4:6; Jer 4:4; Rom 2:25-29). On the other hand, the person without justification from God lives only out of the vacuum of his own insufficiency. His works are the products of sin's selfish instigations, reflecting disobedience in the heart's response to God. In Psalm 1, the ungodly do

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<sup>6</sup>BAGD, 361.

not please God and gravitate to His judgment bar where they are discomfited, unable to maintain a case for their value system and its fruits (1:4-5). Similarly, in Hab 2:4, the unjust show no confidence in God. On the contrary, they reflect a collapse that betrays human insufficiency in all the things on which they rely. Habakkuk gives an example of such people right in his context, the Babylonians whom God will use to invade Judah. The invaders work out their own selfish impulses; their motives are not to do what pleases the Lord. God will indict them at the time He chooses and deal with their guilt that the same context goes on to list (2:5-20).

In Romans 2, Paul, as well, contrasts saved and unsaved. In the saved, grace through faith has its God-glorifying exercise in what they “seek”—Paul does not say that they “merit.”<sup>7</sup> The values that they seek Paul makes clear in three examples in v. 7 and again in three at the close of the contrast in v. 10. The unsaved draw Paul’s focus second, in vv. 8-9. The apostle sees them as styled by their ambition keynoted in disobedience to God and His truth. Paul says that these must, as a result of their rejecting God, meet with His punishment.

In comments describing the punishment, Paul utilizes four terms. He sets these forth in two pairs. The first pair of words spotlights God’s anger in punishing (ὀργή [*org\_*] and θυμός [*thymos*]). The last pair deals with the offenders’ anguish. They feel retribution that their own sin invited God to bring on them (θλῆσις [*thlipsis*] and στενοχωρία [*stenoch\_ria*]).

The word “and” (καί [*kai*]) joins the two words of the first pair and also the two of the last pair. But no “and” connects the two pairs. Paul’s first duet brings together *org\_* (“anger, wrath”) and *thymos* (“fury, indignation”) which depict the standpoint of God, His displeasure in zeal that carries out retribution on those who have not believed Him (cf. 1:1-17), and have not repented in response to His kindness (2:4). After these two terms depict God’s punishment, Paul shifts the spotlight to the consequences, the pain or ordeal the condemned must endure.

“Wrath” (*org\_*) and “fury” (*thymos*) occur together in Paul only here. In examples outside Paul they combine as here. In the LXX, Ps 78[79]:49 is an example. Another instance is Nebuchadnezzar, filled with “rage (*thymos*) and fury (*org\_*)” at three Hebrews who defy his will, refusing to bow to his golden image (Dan 3:13). Micah 5:15 expects God to unleash vengeance in “anger (*org\_*) and wrath (*thymos*)” on disobedient nations. As either term can be put first in the OT word order, the order also varies in the NT. Ephesians 4:31 uses *thymos* before *org\_* of angry attitudes saints should avoid; Col 3:8 employs the reverse order of

<sup>7</sup>So C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 1:147. To “seek” is frequently a good attitude in Scripture, e.g. to seek God (Ps 105:4; Heb 11:6), peace (Ps 34:14), justice (Isa 1:17), righteousness (Zeph 2:3); wisdom (Prov 2:4), God’s kingdom (Matt 6:33), etc. The point is in seeking what God elsewhere represents as the blessedness that His grace will bestow, i.e., glory (Rom 8:18, 21, 30; 1 Thess 2:12), honor (1 Pet 1:7), immortality (1 Cor 15:42, 50, 53 f.; 2 Tim 1:10), eternal life (Rom 5:21; 6:22-23).

attitudes; and in Rev 19:15 God judges massed armies in *thymos* and *org\_*. Uncertainty attaches to making a clear-cut distinction in meaning between the two. Both refer to wrath, but some who comment on Romans 2 render *org\_* as “wrath,” then *thymos* as God’s intense execution of this, His “indignation.” This distinction makes sense, yet falls short of unequivocal proof.

Whether or not one opts for these meanings in differentiating between the two words, one point is sure. As a pair, the words convey God’s anger to confront in a showdown those who have set themselves against Him. Paul does not in Romans 2 define the duration of the wrath that finalizes God’s posture toward the unsaved. As already said, Paul would reasonably fill in this detail in accord with the eternally continuing conscious punishment taught by his Lord and fellow-leaders writing NT books. Examples of the latter are John<sup>8</sup> and Jude.<sup>9</sup>

“Wrath” can occur in the present situation (Rom 1:18-32; 1 Thess 2:16) as man’s sin ensnares him in its consequences and has its appropriate effect. In some passages wrath is future, as is Paul’s emphasis (Rom 2:5, 8; 1 Thess 5:9). Jesus warned the unsaved of “wrath” yet to come (Matt 3:7), and later set eternal punishment in contrast to eternal life (25:46). As the “life” goes on without end, the other destiny, punishment, would also most naturally be just as perpetual. John understood the unsaved to continue still existing in their ultimate state while New Jerusalem bliss is experienced without cessation by the redeemed. The unsaved are still present, even while excluded, “outside,” in a place that is fitting for them, distinct from the city where the saved enjoy bliss without cessation (22:15). Of course, John in context specifies that other place as the “lake of fire” (20:15; 21:8).

As Jesus did, Paul forecast a “day of wrath” when God will reckon ultimately with those who have rejected Him (Rom 2:5; cf. Col 3:6). Romans 5:8 follows up on Romans 1–2 with the wrath God will mete out in that time. Paul conceives of those who have faith as being saved from wrath through Christ (Rom 5:9). In Rom 2:8, the “wrath and indignation” refer to a destiny that is opposite to “eternal life” in v. 7. Of course, Paul sees retribution as “eternal” in 2 Thess 1:8-9. And in 9:22-23, “vessels [recipients] of mercy” with eternal life are put in awesome contrast to “vessels [recipients] of wrath,” the latter not having eternal life.

