

## Is Universal Salvation Explicitly Taught in the New Testament?

### Part 2: Aionios – Eternal, Age-abiding or Both?

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#### Aionios, Aion & Olam: the Technicalities

One of the major issues for those accepting the Universalist position is the translation of the Greek adjective *aionios* (or *aionion*; and also the noun *aion*). This word is usually translated as *eternal* or *everlasting*, therefore when a Universalist comes across a text that reads *eternal punishment* or *eternal destruction* or *eternal fire* this raises a huge problem if the word *eternal* truly means, 'that which is never-ending', or 'that which lasts forever'.

Biblical scholars and writers have written much on this subject over the centuries, with not all of them agreeing. Even some of the major Greek-English lexicons & dictionaries used by most Christians today, such as Strong's, Thayer's, Arndt & Gingrich, and the Theological Dictionary of the NT, appear to contradict themselves by defining *aion* as an age that can be limited, while defining the adjective *aionios* as a) without beginning; or b) without end, never to cease, everlasting; or c) without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be.

As we shall see, this is a little inconsistent with how *aionios* is actually used in scripture. A more accurate definition in accordance with its usage would be 'age-abiding' or 'that which relates to the ages (or eons)', that which lies beyond the horizon of time. And there are a number of translations that do use this rendering or something similar (e.g. Young's Literal Version). Nevertheless, this doesn't restrict its meaning to *only* that which is temporary or limited, as Universalists strongly insist. I used to accept and promote this definition, but now as an ex-universalist, I see the inconsistencies on both sides of the argument.

Interestingly enough, Vine's Expository Dictionary admits the following about the adjective *aionios*.

"*Aionios* describes duration, either undefined but not endless, as in Rom. 16:25; 2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2; or undefined because endless as in Rom. 16:26, and the other sixty-six places in the NT."<sup>1</sup>

Edward W. Fudge had this to say on the subject.

"Through the centuries, the discussion about final punishment has usually been accompanied by controversy concerning these Greek (*aionios*) and Hebrew (*olam*) adjectives. Does *aionios* describe time in unending duration ("everlasting"), some unknown quality of the age to come ("eternal"), both of these, or neither of them? Do these usual translations represent its sense, or should we coin some new adjective such as "aionic" or "aionian"?<sup>2</sup>

In fact, as shown in some of my archived writings, the Concordant Literal New Testament does use the 'coined' English transliteration 'Eonian' as an alternative. There are some translations that render *aionios* as "age-abiding" or "age-during", but by far the usual rendering is "eternal".<sup>3</sup>

Be that as it may, no matter how much has been written about the original Hebrew and Greek words & phrases themselves, the most important thing is their usage in scripture; that is, how they are used in context. There are usually two opposing views on how *aionios* is to be understood.

The common view, usually held by those who believe in the traditional Hell of Eternal Torment, is that it only means 'never-ending', with the possibility that it may include a quality or character that is beyond this world.

The opposing view, usually held by Universalists, is that it only means 'age-abiding', as that which relates to the ages of time, but not 'eternity'. Eternity is usually understood to follow on after a future 'consummation' of the ages; hence that which is 'age-abiding' comes to an end and is therefore always temporary or limited.

I firmly believe that the truth of the matter lies in between these two opposing views; that is, that *aionios* can mean *both* depending on the context. There are many instances, particularly in the Old Testament, where *olam* (and its equivalent *aionios* in the Septuagint) clearly refers to people and things that are not unending.<sup>4</sup>

Vine's Expository Dictionary shows that by far the most basic definition of *olam* is 'indefinite time', whether applied to a person's life span, or the ancient or age-old mountains, or to a covenant lasting for many generations. It can apply to the distant past or the distant future, *as that which lies beyond the horizon of time*.

