

## *Introduction: What's All the Fuss About?*

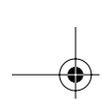
THAT FAMOUS THEOLOGIAN ANN LANDERS WRITES IN A JANUARY 10, 1993, column in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*:

During a heated argument in the U.S. Senate back in the 1920s, one man told a colleague to go to hell. The astonished senator questioned Vice President Coolidge, who was presiding, as to the propriety of the remark. Coolidge, who had been leafing through a book, looked up and said, "I have been checking the rules manual, and you don't have to go."

Calvin Coolidge's witty remark mirrors the opinions of many today when asked about hell, "You don't have to go." Polls show that in spite of the fact that most Americans believe in the existence of hell, they do not think that they will go there. Although he was jesting, Mr. Coolidge actually had the right idea: We must consult "the rules manual." Evangelical Christians agree that the only reliable source to tell us God's truth about eternal destinies is the Bible. Consequently, they affirm the reality of hell and consider the optimism of many Americans concerning the afterlife unwarranted. Furthermore, evangelicals agree that hell is the most terrible fate that can befall a human being. But today there is no unanimity among theological conservatives concerning every aspect of the Bible's teaching on hell. Specifically, they debate the nature of hell. Does it consist of conscious punishment that lasts forever, or does it have an end? The first view is called *traditionalism* and the second *conditionalism* or *annihilationism*.<sup>1</sup>

At times this debate has become animated, as you will learn by hearing from two respected evangelical professors of theology, James I. Packer and John W. Wenham. Both men are British and are published by InterVarsity Press. Packer teaches at Regent College in Vancouver and is the author of the best-selling book *Knowing God*. Wenham, now deceased, was vice prin-





cipal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and warden of Latimer House, Oxford. He is the author of the highly regarded book *The Goodness of God*. Listen, first, to Dr. Packer:

Does it matter whether an evangelical is a conditionalist or not? I think it does: for a conditionalist's idea of God will miss out on the glory of divine justice, and his idea of worship will miss out on praise for God's judgments, and his idea of heaven will miss out on the thought that praise for God's judgments goes on (cf. Rev. 16:5-7, 19:1-5), and his idea of man will miss out on the awesome dignity of our having been made to last for eternity, and in his preaching of the gospel he will miss out on telling the unconverted that their prospects without Christ are as bad as they possibly could be—for on the conditionalist view they aren't! These, surely, are sad losses. Conditionalism, logically thought through, cannot but impoverish a Christian, and limit our usefulness to our Lord. That is why I am concerned about the current trend towards conditionalism. I hope it may soon be reversed.<sup>2</sup>

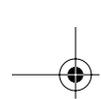
Strong words! And impassioned language is not confined to one side of the debate concerning the duration of hell.

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 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.<sup>3</sup>

There you have it: Two highly regarded evangelical theologians at odds concerning how long the wicked will suffer in hell. Packer's traditional view is held by many other evangelical thinkers, including D. A. Carson and R. C. Sproul. And the conditionalist view set forth by Wenham is no mere fad—it has also been vigorously advocated by Clark H. Pinnock and is tentatively held by John R. W. Stott.

Notice that Packer's and Wenham's convictions are rooted in their hearts as well as their minds. We do not, however, mean to overplay the emotional element; both of these thinkers are committed to their respective positions for what they regard as good reasons—biblical, theological and historical.





Reflecting on why Wenham and Packer hold their views suggests a question: How does each regard the arguments advanced by those espousing the opposing view? This question is not difficult to answer. In a word, they deem the opposing arguments inadequate. Here is Packer again:

The biblical arguments [for annihilationism] are to my mind flimsy special pleading, and the feelings that make people want conditionalism to be true seem to me to reflect, not superior spiritual sensitivity, but secular sentimentalism which assumes that in heaven our feelings about others will be as at present, and our joy in the manifesting of God's justice will be no greater than it is now. It is certainly agonizing now to live with the thought of people going to eternal hell, but it is not right to reduce the agony by evading the facts; and in heaven, we may be sure, the agony will be a thing of the past.<sup>4</sup>

Wenham takes strong exception to such conclusions:

The extraordinary thing about these [traditionalist] replies [to conditional immortality] is that none of them actually addresses the arguments used by the conditionalists. . . .

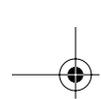
Packer is in some ways even more disappointing. With all his capacity for reading and digesting material and with his gift of lucid exposition, one hoped to see the conditionalist arguments carefully considered. . . . While not answering the conditionalist arguments with any seriousness, these writers do of course state their own case. They set out certain well-known texts and claim that their meaning is "obvious." . . .