Paul’s other word pair in Rom 2:8-9 about final punishment concentrates

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Craigen, “Eternal Punishment in John’s Revelation”; cf. also earlier in the present article.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Jude 13: these rejecters of God’s way fit various descriptions (vv. 12-13), e.g., “wandering stars,” etc. For such stars (persons), the ultimate destiny is “the black darkness . . . reserved forever.” Reserving a state for people assumes that the people are to be consigned there, still existing, or the need for reservation is pointless.

on the painful ordeal of the unsaved. *Thlipsis* means “affliction” or “tribulation,” sometimes that of believers’ sufferings in present life trials (Rom 5:3; 8:35; 12:12). But, as in Rom 2:8, the term also can describe the woeful pressure God justly deals unbelievers in ultimate retribution (2 Thess 1:6).

The second word, *stenoch\_ria*, depicts the “distress” or “anguish” the unsaved undergo. The term occurs often with *thlipsis* in the LXX here and elsewhere in the NT for believers’ painful present difficulties (Rom 8:35; 2 Cor 6:4). But in its context in Rom 2:9, the ordeal is that of the *unsaved*; it is *their* ultimate situation.

As with the first two terms already discussed, those who write about this second pair frequently suggest a distinction that is possible but lacks certainty. Cranfield in his Romans commentary, for example, sees here the painful distress that God’s dealing of affliction brings when the punished feel it.

Whether the two terms are synonymous or distinct for pain, the afflicted feel the pain. Paul does not go on into detail to clarify the duration of the punishment. However, Paul’s utter avowal of Christ’s lordship places its powerful impress on what he teaches as truth *even about final destinies*. This points to his harmony with Jesus. The duration is unending, not only as pertaining to eternal *life* but just as much to eternal *punishment* (cf. “eternal destruction [ruin],” later on 2 Thess 1:9).

Among points etched clearly in Rom 2:6-10 is this. Paul expects the unsaved to bear God’s *indignation*, a reality very different from *annihilation*. And in the second pair of words, Paul’s concept is people’s *distress*, not their *deletion*.

One is free to think differently, to imagine that he has insight to modify the meaning of what Paul says in an outright fashion or to resolve Paul’s words to mean something not really as natural as what the words normally call for. But an insistent sensitivity to keep fidelity with Paul’s words and a conviction that he writes the truth leads others to an unwavering concept of what God verily conveys by His servant.

To Paul in Romans, the God who loves (5:8) also is resolute to uphold justice, in a balance. God is righteous (2:5), true (3:4), faithful (3:3). Apart from the transforming that His grace can effect, men are unrighteous and untruthful (1:18), unthankful (1:21, 25), perverters of His glory (1:23), lustful (1:24), and deniers of His rights as Creator (1:25). They prove worthy of the penalty God thinks it just to assign them (1:27; 3:23), profiled by a veritable “syllabus of sins” (1:29-31). They stand self-condemned by their inconsistency (2:1), treasuring up wrath that will inevitably exact its toll on themselves (2:5). Paul urges, “Let God be true,” even though every man be found a liar (3:4). He discerns that man is an upstart having no valid right to take issue with God’s sovereign wisdom or code of ethics in doing what He does (9:20).

Paul’s contrast in Rom 2:7-10 is between blessing and blight. Some persevere in doing good. They “seek” validly (never “merit”!) glory, honor, immortality. They will receive in its ultimate fulness God’s gift, eternal life. Otherwise in Romans, Paul holds in forthright clarity that indeed some *do* obey the

Lord. They do this as the saved, moved of course by grace through faith and manifesting what is good, i.e., fruit (2:25-29; 4:19-21; 6:17, 22; 8:3, 14; 13:8-10). They obey even if imperfectly, helped by the Spirit, who gives a true circumcision of the heart (2:29; 8:3, 14). Paul always expects the Spirit's power for pleasing God (15:13). These who "seek" in the way of 2:7, 10 are viewed as reaching the consequence on which they set their values, realizing fulfillment of a hope that shaped the way they lived (cf. 8:25), as in Psalm 1. Their destiny has its eventual eternal daybreak in a state of "glory, honor, and peace." Paul refers to "peace" (v. 10), whereas in v. 7 his third word for what is hoped for is "immortality." This is plausibly because that immortal bliss is free of the sin principle that stirred discord with and enmity toward God (cf. 7:14-25). In it the saved will realize peace as there at last they devote themselves exclusively to God, set free forever from any taint of what causes friction with Him, people or things.

On the other hand, those who insist on clutching the bubble of selfish will must see that bubble burst due to God's moral judgment. God prevails. He has the moral perfection, the justice and its right, to judge as infinite wisdom knows best. In this case Paul's concept of the punishment that the unredeemed feel is thoroughly integrated in the will of the Lord who is his life (Phil 1:21; Col 3:1-4), his authority, his all in all.

### ***Romans 9:22-23***

The significance of Rom 9:22-23 for this study centers in Paul's figure to describe the unsaved. They are "vessels of wrath fitted for destruction." Paul portrays those whom God condemns in contrast to "vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand to glory." The main issue crucial to this study attaches to the meaning of the word "destruction" in relation to the nature of future punishment.

Another exegetical issue is to identify whom Paul sees as fitting vessels for destruction. "Fitted" is from the middle/passive form of the aorist tense of *κατατίζω* (*katartizō*). Viewed as passive, the vessels (unsaved) are prepared by *God* for destruction. This follows from God's being the potter who shapes people in the context (vv. 20-21). But if Paul means the middle idea, the *people* shape or fit themselves for destruction by their unbelief and lack of repentance. Reasons are plentiful for either view, but one's view on this does not affect the main issue of this paper, what "destruction" means.

*God* fitting vessels for this destiny is cogent. (1) *God* hardened the Pharaoh (v. 18); (2) *God* is the potter who prepares a vessel, representing a person (21-23); (3) *God* being the one who prepares some for glory, it would appear that *God* prepares others not for glory, i.e., for wrath and destruction; (4) *God* in other passages prepares for destinies, in Paul (1 Thess 5:9) and in other writers (1 Pet 2:8; Rev 13:8).