Nevertheless, when we come to the NT, the use of the Greek *aionios* is much clearer. In almost every instance in which *aionios* is used it is referring to something that relates to God's world, that is, the spiritual world. Therefore, it carries the meaning of *duration* (in the sense of being never-ending or limitless), as well as the *quality* or characteristics of God's world. Nevertheless, as in the OT, when used in the context of *this* world, which is temporary, it denotes indefinite time that can end. **Its usage in scripture seems to deny the notion that *aionios* should have only one fixed meaning.**<sup>5</sup>

## The NT Texts

One of the most important texts in the NT that helps to define *aionios* is 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 & 5:1. In this passage, Paul clearly reveals that *aionios* has to do with a quality and duration that is related to God's world and kingdom -- in complete contrast to *this* world, which is temporary.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an **eternal glory** that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, **an eternal house in heaven**, not built by human hands. (NIV)

“...for the momentary light matter of our tribulation, more and more exceedingly an **age-during weight of glory** doth work out for us -- we not looking to the things seen, but to the things not seen; for the things seen [are] temporary, **but the things not seen [are] age-during**. For we have known that if our earthly house of the tabernacle may be thrown down, a building from God we have, **an house not made with hands -- age-during -- in the heavens,...**”

(YLT)

The way Paul uses *aionios* in this passage is unmistakable as he is clearly contrasting the difference between that which belongs to this world in which we live, which is observable to our sight and yet is temporary, with that which belongs to the spiritual world, which is unseen at present and is not temporary; it is *age-during* or *eternal*. For the believer, the present earthly body will eventually be destroyed, but through the power of the resurrection there is a spiritual body, which is *age-during* or *eternal*, a heavenly body permanently created for the spiritual world.

Elsewhere in the NT, the inheritance of this spiritual heavenly body is described as **eternal life** or *life eternal* (that is, age-abiding life). The vast majority of texts in the NT that use *aionios* are referring to this eternal life. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul describes this spiritual body as immortal and incorruptible, hence it truly is eternal, in the sense of life that will never end.

The vast majority of texts in the NT that use *aionios* (or *aionion*) are positive. Most refer to **eternal life**, while two refer to an **eternal house(s)**, one to **eternal God**, three to **eternal glory**, one to God’s **eternal power** & one to his **eternal kingdom**; while others singularly speak of **eternal comfort**, **eternal salvation**, the **eternal Gospel**, **eternal redemption**, **eternal spirit**, **eternal inheritance**, **eternal covenant**; and finally three speak of the **eternal times** (or remote-age times).

In contrast to this, there are a handful of texts that speak of things more negatively. These become the problem texts for Universalists. There are three that speak of **eternal fire**, one that speaks of **eternal sin**, one that speaks of **eternal punishment**, one that speaks of **eternal destruction**, and one that speaks of **eternal judgment**.

(I plan to deal with these texts in more detail later in this series, but for now, I only wish to focus on the usage of *aionios* here.)

The problem with the Universalist understanding of *aionios* is not so much to do with the translation of *aionios* as ‘age-abiding’ or ‘age-during’, but the insistence that ‘age-abiding’ means that which is strictly limited or temporary. (It took me awhile before I saw this inconsistency myself). A close examination of this adjective throughout the NT reveals that there isn’t any warrant for making a distinction between that which is ‘age-abiding’, which is limited to a time *before* eternity, *before* an ultimate consummation; and that which comes *after* this consummation, which is then said to be truly ‘eternal’.

This definition of *aionios* strictly limits it to the ages of time, therefore implying that it is only temporary, while eternity comes after. This interpretation would

completely contradict the teaching of Paul shown above in 2 Corinthians 4 & 5. Paul would then be contrasting something temporary with something temporary!

It is clearly evident that the majority of uses of *aionios* in the NT have to do with things relating to God and his world; and this has to do not only with duration, but also to the quality that is spiritual and heavenly. These things are truly age-abiding or eternal; they go beyond the world we experience in this material creation.

“Of the seventy usages of the adjective “eternal” *aionios* in the New Testament, at least five times the adjective modifies a noun that names the result of an action. These are eternal salvation (Heb 5:9), eternal redemption (Heb 9:12), eternal judgment (Heb 6:2), eternal punishment (Matt 25:46), and eternal destruction (2 Thess 1:9). Three occur in Hebrews; all five involve the final accounting and sentencing when Jesus returns and the dead have been raised.

Here we see again the *other-age* quality of the “eternal.” There is something transcendent, eschatological, divine about this judgment, this sin, this punishment and destruction, this redemption and salvation. They are not merely human, *this-age* matters, but are of an entirely different nature. Yet the contexts and the contents of Scripture passages in which *aionios* modifies the words *judgment, sin, punishment, destruction, redemption, and salvation* justify the conclusion that something about each of these will never come to an end.”