I would claim that the natural meaning of the vast majority of relevant texts is quite otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

This volume, a debate between a proponent of conditionalism and a proponent of traditionalism, addresses the bone of contention between Packer and Wenham. We will begin by introducing ourselves, explaining what the debate is not, and then set some parameters for the discussion.

Edward William Fudge is a biblical scholar and attorney who lives in Houston, Texas, and is a lifelong member of the Churches of Christ. He has written *The Fire That Consumes: The Biblical Case for Conditional Immortality*. Robert A. Peterson is Professor of Systematic Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. He has penned *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*.<sup>6</sup>

We want to bring the debate into sharper focus by stating what is *not* the subject of this book. The debate is not over universalism, the view that all



people will ultimately be saved. Although a vast number of clergy around the world hold this view, we reject it as contradicting the teaching of Scripture. Truth is not derived by taking opinion polls but by carefully studying God's Word. And the Bible will not allow universalism. Instead of portraying all of humanity as saved in the end, Jesus foretells a final separation between the righteous and the wicked. This is evident in his teaching concerning the sheep and the goats:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." . . .

Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." . . .

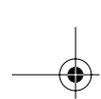
Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Mt 25:31-34, 41, 46)

There is no need to quote multiple passages; universalism is incompatible with clear biblical teaching.<sup>7</sup>

Another topic that is not a subject of debate in this book is that of post-mortem evangelism, the idea that persons have an opportunity after death to believe the gospel of Christ. In spite of the fact that some evangelicals have adopted this position, we believe Scripture points to death as an end to the opportunity for salvation.<sup>8</sup> The testimony of Hebrews 9:27 seems conclusive: "Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people."

We also agree that the Bible's general picture of the end includes the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgment, followed by terrible suffering for the lost. We disagree, however, as to the nature of the eternal punishment of which Scripture speaks. Based on his study of God's Word, Fudge is convinced that conditionalism is true. God will justly exterminate the wicked after they have suffered conscious punishment proportionate to their sins. The ultimate final punishment will constitute the eradication of their being, so the wicked will exist no more.





Fudge believes that this view best magnifies God's justice, fits the Bible's teaching and constitutes part of the proper motivation for evangelism.

Peterson respectfully disagrees. He is convinced for biblical and theological reasons that the suffering of the wicked in hell will never come to an end. Furthermore, it is his conviction that only this view glorifies God's righteousness, squares with biblical doctrine and provides the most important rationale for fulfilling the Great Commission.

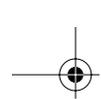
Thoughtful readers may still ask: What is all the fuss about? Theologians like to squabble, but what difference does it really make if I adopt traditionalism or conditionalism? To completely answer these questions is the goal of the rest of this book. For now, short answers will have to do. Both writers think that our position on the subject of the debate affects our view of God, our handling of the Bible and our motivation for evangelism. In Fudge's estimation, traditionalism attributes unworthy motives to God, is based more on secular philosophy than on holy Scripture and seriously jeopardizes the church's witness. In Peterson's view, annihilationism represents wishful thinking based on a faulty portrayal of God, contradicts the clear testimony of Scripture, and if not checked, will do great harm to the task of world evangelization.

It is our goal to conduct this debate in a spirit of brotherly courtesy. We will seek to abstain from misstating one another's positions, from imputing improper motives and from using other questionable tactics that would dishonor the name of Christ.

The format is straightforward. The debaters will present the cases for their positions, Fudge affirming conditionalism and Peterson traditionalism, respectively. Then each will respond to the other's presentation.

We invite readers to join us in exploring the evangelical controversy over hell.





# 1

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## AN INTRODUCTION TO CONDITIONALISM



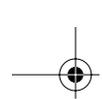
**T**HE BIBLE CLEARLY TEACHES THAT THOSE WHO PERSISTENTLY REJECT God's mercy throughout this life will one day face him in judgment and finally be cast into hell. Hell is real. It is fearful beyond human imagination, and those who go there will never come out again. From at least the time of Augustine (A.D. 354-430), most Christians have taught that God will keep hell's inhabitants alive forever so they can suffer everlasting torment of body or soul or both, in an agony that somehow corresponds to the pain inflicted by fire.



