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Thank You, Father, For Eternally Punishing Me

In the movie *The Princess Bride*, the leader of the bad guys says repeatedly that it's "inconceivable" that their plans could fail. Then of course, their plans fail one by one, and each time he exclaims "Inconceivable!" Eventually, one of the other bad guys observes: "That word you keep using... I do not think it means what you think it means."

I would like to suggest that in our biblical studies, we have a similar problem with the phrase "eternal punishment." I wholeheartedly affirm the reality of eternal punishment, but I believe it may not mean what we think it means. I believe that my Papa gives me eternal punishment because he has embraced me as his child. And it's a good thing.

Let us be washed together in the living waters of the Word...

When the Bible says God is eternal, it means something like what we think it means. But the Bible also describes other, non-God things as eternal, everlasting, and forever (Hebrew: *Olam*). For example, circumcision was an everlasting covenant (Gen 17.13). Burnt offerings and new moon observances are eternal (2 Chronicles 2.4). Aaron's sons would burn incense forever (1 Chronicles 23.13), but then later they stopped. Yahweh's name/presence was at the Temple forever (1 Kings 9.3), but was later taken away (2 Kings 23.27).

Jeremiah is filled with images of eternal destruction and unquenchable fire, describing the destruction of Jerusalem. Listen to the heat of Jeremiah's prophesying: "You have kindled my anger, and it will burn forever...I will kindle an unquenchable fire in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses" (17.4, 27) "I will bring upon you everlasting disgrace—everlasting shame that will not be forgotten" (23.40). "I will...make them...an everlasting ruin" (25.9). Jesus spoke often of the same topic using the same words, though he is often misinterpreted as describing what happens to bad people after they die.

But look at what happens AFTER Jerusalem's eternal destruction: "I will build you up again and you will be rebuilt, O Virgin Israel. Again you will take up your tambourines and go out to dance with the joyful" (31.3-4). "The days are coming... when this city will be rebuilt for me...The city will never again be uprooted or demolished" (31.38, 40).

The same strange pattern continues in the New Testament's concept of "eternal" (Greek: *Aionian*). You may recognize the root of the English word "eon". Paul writes to the Romans about "the mystery hidden eternally (*Aioniois*), but now revealed" (Romans 16.25-26). Jude tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah are right now undergoing "the punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1.7). But we also know that their fortunes will someday be restored (Ezekiel 16.53-55). Jude also uses odd wording to say that the chains of demons are eternal until judgment day (Jude 1.6). Ancient Greek philosopher Olympiodorus (560 A.D.) uses the same word to describe the Greek's afterlife mythology: "Do not suppose that the soul is punished for endless ages...We say that the soul is punished for an aeonian period, calling its allotted period of punishment, its aeon."

The ancient world DID have people who believed in never-ending conscious torment of wicked

souls at the hands of a vengeful deity. Babylon's Zoroastrian Farsi mythology, for example. This myth found its way into parts of Babylon's population of displaced Jews. These Jews adopted the idea, and they later became known as Pharisees (note the link to "Farsi"). They spoke of *Aidios Timoria*, which plainly means "endless torture." But Jesus contradicted them with his notion of *Aionian Kolasin*, meaning "a time of discipline." *Kolasin* is not torture, but fatherly discipline. And as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews points out, our Father will not discipline anyone who is not his beloved child (Hebrews 12:6-7). So to receive *Kolasin* from God (even eternal *kolasin*) is good news, because it is proof of sonship.

These ideas are not just academic to me. In my struggles with mental illness and addiction, I have experienced my share of aionian kolasin at the hands of my Father. His wrath is the sword that separates me from the darkness that seeks to destroy me. And it hurts like hell. Sometimes I feel like I might prefer never-ending flames, because at least then I would be able to play the victim and say God is being unjustly mean to me.

But no, God is not torturing me. He is loving me. My pain comes from the conflict between his love and my stubborn belief that his love cannot be real. My pain comes from beating my head against the wall of reality, demanding that God repent and convert to my point of view – that I am unlovable, unforgivable, unacceptable. I don't consciously think these awful things, but my feelings and behaviors tell me that these beliefs still live and thrive inside me.

But here is the good news. My Father is determined to beat the lies out of me. He doesn't care how much it hurts, and it hurts him even more than it hurts me. To him, my salvation is more important than my comfort (or HIS). That's what fatherly discipline is all about.

And here's more good news: He will keep at it for as long as it takes. This is my best understanding of what it means for punishment to be *Aionian*. When my kids get in trouble in my house, their time-out lasts as long as it needs to for them to calm down and re-enter household life as functional and responsible members of the family. God's commitment to me is open-ended in just that way. Even though his presence with me is painful (to Him AND to me), he will remain for as long as it takes, forever, if I insist.

Because he's my Dad, and that's what dads do. I would never give up on my kids. And my Dad will never give up on me. THAT is good news.

~ John Stonecypher