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3 - What Do We Mean by “Punishment” ?

Now, aside from the word “*wrath*”, we often encounter in the *New Testament* the word “*punishment*” - another translation that could probably use a little explanation. What, we may ask, is God’s aim through “punishment”? Is it just to make us feel bad and that’s the end of it? No. It’s for training.

Instead of “*punishment*”, the translation of the Greek *kolasis* is better expressed in the following definitions:

- “Pruning, restraint, restraining” (*Young’s Analytical Concordance*, 1879)
- *Correction, punishment, penalty...* [SYN. *kolasis*, *timoria*: the noted definition of Aristotle which distinguishes *kolasis* from *timoria* as that which (is disciplinary and) has reference to him who suffers, while the latter (is penal and) has reference to the satisfaction of him who inflicts... (*Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 1901)]

The above definition mentions the Greek word *timoria* (to punish), which emphasizes the satisfaction of the one inflicting punishment - as when Paul, before his conversion, was “punishing” Christians ([Acts 26:11](#)). But Jesus’ concept of punishment was not a vengeful thing (*timoria*) but was *kolasis* - the kind of “punishment” that restrains evildoers while at the same time providing them with the correction and pruning they need to cause them to change and grow in the right direction.

When Jesus spoke of “*everlasting punishment*” (in Matthew 25:46), the terms used in this statement (*kolasis*) reflect God’s viewpoint of punishment as correction or training for the individual concerned after he or she enters the Celestial Realm.

So, if “*punishment*” means “restraint and correction”, and if the

training has its desired effects, then God, whom we know is fair, just and merciful, will surely release repentant souls into a state of greater blessedness. To think of *“punishment”* without any possibility of release does not make sense. If that really were the case, then why would any soul bother making the effort to turn to the Light? Might as well just keep on being “bad” if there’s no hope of reward for turning away from evil.

Even the worst and lowest region in the Spirit Realm, known as the *Lake of Fire*, suggests by its very name the idea of chastisement and purification. The Greek word for “fire” is *pur*, from which we get words like “pure, purity, purify, purge, Purgatory”, as well as those words having to do with fire - “pyre, pyromaniac”.

So, “fire” and “brimstone” (sulphur) should be thought of as purifying agents. As fire and heat purify metals, or as sulphur (or incense) disinfects the air, so chastisement in the *Lake of Fire* serves to cleanse and burn out impurities in the hearts of those souls who land in that infernal region. So, all that to say, this phrase *“tormented with fire and brimstone”* is not to be taken literally; it is a metaphor for the unpleasant but necessary process required for spiritual cleansing to take place in the lives of those who deserve and need it. (See post [“C-6: The Lake of Fire, What is it For?”](#) for more explanation.)

Unfortunately though, the idea of “infinite punishment” for evildoers is the usual concept promoted in most commentaries and study Bibles. So then, what about the phrase *“everlasting punishment”*? ([Matthew 25:46](#), [2Thessalonians 1:9](#)) Or others about being tormented *“forever and ever”* in Hell? This does require some explanation, which may be found here in the post [“C-4: “Everlasting Punishment... Forever and Ever” - Meaning?”](#) But here is a brief summary:

In the English language, “*everlasting*” means “time without end”. And that sounds foreboding - especially when used in phrases like “*everlasting punishment*” or “*everlasting torment*”. It evokes no small amount of dread when applied to punishment in the Afterlife for evil-doers. But this time-without-end concept is not the only way to understand this word. And it is possible to use words like “supernatural” or “in the Realm Beyond”. “*Everlasting punishment*” could be translated as “correction/chastisement/refining in the Realm Beyond”; and “*everlasting*

life” as “beyond-earthly-reality life” or “life and blessedness in the Realm Beyond.”

Rather than it being a question of length of time (to express a span of time that is absolutely never-ending), these words “**forever**” and “**eternal/everlasting**” can just as easily refer to the celestial region that exists beyond the boundaries of time and space and is a realm that our finite, time-bound minds cannot easily grapple with. This is the enduring realm of spiritual reality, which is so different to the temporary earthly reality that we are accustomed to.