It is not surprising that when Jonathan Edwards preached on hell, colonial Americans sometimes fainted with fright. Edwards admonished:

To help your conception, imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, all of a glowing heat, or into the midst of a blowing brick-kiln, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter of an hour, full of fire, as full within and without as a bright coal of fire, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! . . . And how much greater would be the effect, if you knew you must endure it for a whole year, and how vastly greater still if you





knew you must endure it for a thousand years! O then, how would your heart sink, if you thought, if you knew, that you must bear it forever and ever! . . . That after millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, than ever it was; and that you never, never should be delivered! But your torment in Hell will be immeasurably greater than this illustration represents.<sup>1</sup>

A century later Charles Spurgeon minced no words as he described hell's torment to his London audience:

Thine heart beating high with fever, thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony, thy limbs cracking like the martyrs in the fire and yet unburnt, thyself put in a vessel of hot oil, pained yet coming out undestroyed, all thy veins becoming a road for the hot feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune.<sup>2</sup>

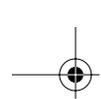
This style of preaching is now in rapid decline. Many advocates of the traditional view now say the fire is likely metaphorical. Hell's pains result more from deprivation than from external infliction, they explain, and are probably spiritual and emotional in nature rather than physical. The real agony will be the smitten conscience and the sense of loss, according to most of Spurgeon's and Edwards's modern descendants. Evangelist Billy Graham is among those who reject the lurid descriptions of hell once popular among advocates of everlasting torment. Says Graham in an interview:

The only thing I could say for sure is that hell means separation from God. We are separated from his light, from his fellowship. That is going to be hell. When it comes to a literal fire, I don't preach it because I'm not sure about it. When the Scripture uses fire concerning hell, that is possibly an illustration of how terrible it's going to be—not fire but something worse, a thirst for God that cannot be quenched.<sup>3</sup>

The fact is that the Bible does not teach the traditional view of final punishment. Scripture nowhere suggests that God is an eternal torturer. It never says the damned will writhe in ceaseless torment or that the glories of heaven will forever be blighted by the screams from hell. The idea of conscious everlasting torment was a grievous mistake, a horrible error, a gross slander against the heavenly Father, whose character we truly see in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

Scripture teaches instead that those who go to hell will experience "everlasting destruction" in "the second death," for God is able to "destroy both





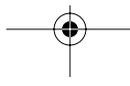
body and soul in hell.” The actual process of destruction may well involve conscious pain that differs in magnitude in each individual case—Scripture seems to indicate that it will. Whatever the case, God’s judgment will be measured by perfect, holy, divine justice. Even hell will demonstrate the absolute righteousness of God. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible repeatedly warns that the wicked will “die,” “perish” or “be destroyed.” Those who die this second death will never live again.

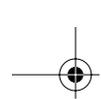
A growing host of respected biblical scholars now publicly question the traditional notion that God will keep the lost alive forever so he can punish them without end. These include such luminaries as F. F. Bruce, Michael Green, Philip E. Hughes, Dale Moody, Clark H. Pinnock, W. Graham Scroggie, John R. W. Stott and John W. Wenham. These men represent evangelical Christian scholarship at its best. They recognize that Scripture must judge all traditions and creeds, not the other way around. They realize that most of the church was wrong for centuries on doctrines far more fundamental than the doctrine of hell, and they understand that it would be presumptuous to suppose that the majority might not have erred on this point just as it did on others.

J. I. Packer rightly notes that “we are forbidden to become enslaved to human tradition, . . . even ‘evangelical’ tradition. We may never assume the complete rightness of our own established ways of thought and practice and excuse ourselves the duty of testing and reforming them by Scripture.”<sup>4</sup> John Stott reminds us that “the hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform.”<sup>5</sup> The growing evangelical rejection of the traditional doctrine of unending conscious torment is not propelled by emotionalism, sentimentality or compromise with culture but by absolute commitment to the authority of Scripture and by the conviction that a faithful church must be a church that is always reforming.

#### Dust Creatures in God’s Image

The Bible’s opening chapter tells us that there was a time when humankind did not exist, and that when God made us, he made us from dirt—from the very elements which also compose our planet. The author of Genesis allows us to watch over God’s shoulder as he makes the first human (Gen 2:7). God





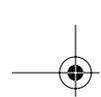
carefully shapes a human body from clay scooped from the earth. The Almighty stoops and breathes into its nostrils. Suddenly what began as a life-size mud doll becomes a living being! God names him *Adam*, a Hebrew word that also means “dust.” Earthly elements plus the “breath of life” have become a whole man—in Hebrew “a living soul.” From a rib of Adam, the story continues, God then makes Eve—also in the image of God (Gen 2:21-22).

Since humans did not exist until God formed them and gave them life, each moment of life is God’s immediate gift of grace. Eventually God reclaims the breath of life and we return to the ground from which we were taken (Eccles 3:18-22). The Bible always portrays human beings within this framework of God’s creation. We cannot exist for even one moment apart from God, who made us.