One also observes factors that favor the middle voice idea, that *people* suit themselves to a destiny. (1) Paul states definitely that *God* prepares vessels for glory,

yet Paul withholds this particularity from the phrase about other vessels, possibly doing this deliberately; (2) God is immediately regarded as “enduring” vessels, as if *they* were fitting themselves in a sense, disobedient to Him, and He was bearing this (cf. 2:8); (3) “Whoever” in 10:11, 13 has its place, as does the phrase in 5:17, “those who receive,” showing that a legitimate *human* response has a role as to destiny. (4) Other Scripture sees *people* as responsible to believe, and condemned because *they* do not (John 3:16, 18-19; 8:24; Rom 10:3-4). (5) In a similar passage about destroying a vessel, Jeremiah shatters the vessel to bits (Jeremiah 19). That context rather heavily shows that the vessel, representing *Israel* whom God must judge, fits *itself* for destruction by refusing to believe and repent.

Reason fairly favors either view. God in His sovereign control of all fits men, and in concord with this men also fit themselves even if the final resolution of the tension lies only within God’s infinite mind. The opposite also has some kind of interplay: God fits some for glory in the final, ultimate sense as taking the initiative and giving certainty. It is compatible with this that men in their response prepare themselves to enter into and have eminence within the realm of glory finally as those who remain unjustified are liable to punishment because they do not believe and turn to God (cf. Paul in Acts 20:21; 26:18-20).

But again, whichever way one resolves the above issue, the crux for the present study is the nature of punishment. What is meant in the “destruction” (πόλεια, *ap\_leia*)? Paul in Phil 3:19 uses the same word in writing of the ungodly who thrive on self-serving, sensual cravings. Their “end is destruction.” Both the word “end” (τέλος, *telos*) and the term “destruction” (*ap\_leia*) are part of Paul’s vocabulary to describe the final state of the unsaved.

*The “end.”* The *telos* in Philippians 3 is that of the unsaved, “enemies of the cross of Christ” (v. 18). Their god is not the Lord, but their lust, gratifying self-indulging appetites. Not God’s glory but what caters to their own shame characterizes them. Their minds fix on earthly things as the value base that inspires them and consumes their thoughts.

By sharp contrast, Paul clarifies, “our citizenship,” that of believers in Christ, is not earthly but in heaven (cf. Col 3:1-4). From the throne of government in the heavenly capital of their spiritual empire, believers await a scheduled visitation by their Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ (3:20; cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18). Their future will be one of Christ transforming their bodies into glorious resurrection bodies styled after His own (3:21). As the saved, the destiny awaiting them is God’s kingdom and glory (1 Thess 2:12), consistent with other NT passages in which it is eternal in Christ’s presence (1 Thess 5:18; cf. John 14:1-2; Rev 21:1–22:5). How great is the contrast between this and the outlook for the unsaved, whose “end” or *telos* is “destruction.” In such a contrast, the picture is not that of *cessation by extinction* but of ruin and emptiness, void of all that gives blissful meaning to the saved. Paul also would agree with the awful anguish in whatever fiery retribution entails in 2

Thessalonians 1.

In Rom 6:21-22, Paul conceives of the *telos* for the unjustified. He contrasts it with the *telos* God holds in prospect for the justified. This *telos* is the “end, goal, or final outcome.” The goal is the fitting fruition to which a given life leads. For the unsaved, Paul sees the *telos* as “death” (6:21), defined soon afterward as the wages or pay-off that sin hands out, or to which it leads (6:23). By contrast, the justified are having (present tense) fruit of their eternal life in relation to sanctification now, and the *telos* or ultimate outcome, the final goal to which justification and sanctification reaches, “eternal life” in its fuller realization. This eternal life Paul sees as God’s gift (23) as distinguished from the merited pay check that sin drafts, “death.”

Setting the two in direct opposition does not suggest that the “end” or “death” for the unsaved is extinction. It suggests a destiny that is the appropriate outcome, the final, irreversible state in contrast to “eternal life” that has its ongoing duration. Such a finalized outcome, yet continuing existence, though in wreckage willfully self-inflicted, is consistent with Jesus’ direct contrast of eternal *punishment* with eternal *life* (Matt 25:46). It also is in concord with His figure of the ungodly persons’ worm [in their estate of death] not dying, the flame that brings them grief not being snuffed out, their weeping and gnashing of teeth in suffering. The “end” is not a situation of nothingness void of any existing being that remains to suffer anguish. No passage envisions persuasively that the grief is brought to a finish and after that all is nothingness.

Paul’s concept of the “end” and “destruction” is also consistent with John’s words. John is clear enough that punishment is ongoing (Revelation 14, 20, 21, 22). Paul’s idea further makes sense with the two destinies he sees in Romans 9, “destruction” or “glory.” Those are the two that his epistles consistently distinguish. In contrast to the final condition of the unjustified, the justified will be in a sphere of glory (Rom 8:18-25; 2 Cor 4:17 f.; Col 3:4; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:10-12).

*The destruction.* Thomas has shown in this issue that *ap\_leian* is widely used of a state that continues on.<sup>10</sup> Besides this term, Paul has another word for “destruction,” *λεθρος* (*olethros*). It will emerge in the section on 2 Thess 1:9. Paul defines the span of destruction there by the adjective “eternal.” And in that same context Paul writes other details that reflect on an unceasing state in which the unsaved are to experience the destruction (ruin). Geisler’s analogy seems apt, even though falling short of the awful fullness to picture eternal ruin. He describes eternal human destruction by automobiles that still exist but are in a wreckage area.<sup>11</sup>

In 2 Cor 11:15 Paul says that the *telos* of false teachers will be “according to their works.” This shows that the final outcome will be in a destiny that God

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Thomas, “Jesus’ View.”

<sup>11</sup>Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1992) 493.

deems suited to a false teacher's works. Paul would understand the works as the ungodly issue (cf. Rom 6:21) of a life void of faith (cf. Rom 10:17) and repentance (2:4; cf. Acts 20:21; 26:18-20).

Now Paul's third main passage deserves attention.