The Greek word *aionios* is translated as “**eternal**” and “**everlasting**” in most Bibles. Common definitions of this word are “without beginning or end”, “without end”. These would apply well to the nature of God Himself. But this seems to be a multi-faceted word, and there are a couple of other definitions worth considering:

- ***Aionios* accordingly is especially adapted to supersensuous things. (Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, pg. 21. Published 1901)**
- **(*aiónios*) does not focus on the future *per se*, but rather on the *quality* of the *age* (165 /*aión*) it relates to. Thus believers live in “*eternal* (166 /*aiónios*) life” right now, experiencing this *quality of God’s life* now as a *present possession*. (Note the Gk *present* tense of *having* eternal life in Jn 3:36, 5:24, 6:47; cf. Ro 6:23.) [from “HELPS Word-studies” in *Discovery Bible*, 2021]**

If *aionios* can refer to “supersensuous things”, meaning that which belongs to the realm beyond our earthly senses, or if it refers to the “quality of the (heavenly) age”, then it does not always have to refer to length of time.

As for the phrase “**forever and ever**”, this is the translation of the Greek *eis tous aionas ton aionon*. In its most literal sense, it means “into the ages of the ages”. This phrase is akin to other phrases like “**holy of holies**”, “**King of kings**”, “**Lord of lords**”. It points to that supreme, ultimate future “Age”, superior to all past ages, when Earth will become Paradise, and God’s will is “**done on earth as it is in heaven.**” (Matthew 6:10)

What does this mean for us? Those who have *“believed on the Son”* shall enter that glorious era as its citizens. And those who have refused to accept the Son (meaning they have also refused to repent and turn away from evil) will find the entrance to the Heavenly Age barred, and their abode confined to the *Lake of Fire* and/or to correctional regimes of a Purgatory-like nature.

So the phrase *“forever and ever”* (*eis tous aionas ton aionon*) refers to definite future ages of Earth’s history. An “age” is a specific period of time - a long one, but not one that lasts “forever”. And the Greek preposition *eis*, which means something like “into” or “in”, means that the punishment is destined to carry on into those future Ages. - but not some vague and timeless infinity. The *“forever and ever”* phrase is supposed to focus on the “when” of that future punishment, not the “how long”.

As for the word *“judgment”*, it comes from the Greek *krisis*, which was often used in the ancient language to mean “separation”. And when a person comes into *“judgment”* (sometimes translated as “condemnation”), he is being “separated”. Most of the parables about Judgment and the Final Day seem to involve this idea of separation. *“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just.”* (Matthew 13:49)

And when those Days of Judgment come, the *“meek”* who are destined to *“inherit the earth”* will, of course, be spared from “separation” and will have the privilege of entering those glorious future Ages of Peace. ([Matthew 5:5](#)) The evildoers and unrepentant, on the other hand, will find themselves “separated” - locked out, confined to the realm of *Hades*, or herded, with Satan and his demons, to their unhappy fate in the *Lake of Fire*.

Some further thoughts about the expression *“forever”*: In the *Old Testament*, if it is referring to such things as alliances or promises or institutions, the phrase *“forever”* conveyed the idea of time that is “hidden” or “not defined”. That’s not quite the same as “time without end”, which is what our English translations generally imply by using the word *“everlasting”* or *“forever”* or *“forever and ever”*. “Time without end” would apply to God Himself, of course, but for other things, the idea

of “not defined” is more applicable.

That leaves the matter open-ended, and leaves room for any number of correctional regimes and time spans - all tailored to suit the needs of the soul for whom they are designed. The “punishment” that some will have to endure is not “forever”; it is just not known how long it will be. That “not knowing” aspect may make it seem like “forever”, especially for those having to undergo a correctional regime of some kind. The actual length of time would depend, presumably, on the attitude of the soul undergoing the re-training process (or “punishment” if we want to call it that).