*The gift of life.* The biblical view of humans as God’s dependent creatures differs sharply from the view taught by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato. According to Plato, each human being has a body that is mortal and will finally die. Plato taught that each person also has a soul that is immortal and cannot die.<sup>6</sup> Plato’s student Socrates continued his master’s philosophy. As he faced his own execution, Socrates welcomed death, for to him it meant escaping the lower realm of mortal bodies and returning to the higher sphere of immortal souls. Like his teacher Plato, Socrates believed that the soul cannot die nor cease to exist. Plato died before Jesus was born, and thus before Jesus revealed that God “can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt 10:28). Socrates’ view also differs from the view expressed by his predecessors, the Old Testament writers, who consistently dreaded death as the end of life. Unlike those Scriptures, Socrates did not view man in relation to the living God.

The most notable characteristic of the dead in the Old Testament is that they are cut off from God. This is a dreadful thought because, of all the living creatures, only humans know God person-to-person. Humans alone exhibit volition and awareness of their mortality. Even though Adam lived 930 years, he too finally died (Gen 5:5). As his descendants returned his lifeless body to the soil, they must have grieved at the thought of their own mortality and the brevity of their lives. The Old Testament writers disagree with later Greek philosophers who portray humans as immortal souls entrapped for a time in mortal bodies. They picture humanity’s state after death with the imagery of Sheol.<sup>7</sup>





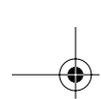
*Sheol—the realm of all the dead.* The word *Sheol* is used in the Old Testament sixty-five times. The King James Version translators rendered it either “hell” (thirty-one times), “the grave” (thirty-one times) or “the pit” (three times). The translators of the American Standard Version simply left it “Sheol.” In the New International Version the word is usually translated as “grave,” though at least once it is rendered “the realm of death” (Deut 32:22). Sheol is not a physical hole in the ground, but it might well be translated “gravedom.”<sup>8</sup> Biblical Greek writers used the word *Hades* (literally “unseen”) for the Hebrew word *Sheol*, both in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

Job describes Sheol as “the place of no return, . . . the land of gloom and deep shadow, . . . the land of deepest night, of deep shadow and disorder, where even the light is like darkness” (Job 10:21-22). David calls it “the place of darkness” and “the land of oblivion” (Ps 88:12). Although individuals are sometimes pictured in the Old Testament as conversing in Sheol or engaging in other such lifelike pursuits (Is 14:9-18), the Hebrew text tells us that they are mere shades, shadows of whole persons who once lived and loved on the earth (Is 14:9).

Some writers have suggested that Sheol was a place of punishment for sin. The translators of the King James Version contributed to this misunderstanding by rendering *Sheol* as “hell.” However, such faithful saints as Jacob, David and Job all expected to go to Sheol when they died (Gen 37:35; Ps 49:15; Job 14:13). Most importantly, Jesus Christ himself went to Sheol (Greek *Hades*) upon his death (Acts 2:27, 31). On the third day Jesus came back from the grave in victory, and he now holds as trophies “the keys to death and Hades” themselves (Rev 1:18). One day death and Hades also will be cast into the “lake of fire”—which is a way of saying they will cease to exist (Rev 20:13-15).

No wonder that righteous men and women throughout the Bible repeatedly express confidence that God will restore them from Sheol to enjoy life in his fellowship again (1 Sam 2:6; Ps 16:9-11). No biblical character is ever said to have placed hope in philosophical notions of natural immortality, or to have supposed that human beings have some mysterious part that cannot die. Whatever the state of mortals between earthly death and the resurrection, their only hope for survival lies in the hands of the Creator who alone is inherently immortal (1 Tim 6:16).





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# THE OLD TESTAMENT



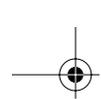
**I**F EARTHLY FAME AND FORTUNE ARE THE ONLY MEASURE, IT APPARENTLY does not pay to serve God. We have all known godly people who have spent their entire working lives in honest labor, shared what they made with others less fortunate—then died with no fanfare, leaving little more than the clothes on their backs. Meanwhile, the well-heeled neighbor who never had time for God stashed away wealth of all kinds and exited this life with a front-page write-up. Where is God's justice in this? These questions are as old as the Bible itself. In fact, the authors of Job, Psalms and Proverbs struggle with the very same questions.



### **Are Good and Evil Lost on God?**

*Job's "friends" and the end of the wicked.* Job's so-called friends argue that present calamity must be punishment for sins and that earthly prosperity is God's blessing for right living (Job 18:5-21; 20:4-29; 22:15-20; 34:10-28). Job insists that he is living proof that their perspective is mistaken, for he knows some wicked men who thrive in this life while he, with clean hands, is perishing. Although we cannot derive solid doctrine from the uninspired conclusions of Job's miserable comforters, their question will not quietly go





away. Given God's moral rule over humankind, how can the wicked die rich while the righteous languish away in misery?