### **2 Thessalonians 1:8-9**

In 2 Thess 1:8-9 is Paul's fullest word on final punishment. In his context two things stand out in sharp contrast (1:3 ff.). The first is for *believers* who are hurt by persecutions now (1:3-6), but God will give them eternal "rest" in their ultimate estate (1:7a, cf. vv.10-12). Then Paul's second contrast is for the *unsaved*. They now have the upper hand, afflicting believers, but ultimately God will punish the afflicting ones themselves in a great turnabout.

Paul uses this flow of thought to spell out the *nature* and *duration* of punishment. This, Paul reasons, will include three details that he mentions in this passage.

(1) The revelation of Christ (v. 7). The apostle says that the Lord Jesus shall be "revealed," using the word *ποκαλύπτω* (*apokalyptō*, "I reveal"). The future tense looks to Christ's second advent unveiling. The statement harmonizes with many NT texts that place the process of judgment at and following the end of this present age, or Christ's second coming. This is the affirmation of Jesus (Matt 16:27 f.; 26:64; Mark 14:62), John (Rev 1:7; 14:9-11), and other NT witnesses (Jude 13). The Lord's coming "from heaven" fits with other biblical passages. Judgment issues from a *heavenly* source, with the God of heaven wielding the last, unanswerable word over those whose power runs out (Dan 2:35; Matt 26:64; Rev 14:13 ff.).

The revelation is of the *Lord* Himself, and from *heaven*. It is also "in a fiery flame" (*en puri phlogos*). Some refer the fire to the appearance of Christ and the angels when revealed. The meaning that this conveys relates to the glorious, majestic splendor shining out at Christ's coming to reign, as He was dazzling at His transfiguration (Matt 17:2). Thomas associates fire, for example, with the glory when Christ is revealed, as earlier in v. 7.<sup>12</sup> One recalls the glory sheen from God who judges in Ezek 1:26-28. Or it possibly connects with the example of the bright flame of literal fire attending the appearance of the angel of the LORD (a theophany, cf. Acts 7:30), miraculous as when it blazed in the burning bush (Exod 3:2).<sup>13</sup> Still others view fire in Paul's language here as related to the words that follow, i.e., the

<sup>12</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "2 Thessalonians," *EBC* 11:86.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Thomas Constable, "2 Thessalonians," *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton, Ill.: Scripture Press, 1983) 2:715; J. E. Frame also points to the manner of the revelation from heaven, using Exod 3:2 (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Paul to the Thessalonians* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1970] 232). One should remember that Exod 3:2 and other passages describe the theophanies not only as shining but as connected with fire also. He should also note that listing references about shining where contexts do not focus on judgment is not relevant to 2 Thess 1:7-8, a context in which judgment is prominent.

irresistible and unceasing sentence of fire from Christ that will lash forth upon and envelope those He judges.<sup>14</sup>

Any of the views glorifies Christ. The last interpretation appears to have more evidence in its favor in 2 Thessalonians 1. First, Paul claims that Christ speaks in him (2 Cor 13:3), and it is fitting that Paul be a channel of Jesus' teaching about *judging* men with the fire of Gehenna. This can be the case whether that be taken to mean future fire of the same literal nature as that known now on earth, a fire that is literal but of a unique nature suited to judging humans eternally without incinerating them, or a figure (fire) depicting a means of real punishment bringing agony beyond what human minds now are capable of grasping (cf. Dan 7:9-10; Matt 5:22, 29; 10:28).

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<sup>14</sup>So Charles Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 226-27; I. H. Marshall, *First and Second Thessalonians*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 177; Friedrich Lang, "π\_ρ," *TDNT* 6:944-45. The above sources portray fire as a means that Christ uses in judgment, unlike George Milligan, who says, "There is certainly no thought here of 'fire' as the actual instrument for the destruction of the ungodly" (*St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians* [1980 reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, n.d.] 90), or Ernest Best (*A Commentary on the First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* [London: Adam and Charles Black, 1972] 259).

Second, Paul's phrase more naturally means a fiery flame than an outshining magnificence, though fire could have a bright appearance.<sup>15</sup> Third, judgment that involves fire *coming upon the unsaved* suits Isa 66:15. Isaiah writes of the Lord coming "in fire" dealing out "flames of fire" in judgment (cf. again Dan 7:9-10; cf. also passages where the Lord coming with fire refers to His judging of sinners, Ps 50:3; 97:3). Fourth, John, tutored by the same Lord Paul knew, writes of a "lake of fire," i.e., some kind of judgmental reality that he describes as "fire" (Rev 20:15).

That refers to the ultimate state into which God casts the unsaved (cf. 21:8). Paul likewise sees it as relevant in his context with "eternal destruction" (2 Thess 1:9). Fifth, at this point in Paul's context in 2 Thessalonians his focus is directed to judgment that causes *affliction* to the unsaved, not just to the *appearance* of Christ.

This does not deny that He will shine in His coming. For His glory belongs to one capable of judging sinners and sin, as many passages bear witness.<sup>16</sup> The "flame of fire" is more than a radiance; it depicts fire used as the element in the judgmental process itself.<sup>17</sup> It is fire issuing from Christ as He slays the wicked (Isa 11:4; 2 Thess 2:8). This fire continues in a process of "eternal" punishment as in v. 9 and Rev 20:15. The context of 2 Thessalonians speaks of the implementing of retribution against the unsaved when it mentions "retribution" or "vengeance" and "eternal destruction."

Paul's thought in context directly emphasizes the punishment.

(2) The retribution by Christ (2 Thess 1:8-9). Paul writes of Christ and His angels dealing out "retribution" (κδίκησις, *ekdik\_sis*). The use of *ekdik\_sis* is appropriate to refer to future judgment. The term means "vengeance," but does not suggest a vindictive spirit in God, rather "righteous retribution" in a fair view of what God discerns the unsaved deserve. In context they afflicted *God's* people, and this was striking against the *God* of these people. In 1 Thess 4:6 Paul uses a form of the word; the Lord renders "retribution," as in 2 Thess 1:8. *Ekdik\_sis* is "just vengeance," consistent with the "judgment" that the context shows is "righteous" in v. 5; both words come from the same word stem as does the term for God's being "just" in v. 6.

