

# The Case for Conditional Immortality

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The Rutherford House conference was a select little gathering which took place at the time of the Edinburgh Festival in beautiful sunny weather. Its proceedings were lightened for some of us by a visit to Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. There were ten papers of varying difficulty and varying interest which have been collected together in *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell*, edited by Nigel Cameron and published in 1992 by Paternoster of Carlisle and Baker of Grand Rapids, USA. I will recount at some length my own contribution and then comment on points of interest in the other papers. With small differences, I argued as follows (for fuller documentation see the original paper):

## The Case for Conditional Immortality

This paper is deliberately restricted in scope. The presupposition on which it is based is an acceptance of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as divinely inspired and harmonious in their teaching when interpreted in the natural and intended sense. There is therefore no discussion of critical questions which see one part of Scripture in conflict with another.

By way of definition: belief in conditional immortality is the belief that God created Man only potentially immortal. Immortality is a state gained by grace through faith when the believer receives eternal life and becomes a partaker of the divine nature, immortality being inherent in God alone.

It is a doctrine totally different from universalism, which I have long believed quite irreconcilable with Scripture. It shares the doctrine of judgment held by the upholders of everlasting torment in almost every particular – except for one tremendous thing: it sees no continuing place in God's world for human beings living on in unending pain not reconciled to God. The wrath of God will put an end to sin and evil.

## An Answer Awaited

I am grateful for the opportunity of expounding this case, for it is seventeen years since I tentatively committed myself to it in print. This was in my book *The Goodness of God* where I dealt with the subject of 'Hell' in one short chapter. I could do little more than outline the main points of the case for unending conscious torment and for conditional immortality (the latter in seven pages) as convincingly as I could and leave the reader to

make his choice. I said, however, that I felt under no obligation to defend any doctrine more shocking than conditionalism until the arguments of L.E. Froom, Basil Atkinson and Harold Guillebaud had been effectively answered.

I had learnt the doctrine from Basil Atkinson (as recounted in Chapter 8) in about 1934. When I left Cambridge in 1938 I had to teach doctrine at St John's Hall, Highbury. There till 1941 I taught conditionalism with much reserve and restraint. After I had twelve years out of direct academic work, before joining the staff of Tyndale Hall, Bristol. Here I taught with rather less reserve, particularly after a Tyndale House Study Group in 1954 which was devoted to The Intermediate State and the Final Condition of the Lost, at which some of the best brains in IVF studied the subject for (I think) three days. Though bringing home to me the great difficulty of coming to assured conclusions about the intermediate state, I was more than ever persuaded that the final end of the lost was destruction in the fires of hell.

Matters reached crisis point in 1973, when I presented Inter-Varsity Press with the manuscript of *The Goodness of God*, as recounted in Chapter 22. Their acceptance of the manuscript was a great step forward for neither Atkinson nor Guillebaud had been able to find a publisher for their carefully written books. I concluded the chapter on hell by saying, 'We shall consider ourselves under no obligation to defend the notion of unending torment until the arguments of the conditionalists have been refuted.'

So I have been waiting since 1973 for a reply to the massive work of Froom (2,476 pages), to Atkinson's closely argued 112 pages, to Guillebaud's 67 pages and (more important) to the one additional (excellent) book which has appeared on the conditionalist side: Edward Fudge's *The Fire That Consumes* of 500 pages (Texas: Providential Press, 1982).

### **An Answer Attempted**

To my knowledge there have been four serious attempts at reply. In 1986 The Banner of Truth Trust republished the work of the reformed theologian W.G.T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, first published in 1885, which faithfully reasserts the doctrine of the Westminster Confession, chapter 32 of which says:

The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep), having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies; and the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places for souls separated from their bodies, the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

In 1989 the same trust published Paul Helm's *The Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell*. In 1990 J.H. Gerstner, *Repent or Perish* (Soli Deo Gloria Publications) was published, which has four chapters directed specifically against Fudge. In the same year J.I. Packer published his Leon Morris Lecture, 'The Problem of Eternal Punishment', which he declares to 'a dissuasive . . . particularly from conditionalism' (p. 25).

The extraordinary thing about these replies is that none of them actually addresses the arguments used by the conditionalists. Shedd, it is true, refers to the eighteenth-century Anglican Bishop Warburton, who 'denied that the immortality of the soul is taught in the Old Testament.' Shedd's reply is that it 'is nowhere formally demonstrated, because it is everywhere assumed' (pp. 50f.). He then proceeds to demolish views which as far as I know no conditionalist holds. Similarly I did not recognize the conditionalism to which Helm refers – he gives no references. He says annihilationists hold that 'when the impenitent die they do not go on to await the judgment, but they go literally out of existence' (p. 117). He does, however, acknowledge that 'Scripture does not teach the immortality of the soul in so many words' (p. 118).