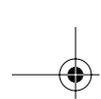
*Psalms and Proverbs promise moral justice.* The book of Psalms contains much of the same language Job's companions use. The psalmists assure us that the wicked will die, their memory will perish, and they will become as if they had never existed. These writers anticipate that the wicked will vanish like water that flows away, will melt like a slug as it moves along and will become like a stillborn child. But God will save the righteous out of death, and they will enjoy his presence forever (Ps 9; 21:4-10; 49:8-20; 58:7-8).<sup>1</sup> The book of Proverbs repeats these promises that the wicked will pass away, be overthrown, be cut off from the land, be no more, have their lamp put out (Prov 2:21-22; 10:25; 12:7; 24:15-20).

*Psalms that anticipate final judgment.* Someone might suggest that these texts all refer only to the present life, but truth requires us to acknowledge that this is not what we see on the earth. As the author of Hebrews later notes, many of the noblest promises of the psalms wait for final fulfillment in the age to come (Heb 2:5-8; 4:6-11). We now consider several other psalms whose New Testament usage projects their ultimate fulfillment into the future and that also describe the end of the wicked as total, everlasting extinction.

In Psalm 34:8-22 David praises God who delivers his people. Peter later applies this psalm's message to persecuted Christians (1 Pet 2:3; 3:10-12). Whoever fears God will discover his kindness and presence, and God will deliver them from trouble (Ps 34:8, 15-18, 22). But the wicked await a different fate. They finally will die (or "be slain" NASB) and their memory will perish from the earth (Ps 34:16, 21). The psalm reaches beyond the present life for its certain fulfillment. As surely as God is just, a day will come when the righteous will shine but the wicked will be no more (Ps 34:5, 16).

In Psalm 37:1-40 David contrasts the security of those who trust in God with the precarious position of the wicked. "A little while, and the wicked will be no more," he promises, "though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace" (Ps 37:10-11). The inheritance of the righteous "will endure forever, . . . but the wicked will perish . . . [and] will vanish—vanish like smoke. . . . There is a future for the man of peace. But all sinners will be destroyed" (Ps 37:18, 20,





37-38). Again the biblical assurances do not match the world we now see. God's final justice awaits an age beyond the present. But Jesus himself assures us that this psalm speaks the truth, and he reaffirms it by quoting it to those who would follow him (Mt 5:5).

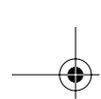
Psalm 69 sounds the desperate cry of a righteous man surrounded and outnumbered by evil enemies. New Testament writers apply its words to Jesus on the one hand (Jn 2:17; 19:28-30) and to Judas and unbelievers in Israel on the other (Acts 1:20; Rom 11:9-10). In the end the author of Psalm 69 requests that the wicked's place be deserted (Ps 69:25) and that they not be listed among the living in the book of life (Ps 69:28; see also Rev 20:15). This language is consistent with final and irreversible death, but it stands in sharp contrast to the notion that the wicked will be kept alive forever for ceaseless torment.

#### The Vocabulary of Divine Judgment

It is one thing to talk about divine justice and the final punishment of sin. It is quite another thing to see it happen with one's own eyes. The historical books of the Old Testament show us examples of actual judgments against the wicked in the past. More important, Jesus and the writers of the New Testament borrow the vocabulary of these events to describe God's final judgment against the lost. Unfortunately, many who have written and taught on this subject have ignored the Bible's own key to this symbolic language. If we allow the Bible to interpret itself, these Old Testament examples can teach us much about the punishment awaiting the wicked at the end of the world.

*The flood and final judgment.* In the structure of Genesis the saga begun with Adam and creation ends with Noah and the great flood (Gen 1—9). When they speak of the flood, both the Greek Old Testament and the Greek New Testament use the word that gives us our English word *cataclysm*. This ancient cataclysmic judgment terminated one world and ushered in another (2 Pet 3:3-6). The flood story is so important for biblical authors they use it as a metaphor both for historical judgments and for the final judgment to come. New Testament writers invoke the metaphor to explain that the final judgment will be unexpected (Mt 24:38-39; Lk 17:26-27), when they discuss its victims (2 Pet 2:5, 9) and those whom it will deliver (1 Pet 3:20-22). The flood provides examples of exemplary faith (Ezek 14:14, 20; Heb 11:7) and





of divine patience (1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 3:5-9). Peter makes this ancient catastrophe a model of God's final wrath (2 Pet 2:5, 9; 3:3-7) as does Jesus (Lk 17:26-27).

