

Preface

It was a number of years ago that the idea for this book first came to me. I believe it was when my nine-year-old daughter walked into my office, looked over several of my bookshelves with a quizzical expression, and finally asked, “Daddy, why do you have so many books about hell?” It struck me as a good question, similar to one that many friends and colleagues have asked me over the twenty years I have been studying the topic of hell, particularly focusing on the doctrine of conditional immortality: “Why are you so interested in hell?”

It is a reasonable question, since the evidence for my somewhat obsessive interest in the topic is obvious to those around me. I have collected over a hundred books on hell, along with countless articles, blog posts, and other media. In seminary, I regularly focused on the doctrine of hell in projects and papers, and later as a pastor, I led presentations on various views of hell in the church, arranged a debate on hell at an evangelical university, and have raised the topic of final judgment in too many conversations to remember. After helping to forge an international project dedicated to the idea of “rethinking hell,” I have now had the privilege of working with some colleagues to select significant excerpts from conditionalist writings to reprint as a book on hell, as well as organizing an international conference on conditionalism. During these years, I have often faced alienation and marginalization from peers who have vehemently disagreed with me, along with the ongoing potential of losing my job over the view of hell that I held. So it truly is a question that should be answered.

The truth is, however, that I am not really that interested in the topic of hell itself. (And to be quite honest, I was never very drawn to the study of any eschatological subject: debates over the timing of Christ’s return, views on the nature of the tribulation and millennium, and musing on the intermediate state have always felt very tiresome and speculative to

me.) Hell is a rather morbid topic, to my mind, and it seems almost in bad taste to spend too much time dwelling upon it, though it is certainly important to understand the doctrine as it relates to God's character and human destiny, and to be able to communicate the reality of judgment, justice, and punishment as part of Christian belief.

My abiding interest in hell, and the reason why I've poured so much of my thought, resources, and conviction into this topic, has to do with the fact that there are so many Christians who claim quite confidently that hell will consist of eternal conscious torment, yet I personally (and surprisingly) have found the biblical, theological, and philosophical evidence for this perspective to be weak and insubstantial. In contrast, I discovered that the case for conditional immortality and the final destruction of the unsaved was comprehensive and compelling: this view seemed to be derived from the clear and consistent language of Scripture, it had an internal coherence that made sense of the overarching narrative of redemptive history, and it resolved philosophical and intuitive difficulties that have plagued generations of Christians and non-Christians alike for centuries.

And yet despite my own experience of the inferiority of the traditional view and the seemingly clear evidence and scriptural basis of the conditionalist view, there were so many other thoughtful and intelligent believers who have claimed the exact opposite—in fact, eternal conscious torment has been the position of the majority of Christians throughout church history. And this is what has made me, and so many others, obsess over the issue. How can it be that the evidence in favor of conditionalism appears so clear to those of us who have been convinced and yet is received with such skepticism by our fellow Christians? This experience is baffling, having an almost Kafkaesque quality to it, and it is honestly what has driven my own obsessive interest in the topic. I just don't understand how I can simultaneously feel so right and so wrong.

For instance, in an article in the alumni publication of the evangelical Christian university where I had worked for a number of years, an "expert" on the topic of hell had this to say about the view I hold:

There have been individuals within the broad evangelical community who have subscribed to this view of annihilationism, which basically is the idea that the unbeliever will be tormented for a particular amount of time in hell but will eventually be terminated or annihilated. It's the

idea that fire destroys and brings things to an end—to ashes. It's the idea of conscious, but not eternal torment. I'm not quite sure if there's any biblical basis for this. From what I've seen and what I've read, the problem seems to be more existential, more emotional than scriptural and textual. Annihilationism is held by some theologians in the church—Clark Pinnock, Edward Fudge—but to be honest, textually speaking I'm not quite sure how they can affirm this.

I remember reading the words “I'm not quite sure if there's any biblical basis for this” and feeling a depth of incredulity and perplexity that confounded me to my core. Of course I understand that Christians have different interpretations of Scripture, but this author's dismissive attitude and ignorance of the careful biblical study of the highest level of evangelical scholars exemplifies the frustrating reality of presumptuous conjectures and careless conclusions that conditionalists face within evangelical circles. Having been told there are no legitimate grounds for holding our view, we have returned to the biblical texts and the theological and philosophical arguments to reexamine if we have indeed misread the texts or misunderstood the evidence for our view somehow. Surely our evangelical brothers and sisters have deeply reflected on the basis for their beliefs and are not simply asserting their view out of blind adherence to the traditional doctrine of eternal conscious torment that has been handed down to them, right? So we research and read some more, looking for the place where we must have gone wrong in our study of the topic. And yet we arrive, in the end, at the same conclusion favoring conditionalism. But when we share these results, once again, traditionalists are adamant that there are no credible reasons for holding our view.

At times, the experience of being dismissed by others as emotional, eccentric, or even heretical, combined with others' unwillingness to actually review the evidence for conditionalism has been both confusing and deeply troubling, particularly given the fact that evangelicals claim to base their beliefs on their study of Scripture and not merely on the authority of any tradition. So my passionate interest in hell has primarily been an exercise in challenging myself and others to test our commitment to the authority of God's revelation in the Bible over unexamined tradition, which would be the same with any other accepted doctrine that did not appear to stand up to exegetical investigation.

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G. K. Chesterton famously said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” Something similar could be said about the doctrine of conditional immortality in terms of most Christians’ willingness to explore the topic. Our hope with this book is that it will provide readers with a collection of solid evangelical voices in support of conditionalism in order to make their study of our view as accessible and focused as possible. (It will also save them the hassle of having to track down the many books from which these chapters are taken, most of which are out of print, hard to find, or expensive to obtain.) If our readers still reject this view, it will not be because they have not considered the best arguments for our perspective (although they would benefit tremendously from also reading Edward Fudge’s definitive exploration of the topic in his book *The Fire that Consumes*). Hopefully, at the very least, my own friends who get this book can have a more accurate understanding of why I and other conditionalists have such an intense interest in the topic of hell. And perhaps someday my daughter will take up this volume too, and discover just why all those books, in a manner of speaking, have a place on every Christian’s shelves.

Greg Stump