This perspective of time being “hidden” or “uncertain” or “not defined” has become obscured nowadays because of how certain passages have been translated - with the phrase “*forever and ever*” in reference to what happens in the Afterlife.

So, to conclude: If we combine *kolasis* (God’s view of punishment) with a truer understanding of the word “*everlasting*”, we might re-phrase “*everlasting punishment*” as “a period of training upon entrance into the Afterlife for those who, during their earthly lives, rebelled against what God was hoping to do through them.”

God’s universe is far from static; it is ever-moving, flowing, and changing. And His goal and desire is to transform us into better and happier individuals. If human souls find themselves “punished” in the Afterlife, will they find themselves trapped forever in some less-than-desirable location? If their “punishment” causes them to seek and desire change for the better, then there should be hope they can move on into domains of greater blessedness.

Punishment is for the sake of amendment and atonement. God is bound by his love to punish sin in order to deliver his creature; he is bound by his justice to destroy sin in his creation. Love is justice... justice requires that the wicked shall not go unpunished - that they, through the eye-opening power of pain, may come to see and do justice, may be brought to desire and make all possible amends, and so become just. Such punishment concerns justice in the deepest degree... Repentance, restitution, confession, prayer for forgiveness,

righteous dealing thereafter, is the sole possible, the only true make-up for sin. For nothing less than this did Christ die. When a man acknowledges the right he denied before... then justice, that is God, has conquered - and not till then.

Such is the mercy of God that he will hold his children in the consuming fire... until they drop the purse of selfishness with all the dross that is in it, and rush home to the Father and the Son... I believe that no hell will be lacking which would help the just mercy of God to redeem his children.

[from the sermon “Justice” in *Unspoken Sermons* series by George MacDonald (1824-1905)]

As for the demons, like many a criminal in our earthly justice system, they seem to view the prospect of future incarceration or punishment in the *Lake of Fire* as nothing more than an occupational hazard; they are not at all like the repentant thief on the cross, who said, “*We receive the due reward of our deeds*”. (Luke 23:41) From the example of the demons whom Jesus encountered in the Gergesenes’ country, it is clear that the thought of repentance or rehabilitation was the furthest thing from their minds. ([Mark 5:7](#), [Luke 8:28](#))

But who knows? Perhaps the *Lake of Fire* will be the medicine that will change their attitude; instead of seeing it as an “occupational hazard”, maybe some will see their punishment as the doorway towards rehabilitation. Whatever the case, if the demons, whose rebellion must be very deep-seated, can’t humble themselves once they find themselves in the *Lake of Fire*, hopefully, many of the human souls who have landed there will come to their senses, repent, and find restoration.

Having explored in some measure this subject of “the Wrath of God”, two points seem to stand out that are worth remembering:

1) On the personal level, “God’s Wrath” does not mean God is being unfair or unreasonable in how He exercises judgment or chastisement. He hates what evil people have done, true enough, but He administers their punishment in a way that will steer them in the right direction toward repentance. The word “wrath” could be replaced by “chastisement” or

“correction” or “displeasure” - something that better reflects the true nature of *God the Father*.

2) The idea that Christ suffered in our stead, modeled on the *Old Testament* practice of sacrifice offerings for sin, was a good way in days of old to explain the meaning of Christ’s Coming, His Death and Resurrection. But in the Modern Age, because of the shift in the cultural landscape towards ignoring the supernatural and the reality of sin, that way of explaining Christ’s appearance doesn’t resonate as well as it used to.

C.S. Lewis has expressed it well, as in this excerpt from what was quoted earlier:

The death of Christ is just that point in history at which something absolutely unimaginable from outside shows through into our own world... the inconceivable, the uncreated, the thing from beyond nature, striking down into nature like lightning...

...His death has washed out our sins, and... by dying He disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is Christianity. That is what has to be believed.

[“Chapter II-4: What Christians Believe”, *Mere Christianity* by C.S. Lewis], 1952]

THE END