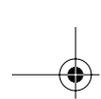
The nature of this judgment could not be clearer. God tells Noah that he will "put an end to all people, . . . destroy both them and the earth," so "everything on earth will perish" (Gen 6:13, 17). What happened next leaves no room for doubt about the meaning of *perish* or *destroy* in this story of the end of the first world. When the flood came,

every living thing that moved on the earth perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Every living thing on the face of the earth was wiped out; men and animals and the creatures that move along the ground and the birds of the air were wiped from the earth. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark. (Gen 7:21-23)

Even a casual reader immediately understands the meaning of *perish*, *die* and *destroy* in this story. In this historical example of the end of the world, those terms mean being "wiped out," being "wiped off the face of the earth." The writers of the Bible use the same verbs to describe the eternal fate of the lost that they use to describe the judgment brought by the great flood. Just as with the flood, the ungodly will "perish," "die" and be "destroyed." These words do not require literal annihilation as a scientist might use that term. No one would protest the use of these words because the flood did not technically annihilate the physical elements of the earth or because the atoms that composed the people who perished were not literally destroyed. Yet Peter points back to what God once did in the flood as an example of what the wicked may expect at the end (2 Pet 2:5, 9; 3:3-7). There is one important difference however. Those who perished in Noah's day will live again to face God's eternal judgment (Jn 5:28-29), but those who experience the second death will be destroyed, body and soul, forever (Mt 10:28; 2 Thess 1:9).

*Lessons from Sodom and Gomorrah.* Genesis 19 relates the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Throughout the Bible this divine judgment ranks alongside the flood as an unmistakable prototype of divine judgment.<sup>2</sup> After Abraham's intercessory negotiations with God to save the city, God warns Lot to gather his family and to escape with their lives (Gen 18:16-33; 19:12-17).





Then the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah—from the LORD out of the heavens. Thus he overthrew those cities and the entire plain, including all those living in the cities—and also the vegetation in the land. But Lot’s wife looked back and she became a pillar of salt.

Early the next morning Abraham got up and returned to the place where he had stood before the LORD. He looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah, toward all the land of the plain, and he saw dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace.

So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham, and he brought Lot out of the catastrophe that overthrew the cities where Lot had lived. (Gen 19:24-29)

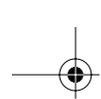
This is the origin of the biblical phrase “fire and brimstone,” the King James Version’s equivalent of “burning sulfur.” Burning sulfur suffocates its living victims by its fumes, and its fire devours what remains. Many of Sodom’s people undoubtedly suffered some conscious agony while they perished, but the Bible does not call attention to that fact. Compared to some fates, death by fire and brimstone is mercifully quick (Lam 4:6). God’s wrath descended on the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah, “burning them to ashes,” making them “an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” at the end of time (2 Pet 2:6).

The writers of Scripture do emphasize the thoroughness of Sodom’s destruction. On the day after it was destroyed, Abraham went out to view the scene. Where once a bustling city had stood he saw only “dense smoke rising from the land, like smoke from a furnace” (Gen 19:28). God had executed his judgment, and no sound was heard in its wake. The sinners were all gone. The silence was unbroken. Throughout Scripture from this point, rising smoke symbolizes complete destruction (Is 34:10; Rev 14:11; 19:3).

The writers of the Bible also stress the permanence of Sodom’s destruction—a one-time destruction which will last forever (Is 13:19-22; Jer 50:40). Sodom would never rise again. In this regard Sodom illustrates the destiny of those who Jude said would “suffer the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

Isaiah begins his prophecy with an oracle against the people of Jerusalem and Judah. They have already felt God’s chastening through the Assyrians, but they did not get the message and further punishment is coming. Some will accept correction and be blessed; others will refuse to repent and





will face even more severe punishment. Isaiah contrasts these alternate futures using vivid prophetic symbols:

Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the LORD will perish. . . . You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water. The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire. (Is 1:27-28, 30-31)

Here is a portrait of total destruction. Apart from God's mercy Judah's wicked would be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah until no one is left (Is 1:9). They would wither like an oak with fading leaves and perish like a garden with no water (Is 1:30). They would burn like tinder with no one to quench the fire (Is 1:31). If no one quenches or extinguishes a fire, it keeps consuming until there is nothing left to burn. Isaiah repeats the image of unquenchable fire at the end of his book, in a passage that Jesus quotes and applies to final judgment. Throughout Scripture unquenchable fire signifies fire that cannot be extinguished or resisted and that therefore consumes until nothing is left (Is 34:10-11; Ezek 20:47-48; Amos 5:6; Mt 3:12).<sup>3</sup>

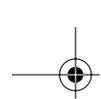
Nahum prophesies God's judgment against ancient Nineveh (1:1), portraying God coming in stormy fire which no one can endure, pursuing his enemies into darkness (1:6, 8). They are consumed like dry stubble (1:10). The prophet mixes metaphors freely: God comes in fire and pursues into darkness. We need not ask how fire and darkness can coexist—each word conjures its own visual image and emotional response. Both responses are true, and they are troublesome only to the over-literalistic. Jesus also later describes final punishment in terms of both darkness and fire (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30).