When we come to Gerstner and Packer an important new factor has arisen: J.R.W. Stott and P.E. Hughes, two leading conservative evangelicals, have written sympathetically of conditionalism. In *Essentials*, his dialogue with David Edwards, Stott writes that he holds his belief in the ultimate annihilation of the wicked 'tentatively'. He also expresses his hesitation in writing this (although he has told me that he has spoken about it for thirty or forty years) 'partly because I have great respect for long standing tradition which claims to be a true interpretation of Scripture, and do not lightly set it aside, and partly because the unity of the world-wide evangelical constituency has always meant much to me' (p. 319). He says he prefers to describe himself as 'agnostic' which, he tells me, is how the late F.F. Bruce also described his position. Since in his view Scripture does not come down unequivocally on either side, he pleads 'that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should at least be accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal conscious torment' (p. 320). Hughes, who lectured at that stronghold of Calvinistic orthodoxy Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and was one of the editors of *Westminster Theological Journal*, has no such hesitations. He says, 'It would be hard to imagine a concept more confusing than that of death which means existing endlessly without the power of dying. This, however, is the corner into which Augustine (in company with many others) argued himself' (p. 403). Hughes wrote to me that he had 'long been of this judgment and common Christian candour compelled me to state my position.' Gerstner pitches into Hughes, Stott and Fudge for their Revolt against Hell. It is a wonderful example of circular argument. He assumes that the Bible teaches what he believes about hell and then proceeds to show that they believe otherwise. He just does not seriously address their arguments. Not sharing his beliefs about hell is equated with a rejection of hell itself, which it is absurd to attribute to such as Stott, Hughes and Fudge.

Packer is in some ways even more disappointing. With all his capacity for reading and digesting material and with his gift of lucid exposition, one hoped to see the conditionalist arguments carefully considered. He had certainly read the slight treatments of Stott and Hughes and he was aware of Fudge's work, but he shows no signs of having read Fudge, Froom or Atkinson and provides no answers to their arguments but gives instead answers to arguments which they do not use.

Since writing the above I have read Ajith Fernando's *Crucial Questions About Hell* published in 1991 by Kingsway with a foreword by Packer. Fernando is a Methodist, a Youth for Christ worker in Sri Lanka, who in the mid-seventies wrote a thesis on universalism for his Master of Theology degree at Fuller Theological Seminary. His book is an updated, popular version of his thesis, written in an admirable spirit, with most of which I thoroughly agree. He pays some attention to conditionalism, referring to Stott, Travis and Pinnock, but to no major conditionalist work. From the other side, Michael Green also committed to print his belief in conditional immortality in 1990 (E.M.B. Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church*, Hodder, pp. 69f).

While not answering the conditionalist arguments with any seriousness, these writers do of course state their own case. They set out certain well known texts and claim that their meaning is 'obvious'. Of conditionalist interpretations Packer says: 'I will say as emphatically as I can, that none of them is natural . . . Conditionalists' attempts to evade the natural meaning of some dozens of relevant passages impress me as a prime case of avalanche-dodging' (p. 24).

### **The Biblical Data**

I would claim that the natural meaning of the vast majority of relevant texts is quite otherwise. Of course what seems natural and obvious to a person with one set of presuppositions may not seem so to someone with a different set. What we must try to do is to think the way the biblical writers thought and clear our minds of ideas from other cultures. This makes the Old Testament very important, but demands of space make it necessary to pass over the Old Testament, though earlier writers and Fudge quite properly pay it considerable attention. But this is not central to the debate and we will simply make two quotations from Fudge. He says: 'The Old Testament utilizes some fifty Hebrew words and seventy-five figures of speech to describe the ultimate end of the wicked – and every one sounds ... like total extinction.'

And this is the summary of his chapter 'The End of the Wicked in the Old Testament':

The Old Testament has very much to say about the end of the wicked. Its poetic books of Job, Psalms and Proverbs repeatedly affirm the principle of divine government. The wicked may thrive now and the righteous suffer, these books tell us, but that picture will not be the final one. These books reassure the godly again

and again that those who trust will be vindicated, they will endure forever, they will inherit the earth. The wicked, however proud their boasts today, will one day not be found. Their place will be empty. They will disappear like smoke. Men will search for them and they will not be found. Even their memory will perish. On these pillars of divine justice the world stands, and by these principles the Lord God governs His eternal kingdom.

The historical books of the Old Testament take us another step. Not only does God declare what He will do to the wicked; on many occasions He has shown us. When the first world became too wicked to exist, God destroyed it completely, wiping every living creature outside the ark from the face of the earth. This is a model of the fiery judgment awaiting the present heavens and earth. When Sodom became too sinful to continue, God rained fire and brimstone from heaven, obliterating the entire population in a moment so terrible it is memorialized throughout Scripture as an example of divine judgment. From this terrible conflagration emerged not a survivor – even the ground was left scorched and barren. Only the lingering smoke remained, a grim reminder of the fate awaiting any man who attempts to quarrel with his Maker. Nations also tasted God’s wrath. Edom and Judah, Babylon and Nineveh turn by turn came under His temporal judgments. Some were spared a remnant. Others were not. God described these divine visitations in terms of fire and darkness, anguish and trouble. Unquenchable fire consumed entirely until nothing was left. Again smoke ascended, the prophetic cipher for a ruin accomplished.