God the Father has rendered to God the Son, described as like a son of man in Dan 7:13-14, authority to measure out judgment as in the latter verses of Daniel 7. This is true also in John 5:27. Luke writes of Paul saying that Christ will judge as the man God has appointed to do this (Acts 17:31). God deals deserved judgment

<sup>15</sup>It is, lit., "flame of fire," whereas NT descriptions quite different from it depict Christ's brightness when He appears or thereafter: the sign of His glory in the clouds (Matt 24:30; cf. 16:27); eyes like a flame of fire, i.e., bright and penetrating to judge thoroughly (Rev 1:14; cf. 2:23); His feet glistening as polished bronze glowing in a furnace (Rev 1:15), and Christ shining as the light that lights up the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:23). Also, none of the NT passages about Jesus' transfiguration refer to *fire* or *flame* in connection with *shining* or *glory* (cf. Matt 17:2-5; Mark 9:2-3; Luke 9:29-32; 2 Pet 1:16-17).

<sup>16</sup>In Daniel 7, the picture is books, open to depict exposing men's works, which God judges.

<sup>17</sup>Cf. n. 15; cf. also n. 14, especially in Lang, "π\_ρ" 944-45, and BAGD, 737.

(Deut 32:35; Ps 93:1; Is. 59:17 f.; Nah 1:2; Rom 12:19; 2 Cor 7:11; Heb 10:30). The same word, *ekdik\_sis*, occurs again of God's second advent justice, vindicating His elect (Luke 18:7). Paul in 2 Thessalonians 1 does as Jesus did, referring to God's retribution on the unsaved in relation to wrong they inflicted on His people. This does not deny other sins they also must answer for, as Thomas in this series shows (cf. 2 Thess 2:10, 12).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Thomas, "Jesus' View."

Paul says that this just judgment comes “to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” Since he uses the phrase “to those” twice here, he may intend to mark out two groups. If so, he allows for some who do not know God—these who did not hear the gospel per se but are still without excuse before God (cf. Rom 2:12-15)—and others who did hear the gospel but did not honor it in a faith/obedience response.<sup>19</sup> Another view of the repeated “to those” has Paul’s wording embrace all of the unsaved as defined in a twofold description. All do not *know* God in a saving reality and all of these also do not *obey* His gospel. That is, every one of these lacks both the *relationship* with God that the saved have and the *response* that those who do know him in genuine salvation have.<sup>20</sup>

Either view fits well with Scripture. Overall, more evidence favors relating both descriptions to all the unsaved. Paul’s context has not been referring to the heathen who never heard as he does in Rom 2:12-15. Also, the focus here is on *disobedience*, rather than *not hearing*. Paul has a Hebraic background which often describes the same truth two ways in parallelism (Ps 149:7; Jer 10:25). In the very context of 2 Thessalonians 1, v. 10 uses a repeated *tois* for “saints” and “those who believed,” the same group. Paul refers even to Gentiles as disobedient (Rom 11:30-32). Not only this, but unsaved Jews also do not genuinely know God (Jer 2:8; 4:22; 9:3, 6; Hos 5:4; John 8:19, 44, 55; 15:21; 16:3; 17:25; cf. 1 John 3:1).

Whether the phrases distinguish two groups that make up all the condemned

<sup>19</sup>Thomas sees the unsaved in two distinct groups (“2 Thessalonians” 87). The first is Gentiles who are “without God” (Eph 2:12), the phrase being an OT way of referring to Gentiles (Jer 10:25; cf. Ps 79:6[LXX, 78:6]). The second includes Jews who know God but do not believe and obey, as in Rom 10:16. Cf. Frame, *A Critical Commentary* 233, and Marshall, *Thessalonians* 177 f., for the same essential view.

<sup>20</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 121; Best, *Thessalonians* 260, who holds that repetition of the article does not imply two groups but is “to emphasize the enormity of their action”; Wanamaker, *Thessalonians* 227-28; Roger Aus, *Comfort in Judgment: The Use of the Day of the Lord and Theophany Tradition in Second Thessalonians 1* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Yale University, New Haven, Conn., 1971) 88; John R. W. Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time: The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1991) 148.

or refer to all by two descriptions that profile all, Paul's essential concept on the nature of punishment remains. Paul expects punishment for all the unsaved. It is to "pay the penalty of eternal destruction," a reality that is stark and certain, like his phrase "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), i.e., the wages that sin will pay to the unsaved. All who reject God's free gift must face this eternal death as they depend on their own works and fall liable to God's righteous judgment without having Christ's righteousness to be their surety.

"Eternal destruction" is, without a definite article, *λεθρον α̅ωνιον* (*olethron ai\_nion*). Paul's use is the only NT instance which combines this word for "destruction" with the adjective "eternal."

*Olethros* has various usages. In secular Greek, it depicts "destruction" in corruption of physical death.<sup>21</sup> The term also can denote a loss of money, being "wiped out" or "reduced to ruin."<sup>22</sup> In the LXX the word appears in Jeremiah's description of an army wiped out (Jeremiah 31(48):3). Then Paul uses *olethros* of destruction that overtakes those who hold out foolish hopes of peace and safety (1 Thess 5:3). In 1 Tim 6:9, temptations and lusts catapult the indulgent into "corruption and ruin," using first *olethros*, then *ap\_leian*. The earlier term depicts "corruption," possibly in a shattered state of existence that is pathetic in debauchery, or else the final temporal step in corruption, physical death. In the same phrase, *ap\_leian* portrays "ruin."<sup>23</sup> The words together convey "complete destruction,"<sup>24</sup> or the derelict stage of wreckage while yet physically alive is followed by the more final, utter temporal ruin in physical death. Another possibility is that the ruin that comes in bodily death also thrusts one on to the utter, irrevocable eternal spiritual ruin (cf. Heb 9:27). The context suggests this as it refers to ultimate destiny (vv. 7, 12, 14, 17, 19).