As we become familiar with these Old Testament symbols of judgment, we will be better able to understand the meaning of the same language in New Testament texts. And we will escape the easy temptation to explain biblical expressions in ways that have no basis in Scripture. More important, we can avoid interpreting biblical images in ways that contradict their ordinary usage throughout the Bible.

### Prophetic Pictures of the End

Several Old Testament passages specifically foretell the destiny of the lost at the end of the world. According to these prophetic passages, the wicked





will become like chaff or husks of wheat which the wind blows away. They will be like pottery that has been broken to pieces. The wicked will be slain and consumed and will cease to exist. They will be ashes under the soles of the feet of God's people. None of these Scripture texts even hints at anything resembling eternal conscious torment.

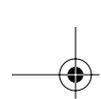
Psalm 1 contrasts the present and future fates of the wicked and the righteous. The godly man is like a well-nourished tree that never stops bearing fruit (1:3). We think of the Garden of Eden in Genesis or the Eternal City in Revelation. The wicked are "like chaff that the wind blows away," and their path will finally perish (1:4-6). This psalm speaks of exclusion from God's presence, a principal theme of Jesus' teaching and that of the apostles.

Psalm 2 also foretells the final fate of the lost. In Christian retrospect we see that this psalm describes Jesus Christ as the savior and judge anointed by God (Mt 3:17; Rev 2:26-27).<sup>4</sup> When he finally judges his enemies, he "will dash them to pieces like pottery" (2:9), which is also to "be destroyed" (2:12). When God destroys the wicked, they will resemble pottery that someone has shattered with an iron rod. Does this imagery sound like final extinction or like perpetual torment?

Psalm 110 is one of the most messianic texts in all the Old Testament and is the Old Testament chapter most often quoted in the New Testament.<sup>5</sup> It describes Jesus' exaltation at God's right hand (Ps 110:1), his present intercession for his people (Ps 110:4) and his final triumphant return in judgment (Ps 110:1, 5-6). Commenting on verse one of this psalm, the apostle Paul tells us that the last "enemy" to be destroyed will be death (1 Cor 15:25-26), and John describes death's annihilation by using the image of the lake of fire (Rev 20:14). Psalm 110 says that God's human enemies will be "crushed" (v. 5-6), and it pictures a time when God will be "heaping up the dead" (v. 6). These poetic statements precisely match John's explanation that the lake of fire, for human beings, means "the second death" (Rev 20:14-15; 21:8).

The eleventh chapter of Isaiah prophetically previews the person and work of Jesus Christ. New Testament writers paraphrase or echo each of its first five verses. Verses 6 through 9 picture the result of Jesus' work of redemption, and verse 10 foretells the gospel ministry among the Gentiles (Rom 15:12). Judgment will mean vindication for some and punishment for





others. Jesus will “strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked” (Is 11:4). The picture is symbolic but absolutely clear: the wicked finally will be utterly destroyed.

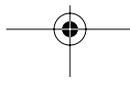
A question concerning “everlasting burning.” Defenders of the traditional view of hell as everlasting conscious torment often look for support to Isaiah’s question “Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?” (Is 33:14), as if it supports the notion that God will keep the wicked alive forever to burn them everlastingly. When we read this passage carefully, we see that it teaches the exact opposite.

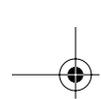
Foreign armies afflicted Israel in Isaiah’s day, but in Isaiah 33:10-24 the prophet foretells a day when the wicked will be burned up. That day will come at the end of the world. Then God’s people will “see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar” (Is 33:17). They will look on the eternal Jerusalem (Is 33:20). They will never be ill again, and all their sins will have been forgiven (Is 33:24). God will “arise,” and the wicked will be unable to protect themselves. They will ignite themselves by their own sins, producing a fire that “consumes” them (Is 33:10-11). They will blaze as easily as “cut thornbushes” and burn as thoroughly “as if to lime” (Is 33:12). No metaphor could describe a destruction more complete.

How strange, then, that some attempt to find everlasting conscious torment in verse 14 of this passage, which says:

The sinners in Zion are terrified;  
trembling grips the godless:  
“Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire?  
Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?”

Admittedly, this verse may be somewhat confusing at first glance. How can a “consuming” fire involve “everlasting” burning? However, this verse does not envision the wicked *living* forever in fiery torment. Instead, it portrays a fire with which no wicked person can *possibly* “dwell.” Verse 15 answers the question verse 14 asks. Only the person who “walks righteously and speaks what is right,” who rejects extortion and bribes, who avoids evil in every form—only this one can coexist with the God whose holiness is a consuming fire that burns up all sin and whoever will not repent of it.