The inspired declarations of the prophets combine moral principle with historical fate. The details of actual destruction wrought on earth become symbols for another divine visitation. The prophets speak to their own times, but they also stand on tiptoe and view the distant future. A day is coming, they tell us, when God will bring an end to all he has begun. That judgment will be the last. Good and evil will be gathered alike to see the righteousness of the Lord they have served or spurned. Again there will be fire and storm, tempest and darkness. The slain of God will be many – corpses will lie in the street. Amidst this scene of utter contempt worms and fire will take their final toll. Nothing will remain of the wicked but ashes – the righteous will tread over them with their feet. God’s kingdom will endure forever. The righteous and their children will inherit Mount Zion. Joy and singing will fill the air. All the earth will praise the Lord.

Fudge shows that in the Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha the Old Testament view predominates, although the notion of endless torment is beginning to appear in Jewish literature. A. Edersheim in Appendix 19 of *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* shows that the rabbis were also speculating during this period and teaching that hell meant endless punishment for some. The School of Shammai arranged all mankind into three classes; the perfectly righteous, who are ‘immediately written and sealed to eternal life;’ the perfectly wicked, who are ‘immediately written and sealed to Gehenna;’ and an intermediate class,

who, 'go down to Gehinnom, and moan, and come up again.' . . . Substantially the same . . . is the view of the School of Hillel. In regard to sinners of Israel and of the Gentiles it teaches, indeed, that they are tormented in Gehenna twelve months, after which their bodies and souls are burnt up and scattered as dust under the feet of the righteous; but it significantly excepts from this number certain classes of transgressors 'who go down to Gehinnom and are punished there to ages of ages.'

These are patently speculations without any of the authority of the canonical scriptures. They could certainly have influenced the minds of the first Christians, but the ultimate question is, 'What did God the Holy Spirit say in the God-breathed Scriptures?' We must be careful not to import into them alien elements from external sources, however popular or influential they may have been.

When we come to the New Testament the words used in their natural connotation are words of destruction rather than words suggesting continuance in torment or misery. When preparing this paper I found in my files thirty pages of foolscap (dating, I think, from the forties) on which I had attempted to jot down from the Revised Version all passages referring to life after death. This is probably not a complete list but I have worked through it again and the following interesting statistics result.

I found 264 references to the fate of the lost. Ten (that is 4 per cent) call it Gehenna, which conjures up the imagery of the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, notorious for the hideous rites of Moloch worship, in which children were thrown alive into the red-hot arms of the god – an abomination in the eyes of the Lord (Lv. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Ki. 23:10; 2 Ch. 28:3; 33:6; Je. 7:31; 32:35). It is often said to have been the site of the city's rubbish tip in the days of Christ, where bodies of criminals and animals were thrown, but evidence for this is late and unreliable. It is in any case an evil place in which are pictured corpses being consumed by fire and maggots as in Isaiah 66 (Mt. 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Mk. 9:43,45,47; Lk. 12:5). Two of these call it the Gehenna of fire.

There are twenty-six other references (that is 10 per cent) to burning up, three of which concern the lake of fire of the Apocalypse. Fire naturally suggests destruction and is much used for the destruction of what is worthless or evil.

It is only by a pedantic use of the modern concept of the conservation of mass and energy that it is possible to say that fire destroys nothing. It has a secondary use as a cause of pain, as in the case of the rich man of the Lazarus story.

Fifty-nine (22 per cent) speak of destruction, perdition, utter loss or ruin. Our Lord himself in the Sermon on the Mount uses destruction, which he contrasts with life, as the destination of those who choose the broad road (Mt. 7:13). Paul uses it of 'the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction' (Rom. 9:22); of 'those who oppose you' who 'will be destroyed' (Phil. 1:28); of the enemies of the cross of Christ whose 'destiny is destruction'

(Phil. 3:19). 'The man of lawlessness is . . . doomed to destruction' (2 Thes. 2:3); harmful desires 'plunge men into ruin and destruction' (1 Tim. 6:9). Hebrews 10:39 says 'we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who believe and are saved.' 2 Peter speaks of 'destructive heresies . . . bringing swift destruction . . . their destruction has not been sleeping' (2:1-3). 'The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men' (3:7). The old order will disappear and 'the elements will be destroyed by fire' (3:10-12). The beast will 'go to his destruction' (Rev. 17:8,11).

The very common word *apollumi* is frequently used of eternal ruin, destruction and loss, as in John 3:16: 'should not perish', but it is also used of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son, who, though metaphorically dead and whose life was in total ruin, was restored (Lk. 15).

Twenty cases (8 per cent) speak of separation from God, which carries no connotation of endlessness unless one presupposes immortality: 'depart from me' (Mt. 7:23); 'cast him into the outer darkness' (Mt. 22:13); he 'shall not enter' the kingdom (Mk. 10:15); 'one will be taken and the other left' (Lk. 17:34); 'he is cast forth as a branch' (Jn. 15:6); 'outside are the dogs', etc. (Rev. 22:15). This concept of banishment from God is a terrifying one. It does not mean escaping from God, since God is everywhere in his creation, every particle of which owes its continuing existence to his sustaining. It means, surely, being utterly cut off from the source and sustainer of life. It is another way of describing destruction.