“...*aionios*, usually translated by “eternal” in the New Testament, distinctly carries a qualitative sense. It suggests something that partakes of the transcendent realm of divine activity. It indicates a relationship to the kingdom of God, to the age to come, to the eschatological realities that in Jesus have begun already to manifest themselves in the present age... We have also seen that the adjective *aionios* has a temporal aspect, indicating something that will never end. God himself has no limitation, including the limits of time. The age to come partakes of that limitlessness. So do the works of God that Scripture calls “eternal.” ”

(Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, (Third Edition, 2011, Cascade Books), pp. 38-39 & 41)

In Part 3, we shall consider Gehenna, the eternal fire and its relation to the Lake of Fire, the Second Death.

For further details on the two ages and the two realities, see *Table 2 – Two Ages/Two Realities/Two Qualities*, and the chart *Two Ages/Two Realities* by this author.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Ed. Vine, Unger & White, Jr. (1985, Thomas Nelson), under NT entry 'Eternal'.

<sup>2</sup> Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, (Third Edition, 2011, Cascade Books), p. 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> The word *eternal* comes from the Latin *aeternus*. Some scholars argue that its original ancient meaning was not that of 'everlasting', though others would debate this. It entered the Bible through the Latin Vulgate translated by Jerome.

<sup>4</sup> For example, if the Hebrew *olam* were to be consistently translated as 'eternal' or 'everlasting', here is what the following texts would say. The hills of the earth are said to be 'everlasting' (Genesis 49:26; Deuteronomy 33:15); The days and years of human generations in the past are said to be everlasting (Deuteronomy 32:7; 1 Samuel 27:8; Psalms 143:3; Ezekiel 26:20 (twice)); The Levitical (Aaronic) priesthood is said to be everlasting (Exodus 40:15; Numbers 25:13); Old boundary stones are said to be everlasting (Proverbs 22:28; 23:10); and the covenant of circumcision in Abraham's flesh is said to be everlasting (Genesis 17:13).

Now, the hills or mountains of the earth are evidently not everlasting, but they are *ancient* or *age-old*. Human generations of the past are also not everlasting, but they are *ancient* or as long as one's life span, which is indefinite. The priesthood of Aaron has been terminated and succeeded by a new priesthood of a different order, which is in accordance with the new covenant (cf. Hebrews 7:11-19). Old boundary stones, or any stones for that matter, are evidently not everlasting, but they are *ancient* or *age-old*. According to the NT, fleshly circumcision has now been done away with in Christ (cf. Galatians 5:2-6; Colossians 2:11-14). We are also told that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50), therefore, if Abraham's circumcision in flesh were truly 'everlasting', then he would never inherit the kingdom of God!

<sup>5</sup> Another Greek word that is usually translated 'everlasting' is *aidios*. It is only used twice in the NT, in Romans 1:20 and Jude 6. It's essential meaning is that of permanence, continuity and perpetuity. Interestingly enough, these two instances have to do with the subject of God's world, that is, the spiritual realm.

The root of *aidios* is *aei*, which is usually translated as 'ever'. This adverb essentially denotes continuous time, that which is unceasing and ongoing. There are a number of phrases in the NT that are formed by connecting *aei* with *aion* (an age). Vine's Expository Dictionary says, "...they are idiomatic expressions betokening undefined periods and are not to be translated literally". These phrases are commonly translated as 'forever' or 'forever and ever'. Literally these phrases would read, unto an age, unto the age, unto the ages, unto the ages of the ages, unto ages of ages, unto the age of the age, of the age of the ages, unto all the ages, and unto a day of an age (cf. *Vine's Expository Dictionary*, 1985, Thomas Nelson, under NT entry 'ever, forever, evermore').

Due primarily to the influence of the Concordant Publishing Concern, I used to understand these phrases as applying quite literally to specific ages in God's overall plan of the ages. This is still very evident in some of my archived writings, though I no longer view these phrases in the same manner. For instance, it is evident from a careful study of the phrase 'forever and ever' in the book of Revelation alone that it is referring to people or things or conditions that will go on indefinitely through the ages of time; hence, it is unchanging, permanent and never-ending. Again, it is usually used of that which relates to God's world, i.e. the spiritual dimension.