In 1 Cor 5:5, Paul counsels the church at Corinth to deliver over to Satan an unrepentant church member guilty of sexual offense for "destruction (*olethron*) of the flesh." Probably this refers to bodily ruin in physical death.<sup>25</sup> Paul hopes that the discipline will provoke a remedy before death, repentance, so that the offender might turn out to be saved at the future judgment.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>21</sup>J. S. Schneider, "λεθρος," *TDNT*, 5:168.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, "loss of money"; for military destruction, cf. several references in Wanamaker, *Epistles to the Thessalonians* 228.

<sup>23</sup>George W. Knight, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 256.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Schneider, "λεθρον" 169; cf. also Knight, *Pastoral Epistles* 256.

<sup>25</sup>Lieselotte Mattern, *Das Verständnis des Gerichtes bei Paulus, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments*, XLVII (Zurich/Stuttgart: Zwingli Verlag, 1966) 103-8.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. John A. Witmer, "Who is My Brother?", *Bibliotheca Sacra* 126 (1969):156: as in a case where the same phrase occurs ("deliver to Satan"), 1 Tim 1:20, Paul's aim is not condemnation but reclamation through repentance. The man's sinful indulgence, similar to that of the "unrighteous" who are unsaved (6:9 f.) "casts suspicion on the reality of his profession of faith (1 Cor 5:11)." Whatever his state, repentance can assure his winding up saved in the ultimate situation.

In 1 Corinthians 5, ruin exacting its toll on a person who still exists is in view. Distinct from this, *olethros* in 2 Thessalonians 1 as “eternal destruction” is the ultimate kind of ruin. Destruction in 1 Cor 5:5 leaves an offender still existing (even when physical death occurs), but he must face a later verdict, after physical death, in “the day of Jesus Christ.” Likewise God can carry through with the destruction in 2 Thessalonians 1 though those upon whom He is executing it are continuing to exist while suffering it.

*Ai\_nios* is, of course, related to the noun *α\_ών* (*ai\_n*), “age, generation, space of time in the past or future.” The word’s usage in a given contextual connection (secular Greek or NT) suggests the meaning span that is most pertinent in each case. In the NT the word family often means eternity absolutely, what will not end (Luke 1:55; John 6:51; 12:34; Heb 7:17; 1 John 2:17). Used of God, the word bears this absolute sense. He is “the eternal God” (LXX, Gen 21:33; Isa 26:4; 40:28; Rom 16:26), and other NT writers employ it of Christ as absolutely eternal (Heb 1:10 [from Ps 101:26]; 13:8; Rev 1:17; 2:8). The adjective *ai\_nios* is linked not only with God (Rom 16:26), but also with “eternal comfort” in the same context of 2 Thessalonians (2:16). It occurs for God’s “eternal purpose” (Eph 3:11) and a believer’s glorified body as an “eternal house in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1).

In other descriptions the word also refers to what will never end: “the eternal covenant” (Heb 13:20), “eternal salvation” (5:9), “eternal redemption” (9:12), and “eternal inheritance” (9:15). The term speaks of eternal realities such as “judgment” (6:2), God’s eternal power and Godhood (Rom 1:20), eternal “fire” (Matt 18:8; 25:41), “punishment” (25:46), “dominion” (1 Tim 6:16), “glory” (2 Tim 2:10; 1 Pet 5:10), unpardonable “sin” (Mark 3:29), “bonds” that hold wicked angels in their sinful condition (Jude 6), and the “gospel” that will never cease to have relevance (Rev 14:6).

Every reality here denotes what continues, never ceasing. Such a duration is distinct from something blotted out, gone, put in the past forever. That gives additional confidence about Paul’s natural meaning as unending punishment when he writes of “eternal destruction [ruin]” in 2 Thess 1:9. The destruction is a reality in which the unsaved are in a ruin that continues to be their state while they go on enduring the “affliction” that God repays them in 2 Thess 1:6.

Paul’s says more about the nature of punishment.

(3) The exclusion from the presence of Christ (2 Thess 1:9). Paul depicts that the punishment is “away from [*π\_ό*, *apo*] the presence [face] of the Lord and away from [second *apo*] the glory of His power.” If the apostle’s idea is annihilation, he does not use any clear term to specify a blotting from existence. Rather, his double *apo* places a marked emphasis on exemption from being in the Lord’s presence. This is not absolute, for God is everywhere present, having awareness and ability to operate there. The exclusion is rather in the sense of any possibility for acceptance, bliss, or fellowship. The picture describes rejection, being shut out (cf. Luke 13:30, the door shut), not rubbed out of existence; it is exclusion, not extinction.

It refers to banning and barrenness (privation), not blotting out. It is more than even this as it involves, actively, the indescribable anguish (cf. Rom 2:9) of the fire so many passages use to depict suffering pain.

In the banishment is utter ruin, the final step in having failed to seize the opportunity to know the God whom to know is “glory, honor, immortality, eternal life” (Rom 2:7). Paul sees the saved eternally “with Christ” (Phil 1:23; Col 3:4; 1 Thess 4:17), but the unsaved separated to exist without Him.<sup>27</sup> Plummer’s preference for *olethron* meaning “ruin,” not destruction into nothingness, is sensitive to the evidence.<sup>28</sup>

Paul is explicit about realities from which the banishment excludes the unsaved. These the saved enjoy: relief that soothes (7a), glorifying Christ (10), and marveling at what is wonderfully exhilarating (10).

### Other Considerations

Two other factors in Paul’s letters agree with the above evidence that punishment is conscious and continuous.

*Assertions of not inheriting the kingdom.* In accord with Jesus, Paul viewed God’s kingdom as a leading designation for the realm of blessedness. Jesus saw the benefit of the saved as one of being forever in the kingdom in the final, unending sense (Matt 19:16 ff.; Luke 19:12-27). Paul conceived of the privilege the unsaved miss under the phrase “shall not inherit the kingdom” (1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:21; cf. Eph 5:5). He said, as well, that flesh and blood—man in his natural, mortal estate only—shall not inherit the kingdom, i.e., live in a glorified estate (1 Cor 15:50).