Twenty-five cases (10 per cent) refer to death in its finality, sometimes called 'the second death'. Without resurrection even 'those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished' (1 Cor. 15:18). This has been brought out with great force by a number of modern theologians like Oscar Cullmann, Helmut Thielicke and Murray Harris. They show that the teaching of the New Testament is to be sharply contrasted with the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, which sees death as the release of the soul from the prison of the body. What the Christian looks forward to is not a bodiless entrance 'into the highest heavens' at death but a glorious transformation at the Parousia when he is raised from death. Life is contrasted with death, which is a cessation of life, rather than with a continuance of life in misery.

One hundred and eight cases (41 per cent) refer to what I have called unforgiven sin: adverse judgment, in which the penalty is not specified (e.g. 'they will receive greater condemnation' (Mk. 12:40)); life forfeited, with the wrath of God resting on the unbeliever (Jn. 3:36); being unsaved, without specifying what the saved are delivered from (Mt. 24:13). Other passages show salvation contrasted with lostness (Mt. 16:25), perishing (1 Cor. 1:18), destruction (Jas. 4:12), condemnation (Mk. 16:16), judgment (Jn. 3:17), death (2 Cor. 7:10), never with everlasting misery or pain.

Fifteen cases (6 per cent) refer to anguish – this includes tribulation and distress (Rom. 2:9), deliverance to tormentors (Mt. 18:34), outer darkness (Mt. 22:13), wailing and grinding of teeth (Mt. 25:30), the undying worm (Mk. 9:48), beaten with many stripes (Lk. 12:47), the birth-pains of death (Acts 2:24), sorer punishment (Heb. 10:29).

There is one verse (Rev. 14:11) – this represents less than a half of one per cent – which refers to human beings who have no rest, day or night, the smoke of whose torment goes up for ever and ever, which we shall come back to in a moment.

It is a terrible catalogue, giving most solemn warning, yet in all but one of the 264 references there is not a word about unending torment and very many of them in their natural sense clearly refer to destruction.

### **Immortality of the Soul**

There is thus a great weight of material which *prima facie* suggests destruction as the final end of the lost. The traditional view gains most of its plausibility from a belief that our Lord's teaching about Gehenna has to be wedded to a belief in the immortality of the soul. A fierce fire will destroy any living creature, unless that creature happens to be immortal. If man is made immortal, all our exegesis must change. But is he? From Genesis 3 onwards man looks mortal indeed; we are clearly told that God alone has immortality (1 Tim. 6:16); immortality is something that well-doers seek (Rom. 2:7); immortality for the believer has been brought to light by the gospel (2 Tim. 1:10) – he gains immortality (it would appear) when he gains eternal life and becomes partaker of the divine nature; immortality is finally put on at the last trump (1 Cor. 15:53). No, say the traditionalists, God in making man made him immortal, so that he must live on, not only beyond death but also beyond the second death, for ever and ever. The fires of hell will continue to inflict pain on persons they cannot consume.

Some acknowledge that only God is inherently immortal and that he could if he wished annihilate anything that he has made, including human beings. But he has willed both that all who believe should become partakers of the divine nature and so become immortal he has also willed that those who refuse the gospel invitation should not die but should remain alive suffering the unending torment which they deserve. So we are not immortal by nature but by divine decree, which in practical terms seems to come to the same thing.

Now the curious thing is that when asked for biblical proof of the immortality of the soul, the answer usually given is that it is nowhere explicitly taught, but that (as we have already quoted from Shedd) 'it is everywhere assumed'. Goulburn similarly says that the doctrine of man's immortality 'seems to be graven on man's heart almost as indelibly as the doctrine of God's existence (p. 68)'. The great Dutch theologian Hermann Bavinck defends it as a biblical doctrine but says that it is better demonstrated by reason than by revelation. That life beyond death is repeatedly taught in Scripture and is instinctively believed by



everyone, I readily agree, but of its nature and endurance we know nothing except by revelation. If anything has become pellucidly clear to me over the years it is this: philosophizings about the after-life are worthless; we must stick to Scripture and Scripture alone. Certainly something as important as the immortality of the soul and the endless pain of the lost cannot be assumed!

### **Passages Relied on for Endlessness of Punishment**

What are these ‘dozens of relevant passages’ which we conditionalists attempt to evade by ‘various exegetical expedients’ (Packer p. 24)? They seem in fact to be fourteen in number.

There are seven passages which use the word *aionios*: everlasting punishment (Mt. 25.46), an eternal sin (Mk. 3:29), everlasting destruction (2 Thes. 1:9), everlasting judgment (Heb. 6:2), the punishment of everlasting fire (Jude 7). Fudge rightly devotes a chapter early in the book to the meaning of *aionios* and shows (as is well known) that it has two senses. It has a qualitative sense, indicating ‘a relationship to the kingdom of God, to the Age to Come, to the eschatological realities which in Jesus have begun already to manifest themselves in the Present Age’ (p. 49). This aspect is perhaps best translated ‘eternal’, since eternity can be thought of as outside time. When I analyze my own thoughts, I find that (rightly or wrongly) everlastingness has virtually no place in my concept of eternal life. Everlasting harp playing or hymn singing or even contemplation is not attractive. What the heart yearns for is deliverance from sin and the bliss of being with God in heaven, knowing that the inexorable march of death has been abolished for ever. *Aionios* can be used also to temporal limitlessness which can be rightly translated ‘everlasting’.

It is common to argue that since everlasting punishment is set against everlasting life in Matthew 25:46 and since the life lasts as long as God, so must the punishment. This was the position of Augustine, of which Hughes writes:

Augustine insisted . . . to say that ‘life eternal shall be endless, punishment eternal shall come to an end, is the height of absurdity’ (*City of God* 21:23) . . . But, as we have seen, the ultimate contrast is between everlasting life and everlasting death and this clearly shows that it is not simply synonyms but also antonyms with which we have to reckon. There is no more

Radical antithesis than that between life and death, for life is the absence of death and death is the absence of life. Confronted with this antithesis, the position of Augustine cannot avoid involvement in the use of contradictory concepts (p. 203)

To this we might add three further considerations: (1) It would be proper to translate ‘punishment of the age to come’ and ‘life of the age to come’ which would leave open the question of duration. The Matthean parallel to the *aionios* of Mk. 3:29 is indeed ‘age to come’ (Mt. 12:32). (2) We have other examples of once-for-all acts which have unending

consequences: eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12), Sodom's punishment of eternal fire (Jude 7). (3) Just as it is wrong to treat God and Satan as equal and opposite, so it is wrong to assume that heaven and hell, eternal life and eternal punishment, are equal and opposite. Both are real but who is to say that one is as enduring as the other?

There are three passages which speak of unquenchable fire, two in the teaching of the Baptist (Mt. 3:12 = Lk. 3:17) and one from our Lord who speaks of going away 'into Gehenna into the unquenchable fire' (Mk. 9:43). The chaff of course is burnt up by the irresistible fire – there is nothing to suggest that the fire goes on burning after it has destroyed the rubbish. The same Markan passage (9:48) gives us the one reference to the undying worm, which (as we have seen) is a quotation from Isaiah 66:24 which depicts corpses being consumed by maggots.

There is nothing in any of these ten texts which even suggests (let alone requires) an interpretation contrary to the natural interpretation of the great mass of texts which tell of death, destruction, perishing and consumption by fire. Nor has the imagery of outer darkness and grinding of teeth any bearing on the question of endlessness.

This leaves us with one passage in Jude and three passages in the Book of Revelation. Jude has spoken of the people saved from Egypt and the destruction of those who did not believe; and of angels kept in eternal chains in the nether gloom awaiting the day of judgment, when they will suffer as Sodom suffered, undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (v. 5-7); he then goes on to speak of those who defile the Christian love feasts 'for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever' (v. 13). These immoral Christians will suffer the same fate as the fallen angels: nether gloom till the day of judgment, then irreversible destruction like that of Sodom.

In the Book of Revelation two passages speak of the smoke of torment rising for ever and ever. 14:11 says of those with the mark of the beast, tormented with burning sulphur, 'the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest, day or night, these worshippers of the beast.' 19:3 says of the great whore, 'the smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.' Finally, 20:10 speaks of the devil 'thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.'

Of these three passages two are concerned with non-human or symbolic figures: the devil, the beast, the false prophet and the great whore, and only one refers to men. But the imagery is the same and they need to be examined together. The mind of John of the Apocalypse is steeped in Holy Scripture and it is to the Old Testament that we must go for enlightenment. After Noah's flood, the second great demonstration of divine judgment is the raining down of burning sulphur on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. What is left is total, irreversible desolation and dense smoke rising from the land (Gen. 19:24-28). This

fearful example is recalled by Moses (Dt. 29:23), Isaiah 13:19, Jeremiah 50:40, Lamentations 4:6, Amos 4:11, Zephaniah 2:9, Peter 2 Pet. 2:6, Jude 7 and Jesus himself Lk. 17:28-32. It seems best to interpret the lake of fire and brimstone, the smoke and the torment of the Apocalypse in the light of this archetypal example. The concept of second death is one of finality; the fire consumes utterly, all that is left is smoke, a reminder of God's complete and just triumph over evil.

The third passage (Revelation 14:11) is the most difficult passage that the conditionalist has to deal with. I freely confess that I have come to no firm conclusions about the proper interpretation of the Book of Revelation. While I would not want to be guilty of undervaluing its symbolism, I am nonetheless chary about basing fundamental doctrine upon its symbolic passages. Certainly, on the face of it, having no rest day or night with smoke of torment going up for ever and ever, sounds like everlasting torment. But, as Stott points out, the torment 'experienced "in the presence of the holy angels and . . . the Lamb," seems to refer to the moment of judgment, not the eternal state' (p. 318). This is the time of which Jesus gave warning (Lk. 12:9) when 'he who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God'. Final judgment is an experience of unceasing and inescapable pain till all is over; but, as at Sodom, all that is left is the smoke of their torment going up for ever. It is a reminder to all eternity of the marvellous justice and mercy of God.