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<sup>27</sup>Herman Sasse, “α\_ὄν,” *TDNT*, 1:197.

<sup>28</sup>Alfred Plummer, *A Commentary on St. Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (London: Paternoster Row, 1918) 25. He adds: “Disastrous loss seems to be implied rather than the extinction of existence.”

The penalty for the unsaved is being *barred* from entrance into the blessing, not *blotted* out of existence. They will continue to have their being though shut out from welfare with God and with His people, rejected from the blessing that the saved share and the sphere in which they enjoy it. Paul's phrasing is very naturally in harmony with Jesus' descriptions of those God rejects. Access is denied them to the state of blessedness, being pictured by a door that shuts them out (Matt 8:11-12; Luke 13:23-30). It is consistent in Matt 25:30 that a so-called but bogus servant, not genuinely saved,<sup>29</sup> cannot enter as others do into the sphere of gladness and festivity (vv. 21, 23). He, by contrast, is cast into "outer darkness."<sup>30</sup> There, rather, he undergoes distress in weeping and gnashing of teeth (25:30).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>That Matt 25:30 refers to an unsaved person is probable because: (1) this fits best with Jesus' pattern in contrasts between people in Matthew 24-25 (cf. 24:40-41 and 24:45-51 where the wicked "servant" is cut in pieces [v. 51] and placed with the hypocrites and with "unbelievers" [Luke 12:46]); (2) "cast" to some other place normally refers to the rejected (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; Luke 13:28).

<sup>30</sup>So it appears to be in other passages (Matt 8:12; 22:13). Scripture nowhere supports a "zone" of "darkness" for the saved, whether in passages referring to a future millennium or to the eternal state. However, the unsaved are banished into darkness (Jude 13).

<sup>31</sup>The reasonableness of weeping relating to anguish of the unsaved fits from Ps 112:10.

Paul's concept also harmonizes with the apostle John's descriptions, which contrast the estate in which the unsaved exist<sup>32</sup> with that which the redeemed enjoy.<sup>33</sup> The saved enjoy various aspects of blessing in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:3-7; 22:1-5). On the other hand, the unsaved are not only excluded *from* such blessing, they are rather *in* the "lake of fire" (21:8).<sup>34</sup> Revelation 22:15, where the immediate context depicts the blessedness of the redeemed, pointedly says that the unsaved are "outside" the eternal city in which the only human heirs are Christ and all the saved (21:7).<sup>35</sup> As with Paul's idea of the rejected being barred from inheritance privileges, so John draws a definite distinction between these *in* the "lake of fire" (21:8) and people *in* the New Jerusalem who are sons, overcomers, heirs (21:7).<sup>36</sup> The text represents the unsaved not as *obliterated*, but *outside*—still existing but at a distance—in another place suitable to them.<sup>37</sup> Paul and John alike introduce no question about their *being*. The focus is on their having existence and God excluding them from the destiny of the saved. The statement does not indicate that they are extinguished.

Paul also agrees with Jesus and John in another detail. The unsaved are consigned (cf. "cast," Rev 20:15; "away from," 2 Thess 1:9) to their own separate destiny because they did not believe unto life (John 3:36 and Rev 20:12-15; Rom 6:23). In addition, they are there as a consistent order of things reflected in their not having the dynamic of God's life producing fruit true to His character. In Paul, the lack of a relationship with God shows in produce of a sinful kind (Rom 6:21; 1 Cor 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21). In John the same reality is essentially the case (1 John 2:15-17). The unsaved are marked by characteristics that are sinful (Rev 9:20; 21:8, 27; 22:15). God judges those destined for punishment as unfit to share in His blessedness due to their names not being in "the book of [eternal] life" by grace through faith in receiving a gift (cf. "without cost," 21:6; 22:17). It is also true that their works in God's divine record "books" manifest that they have not flowed from a true relationship with Him (Rev 20:12-13; cf. 22:15). Paul concurs that having the life that is a gift has a fruit of its own nature (Rom 6:22), the fruit that grace

<sup>32</sup>Cf. Rev 14:9-11; "second death" in 20:14-15 and 21:8; 22:15.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Rev 14:12-13; "life" in 20:11-14; 21:1-7; 22:1-5, 14.

<sup>34</sup>Locality is in view, with no inferences of being taken out of existence.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. also Rev 21:27; 22:14, 19.

<sup>36</sup>Note the Greek *δέ* that introduces 21:8, marking those of the "lake of fire" off from those who in 21:7 are overcomers, heirs, sons of God in the New Jerusalem. For evidence that the terms in 21:7 describe all the saved, see Daniel K. K. Wong, "The Johannine Concept of the Overcomer" (Ph.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Tex., 1995) 118-300.

<sup>37</sup>In Revelation 21, vv. 1-2 refer to the place the saved inhabit, v. 3 to God's presence with the saved and their relation as His possession (cf. Eph 1:14; 4:30), v. 4 to the privileges in the blessed estate, v. 5 to the prospect of God's making all things new, v. 6a to the profile of God who pledges the blessing, v.6b to the grace that assures a place there, v. 7 to the kind of person who inhabits blessedness, then v. 8 to the kind of people who do not populate bliss but are in the lake of fire.

promotes, fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22 f.).

*Absence of language for annihilation.* Like Jesus and other NT writers, Paul never uses words for God's retribution that mean extinction. If they thought that the unsaved would be blotted out, they bypassed NT words that could have made that pointedly clear.

(1) The word *ξάλειψω* (*exaleiph*) means "to smear out, to blot out, to obliterate, to expunge."<sup>38</sup> Several times it distinctly indicates a blotting out. Paul himself uses it of God canceling or blotting out the certificate of death against those who receive Christ (Col 2:14). Luke writes of Peter's and John's appeal to fellow Jews to repent that their sins might be "wiped away" (Acts 3:19). John uses the word three times of Christ's promise not to "blot out" names of overcomers from His book of the saved (Rev 3:5) and of God's wiping away every tear from the saved (7:17; 21:4). In Revelation 7, John emphasizes that certain things are no longer present with the saved in heaven—hunger, thirst, the sun's burning heat, and any hurt from heat. In Revelation 21, the prospect that tears no longer even exist in the blessed realm accompany other things—death, mourning, crying, and pain—that are not there.<sup>39</sup>

Had Paul or any NT writer looked for an apt way to say that punishment of the unsaved comes to the point of their ceasing to exist, this word could express that. But no NT author uses the term to make that point.