The proof texts of the Westminster Confession add the passage concerning the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31), which is indeed one of great exegetical difficulty. But the scene with Lazarus in Hades can hardly represent the final state of the lost seeing Hades itself is to be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14), and in any case there is no reference to the everlastingness of that place of torment. (Further reference to Revelation 14 and Luke 16 will be made in the next chapter.)

So this 'avalanche', these 'dozens', these fourteen passages whose natural meaning we are attempting to evade reduces to perhaps one, and that is far from insuperable, representing less than a half of one per cent of the new testament passages on the doom of the lost. So both Old and New Testaments taken in their natural sense seem to be almost entirely, if not entirely, on the conditionalist side.

The nub of the whole debate is the question of the natural meaning of the texts but there are other objections to the conditionalist position which should be briefly looked at. These in fact turn out to suggest weighty objections to the traditional position.

### **Other Objections to Conditionalism**

1. Belief in endless torment is said to have been the view of Jesus and the Jews of his day, of the New Testament writers and fathers of the Church, of the Reformers and all Bible-believers, and never seriously questioned till the twentieth century (Packer p. 22). I myself, resting largely on the authority of Charles Hodge (*Systematic Theology* III 870), at one

time believed this to be true. But it is quite untrue. It was certainly an almost unchallenged view during the middle ages, but it was not so either in first-century Judaism or in the early fathers or at the Reformation and most certainly not in the nineteenth century, which was the heyday of conditionalism among evangelicals.

B.L. Bateson in a private communication says in response to Packer's assertion 'it was never queried with any seriousness (by evangelicals) until the twentieth century' (p. 23): 'The subject was much discussed by evangelicals in the nineteenth century, not only in Britain, but also in the United States and at least fifty books and pamphlets appeared and many items of correspondence appeared on both sides in Christian magazines. Here are some of the best works:

Edward White, Congregationalist, *Life in Christ*, 1878, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. 541 pp.

E. Petavel, DD, Swiss pastor, *The Problem of Immortality*, 1878, 600 pp.

Richard Whately, Protestant Archbishop of Dublin, *A View of the Scripture Revelation concerning a Future State*. There were nine editions from 1829 of which the later ones were conditionalist.

Canon Henry Constable, *The Duration and Nature of Future Punishment*. Six editions between 1868 and 1886.

W.R. Huntington, DD, Rector of All Saints, Worcester, USA, *Conditional Immortality*, 1878, 202 p.

J.H. Pettingell, Congregational minister, *The Life Everlasting*, 1882, 761 pp.

Reginald Courtenay, Bishop of Jamaica, *The Future States*, 1843.

H.H. Dobney, Baptist minister, *The Scripture Doctrine of Future Punishment*, 1846.

J.M. Denniston, Scottish Presbyterian missionary to Jamaica, *The Perishing Soul*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. 1874.

Dr. Cameron Mann, Protestant Episcopal Bishop of N Dakota, *Five Discourses on Future Punishment*, 1888.

Dr. Joseph Parker, Congregational minister of the City Temple, London from 1874 for 28 years, proclaimed conditionalism in the 25 volumes of *The People's Bible*.

Bateson then goes on to mention R.W. Dale, whose book on the atonement was the most recommended book on the subject in my student days, and W.H.A. Hay Aitken, who was a

well-known mission preacher and Canon of Norwich Cathedral. This is all meticulously documented in Froom's great volumes, and Fudge devoted three chapters to the inter-testamental period and four to the period from post-apostolic times to the present day – something over a quarter of his book – showing that Packer's statement is quite untrue.

2. Belief in annihilation is said to miss out on the awesome dignity of our having been made to last for eternity (Packer p. 24). But how long a period of hopeless, ceaseless pain, 'learning' (in Packer's words) 'the bitterness of the choice' the unbeliever has made, can be said to enhance the dignity of man, I fail to see. Long-term imprisonment is one of the horrors of our supposedly civilized society and long-term prisoners normally gain a hangdog look. What would be the effect of such unending 'learning' which yields no reformation? Certainly not awesome dignity. Or is it the believer who has this dignity? Surely he gains his dignity by grace, rather than by creation with a potential for heaven or hell.

3. Believing in annihilation the Christian 'will miss out on telling the unconverted that their prospects without Christ are as bad as they possibly could be . . . Conditionalism cannot but impoverish a Christian and limit our usefulness' (p. 24). It seems to me to be a complete fallacy to think that the worse you paint the picture of hell the more effective your evangelism will be. I felt a growing distaste as I read through Shedd and a worse distaste as I read through Gerstner. This is not the God that I am trying to present to unbelievers. Shedd quotes Jonathan Edwards: 'Wrath will be executed in the day of judgment without any merciful circumstances . . . in hell there will be no more exercises of divine patience.' Faber likewise says:

O fearful thought! One act of sin  
Within itself contains  
The power of endless hate of God  
And everlasting pains.

Packer says, 'every moment of the unbeliever's . . . bitterness . . . furthers the glory of God' (p. 24). But the God whom I know had compassion on the crowds 'because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt. 9:36). He teaches us to think of him as like a good earthly father who won't give a snake to the son who asks for a fish (Lk. 11:11). 'He knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust' (Ps. 103:14). Faber said rightly, there is no place where kindlier judgment is given than in heaven. I think that the ordinary decent person who is groping his way through life, ignorant of God, battered and perplexed by the sinful world around him, is helped best by introducing him or her to the Jesus of the gospels in his gentleness, truthfulness and power. As we talk, while not hiding the seriousness of sin, we must see that the love of God gets through. To present God as the one whose 'divinely executed retributive process' (Packer p. 24) will bring him into everlasting torment unless he believes, is hardly likely to help. To any normal way of

thinking (and Jesus has told us when we think about God to think how the best of human fathers act), this depicts God as a terrible sadist, not as a loving Father.

Whether in practice the adoption of conditionalism makes our evangelism less effective, it is impossible to say. Many preachers of endless torment have been greatly used by God but it is doubtful whether that part of the message effected the conviction. Equally I have no reason to think that the adoption of conditionalism impairs a man's evangelism. Basil Atkinson was always on the look-out to put in a word for Jesus. I was very touched when one day I heard that he, a man whose mind lived in academia and Christian theology, had gone up to a group of lads lounging around in the Cambridge market-place and told them that Jesus loved them. I haven't noticed that John Stott's or Michael Green's conditionalism has made them any less of evangelists. In personal talks I often find myself explaining the self-destructive power of sin and of its ultimate power to destroy absolutely. I explain that that is how God has made the world. Judgment expresses his wrath against the abominable thing which he hates.

### **The Glory of Divine Justice**

4. We are said to miss out on the glory of divine justice, and, in our worship, on praise for God's judgments (Packer p. 21). We should have 'a passionate gladness' that God's 'adorable justice' should be done for the glory of our Creator (p. 21). I cannot see that this is true. In my book *The Enigma of Evil* I try to grapple with all the moral difficulties of the Bible and many of the difficulties of Providence. My main theme is to show how God's judgments reflect the goodness of the God we adore. The one point at which I am so seriously perplexed that I have to devote a whole chapter to it is the subject of hell. My problem is, not that God punishes, but that the punishment traditionally ascribed to God seems neither to square with Scripture nor to be just. Many stress that on the cross Jesus suffered the pains which we deserve. But, though he suffered physical torture, the utter dereliction of separation from the Father, and death, he did not suffer endless pain. I know that no sinner is competent to judge of the heinousness of sin but I cannot see that endless punishment is either loving or just.

C.S. Lewis was brought up in Northern Ireland where that extraordinary hell-fire preacher W.P. Nicholson had exerted so great an influence. In one of his early books, *The Pilgrim's Regress* he tells of his spiritual pilgrimage in allegory.

Chapter one starts in Puritania, where he dreams of a boy who is frustrated by the prohibitions of his elders. He is told that they are the rules of the steward, who has been appointed by the Landlord who owns the land. One day his parents take him to see the Steward:

When John came into the room, there was an old man with a red, round face, who was very kind and full of jokes, so that John quite got over his fears, and they had a

good talk about fishing tackle and bicycles. But just when the talk was at its best, the Steward got up and cleared his throat. He then took down a mask from the wall with a long white beard attached to it and suddenly clapped it on his face, so that his appearance was awful. And he said, 'Now I am going to talk to you about the Landlord. The Landlord owns all the country, and it is very, very kind of him to allow us to live on it at all – very, very kind.' He went on repeating 'very kind' in a queer sing-song voice so long that John would have laughed, but that now he was beginning to become frightened again. The Steward then took down from a peg a bit card with small print all over it, and said, 'Here is a list of all the things the Landlord says you must not do. You'd better look at it.' So John took the card: but half the rules seemed to forbid things he had never heard of, and the other half forbade things he was doing every day and could not imagine not doing: and the number of rules was so enormous that he felt he could never remember them all. 'I hope,' said the Steward, 'that you have not already broken any of the rules?' John's heart began to thump, and his eyes bulged more and more, and he was at his wit's end when the Steward took off the mask and looked at John with his real face and said, 'Better tell a lie, old chap, better tell a lie. Easiest for all concerned,' and popped the mask on his face all in a flash. John gulped and said quickly, 'Oh, no, sir.' 'That is just as well,' said the Steward through the mask. 'Because, you know, if you did break any of them and the Landlord got to know of it, do you know what he'd do to you?' 'No, sir,' said John: and the Steward's eyes seemed to be twinkling dreadfully through the holes of the mask. 'He'd take you and shut you up for ever and ever in a black hole full of snakes and scorpions as large as lobsters – for ever and ever. And besides that, he is such a kind, good man, so very, very kind, that I am sure you would never want to displease him.' 'No, sir,' said John. 'But, please, sir . . .' 'Well,' said the Steward. 'Please, sir, supposing I did break one, one little one, just by accident, you know. Could nothing stop the snakes and lobsters?' 'Ah! . . .' said the Steward; and then he sat down and talked for a long time, but John could not understand a single syllable. However, it all ended with pointing out that the Landlord was quite extraordinarily kind and good to his tenants, and would certainly torture most of them to death the moment he had the slightest pretext. 'And you can't blame him,' said the Steward. 'For after all it is his land, and it is so very good of him to let us live here at all – people like us, you know.' Then the Steward took off the mask and had a nice, sensible chat with John again, and gave him a cake and brought him out to his father and mother. But just as they were going he bent down and whispered in John's ear, 'I shouldn't bother about it all too much if I were you.' At the same time he slipped the card of the rules into John's hand and told him he could keep it for his own use.