(2) Another word is *σβέννυμι* (*sbennumi*, "quench").<sup>40</sup> It occurs for quenching fire, as in Jesus' words drawn from Isa 42:3 about the Messiah not extinguishing the feeble who look to Him. Jesus conveys this in the picture of snuffing a wick's flame, flickering dimly in a lamp (Matt 12:20). The same word surfaces in Jesus' parable of ten virgins. He pictures the lamps of the foolish in the process of "going out" as the women are frantic to coax light to join the coming bridegroom (Matt 25:8). Mark 9:48 has the same word for the doomed; the "fire" punishing them will *not* be "quenched."

The adjective form of the word *σβεστος* (*asbestos*, "not quenched") represents the "fire" of punishment not being extinguished (Mark 9:43),<sup>41</sup> when God burns<sup>42</sup> up the unsaved. John the Baptist portrays the people doomed to the

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<sup>38</sup>BAGD, 272.

<sup>39</sup>These continue to exist in the "lake of fire," i.e., remain for the unsaved in their state of punishment. In the New Jerusalem the conditions of woe have no part.

<sup>40</sup>BAGD, 752.

<sup>41</sup>BAGD, 114.

<sup>42</sup>*Κατακαύω* means "burn up." It does not imply that the unsaved are incinerated out of existence as people. The punished still exist in Rev 22:15, and the description of the smoke relating to their punishment still continuing and their having no rest continuously (Revelation 14) shows the same. Also, the natural idea of "eternal" for what continues to exist suggests their ongoing consciousness. The descriptions of them point to their *separation* from the saved, not their *extermination*. The fire is described as unquenchable (Mark 9:43), also as eternal (Matt 8:18; 25:41). That fits with Paul's phrase "eternal

unquenchable fire as chaff (Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17).

Ephesians 6:16 employs the term *sbennumi* for believers' "shield of faith" that quenches (putting out) the fire of enemies' darts. And Paul urges believers not to "quench" the Spirit, i.e., not douse His work as believers minister to edify believers (1 Thess 5:19). Paul and others in the NT never enlist the word to say that the *unsaved* when punished are snuffed out, or that God causes *punishment* itself to cease.

(3) A further word, *παύω* (*pau*), is Paul's term for tongues ceasing ("whether there be tongues, they shall *cease*," 1 Cor 13:8). But Paul never says that punishment or the punished unsaved person *ceases*.

(4) Further terminology regarding the unsaved that is absent from Paul and others in the NT is a phrase used for the sea no longer existing, *ο\_κ\_στιν\_τι* (*ouk estin eti*, "it is no longer," Rev 21:1). Paul might have utilized the phrase to state that the punished come to be present no longer if he thought annihilation were true. John uses similar terminology for light from a lamp no longer being seen in Babylon after God has judged it (Rev 18:23). Indeed, the word *eti* occurs six times of things that no longer "still" exist in regard to Babylon (Rev 18:21-23).

Again Paul, just as Jesus and other NT writers, never sees fit to use such a phrase to suggest that punishing the unsaved involves their extinction.

### Summary and Conclusion

Paul reflected a thorough commitment to and unity with what his Lord taught in the gospels. Though he did not go into as much detail as Jesus on punishment, the words he selected most naturally have the same meaning. In passages reviewed here, Paul was clear enough that the destiny of the unsaved is of the same essence that Jesus and John taught. The punishment is felt (Rom 2:8-9). It consists of a state of "ruin" though not deletion from existence (Rom 9:22; Phil 3:19), an "eternal destruction," most probably denoting it as continuing, never ceasing. The unsaved themselves exist eternally to bear it (2 Thess 1:8-9).

In other passages, Paul was also in accord with unending punishment, not annihilation. The "end," "goal" or "final outcome" that the unsaved gravitate to is "death" (Rom 6:21). Paul did not conceive of this as ceasing to exist but as reaching a finalized goal, a separation from God and His blessing, the ultimate spiritual "death" (separation from God) beyond the spiritual death that is already the state of the unsaved.

At the same time, Paul agreed in essence with Jesus' and John's concept that the unsaved in their final punishment still exist, but are excluded from the realm of the saved. They are ultimately in a situation God suits to their own case. As the

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destruction" (2 Thess 1:9).

others, Paul expressed sharp contrasts between the destiny of saved and unsaved, e.g., “death” contrasted with “life,” and “destruction” in distinction to “glory.” He also phrased the destiny of the unredeemed as, negatively viewed, not inheriting the realm of blessedness to which the saved will be heirs (cf. Rom 8:17, 18-25; Gal 5:21). John also held this contrast about the inheritance (Rev 21:7), and immediately contrasted it with the destiny of those who do not enter the inheritance, the unsaved (v. 8). To be refused inheritance is exclusion from the blessing that accrues to all of the saved. For Paul as for John it was not extinction of the very being.

Paul, as also others writing NT Scripture, never called on terms that could distinctly suggest an elimination from existence. The terms they do chose seem in their most sensible meaning to point to the unsaved continuing to exist, this in punishment that never stops.

What Paul writes reflected an outlook that is clear enough. Its natural sense should not be softened to suit human reasoning more easily, or cast in doubt. Biblical language firmly resists being construed to support other views on the nature and duration of punishment. Paul expected eternally continuing ruin awaiting those who do not receive the redemption the saved receive as God's gift. Paul, having the heartbeat of his Lord, found this conviction about destinies of saved and unsaved a great prompt. It was a reality that led him sacrificially to pray for others (Rom 10:1) and proclaim the gospel with urgency (Rom 1:15-17; 2 Cor 5:14-21).