Unending torment speaks to me of sadism, not justice. It is a doctrine which I do not know how to preach without negating the loveliness and glory of God. From the days of Tertullian it has frequently been the emphasis of fanatics. It is a doctrine which makes the Inquisition look reasonable. It all seems a flight from reality and common sense.

I have a suspicion (though I may well be wrong) that many of the sincere Christians who hold this doctrine don't quite believe it themselves. They are tempted to whittle down some of the Bible's teaching. Jesus speaks of the many on the broad road to destruction in contrast to the few on the road to life but Charles Hodge says (III p. 870), 'We have reason to believe . . . that the number of the finally lost in comparison with the whole number of the saved will be very inconsiderable.' (Shocking adjective!) B.B. Warfield (p. 63) speaks of them as 'a relatively insignificant body'. Goulburn says (p. 164), 'no one to whom the offer of grace and salvation is fully and fairly made, can possibly perish except by the wilful, deliberate, open-eyed rejection of the offer'. But what of the multitudes who have heard the offer imperfectly presented and what of the multitudes who have simply neglected their great salvation? Goulburn seems to suggest that there are few on the road to destruction. Salmond (p. 674) sets great hope on deathbed repentances, however faint and feeble. As does Pusey (pp. 11-17).

Packer says that hell is 'unimaginably dreadful' (p. 20), 'far, far worse than the symbols' (p. 25), and he recommends that we 'do not attempt to imagine what it is like'. But is it not the preacher's duty to exercise his imagination in a disciplined way to bring home to his hearers the dread truth, whatever it is? It seems to me that Fudge is a most unwavering preacher of hell, not tempted to whittle down what the Bible actually says. Its solemn teaching appears to be that our destiny is sealed at death, and this gives great urgency to our preaching. (See Heb. 9:27, 'It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment.' 2 Cor. 5:10, 'We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or bad, according to what he has done in the body.' Rom. 2:5-8, 'On the day of wrath . . . he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience and well doing seek glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury.' John 3:36, 'He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.' John 8:24, 'I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he.')

Some argue that destruction is no punishment, since many an unbeliever wants to die, so mere death would be a denial of justice. This assumes that the first death is the end and that there is no Day of Judgment and that we are not judged according to our works. This is plainly unscriptural and not the view of any conditionalist that I know. The very wicked who have suffered little in this life will clearly get what they deserve. Perhaps a major part of the punishment will be a realization of the true awfulness of their sin, in its crucifixion of the Son of God and in its effects on others. The horror (particularly of the latter) would be greater for some than for others.

5. Conditionalists, we are told, 'appear to back into' their doctrine 'in horrified recoil from the thought of millions in endless distress, rather than move into it because the obvious meaning of Scripture beckons them' (Packer p. 24). As I have already shown, I was drawn



to conditionalism by Scripture, rather than by a horrified recoil from the other doctrine. But I do plead guilty to a growing horror at the thought of millions in endless distress, which I find exceedingly difficult to reconcile not only with the goodness of God, but also with the final supremacy of Christ. If there are human beings alive suffering endless punishment, it would seem to mean that they are in endless opposition to God, that is to say, we have a doctrine of endless sinning as well as of suffering. How can this be if Christ is all in all? I plead guilty also to failing to see how God and the saints could be in perfect bliss with human beings hopelessly sinning and suffering. Packer's answer to this (p. 24) is that God's joy will not be marred by the continuance in being of the damned, so that the Christian's joy will not be either.

These speculations don't look to me like the beckoning of Scripture's obvious meaning. I have thought about this subject for more than fifty years and for more than fifty years I have believed the Bible to teach the ultimate destruction of the lost, but I have hesitated to declare myself in print. I regard with utmost horror the possibility of being wrong. We are all to be judged by our words (Mt. 12:37) and teachers with greater strictness (Jas. 3:1). Whichever side you are on, it is a dreadful thing to be on the wrong side in this issue. Now I feel that the time has come when I must declare my mind honestly. I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel. I should indeed be happy if, before I die, I could help in sweeping it away. Most of all I should rejoice to see a number of theologians (including some of the very first water) joining Fudge in researching this great topic in all its ramifications.

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