*Food for fire and maggots.* The last verse in the book of Isaiah says of the righteous at the end of time, “And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (Is 66:24).

For nearly three millennia, this verse has been among the most often-quoted Scripture passages concerning final punishment. Yet it might also be the most misunderstood, misused and misapplied passage in the Bible on that subject. We must read the context, which foretells a time when God will execute judgment “with fire and with his sword,” when many will be “slain” and will “meet their end together” (66:16-17). Then the righteous and their descendants will endure forever, and “all mankind” will worship God, for the wicked will no longer be alive (66:22-23).

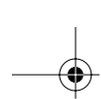
This symbolic picture of the future reflects an actual incident that Isaiah describes in chapter 37 of his book. The savage Assyrians had surrounded Jerusalem and good King Hezekiah prayed to God. That night “the angel of the LORD went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand men in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies!” (Is 37:36).

In chapter 66 Isaiah anticipates the same scene on a massive scale at the end of time. In this prophetic picture, as in the historical event of Isaiah’s day, the righteous view “the dead bodies” of the wicked. They see *corpses*, not living people. They view *destruction*, not conscious misery. Discarded corpses are fit only for worms (maggots) and fire—both insatiable agents of disintegration and decomposition.

To the Hebrew mind, both worms and fire signify disgrace and shame (Jer 25:33; Amos 2:1). Worms and fire also indicate complete destruction, for the maggot in this picture does not die but continues to feed so long as there is anything to eat. The fire, which is not “quenched” or extinguished, burns until nothing is left of what it is burning. According to God’s prophet Isaiah, this is a “loathsome” scene, which evokes disgust rather than pity (Is 66:24; see the same word in Dan 12:2). This scene portrays shame and not pain. This passage of Scripture says nothing about conscious suffering and certainly nothing about suffering forever.

It is inexcusable to interpret language from this text, whether quoted directly or indirectly from the mouth of Jesus (Mk 9:48), to give a meaning





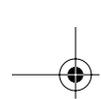
diametrically the opposite of Isaiah's clear picture. Yet that is exactly what traditionalist interpreters have done without exception, down to the present day.<sup>6</sup>

*Two kinds of resurrection.* Daniel 12:1-2 provides one of the few explicit Old Testament references to the resurrection of both the good and the evil. This prophecy clearly says that "multitudes" will awake from the dust of the earth, but that they will be raised in two forms: "some to everlasting life" and "others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2). The Hebrew word translated "contempt" here is the same word translated "loathsome" in Isaiah 66:24 where it describes unburied corpses. The shame and contempt here are "everlasting" because the loathsome disintegration of the wicked will never be reversed.

Daniel predicts a future time when those who are "wise" will understand his end-time prophecy. All who know the gospel are privileged to be included in that category, for the New Testament reveals clearly what Daniel only hinted at. According to the New Testament, all those who have died will be raised again when Jesus comes (Jn 5:28). The saved will be raised immortal and incorruptible (1 Cor 15:52-54; Rom 2:6-7; 2 Cor 5:4). Those who are raised to shame and everlasting contempt will not be raised immortal but rather for condemnation (Jn 5:29). They will be judged, expelled from God's presence and finally die again forever in the lake of fire—in what Revelation calls the second death (Rom 6:23; 2 Thess 1:9; Rev 21:8). Evangelical commentator Robert H. Mounce well describes the second death as "the destiny of those whose temporary resurrection results only in a return to death and its punishment."<sup>7</sup>

The closing chapter of the Old Testament contrasts the final destinies of the saved and the lost. God's "great and dreadful day" will come when those who revere him will leap for joy in the healing rays of the sun of righteousness (Mal 4:2, 5). Arrogant evildoers will then become like "stubble" and "that day . . . will set them on fire" (Mal 4:1). This all-consuming fire will leave them without "a root or a branch," an expression which removes any hope of a remnant or a survivor (Mal 4:1; contrast this with 2 Kings 19:30; Is 11:1; 53:2). It will be too late for repentance. There will be no restoration or escape. Those lost will be "ashes" under the soles of the feet of the saved (Mal 4:3).





Because these expressions are similes and metaphors, we ought not to take them literally. At the same time, these figures of speech accurately portray the reality they describe. The righteous will rejoice in God's salvation and the wicked will be gone forever. This is the Old Testament's final word on the topic. God's next prophet, John the Baptizer, will march out of the desert, demanding repentance in view of the approaching judgment fire. He also will warn of a time when the wicked will be judged and finally burned up (Mt 3:12).

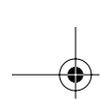
#### Between the Testaments

During the tumultuous period between Malachi and Matthew, pious Jews wrote the books contained in the Apocrypha and the pseudepigrapha, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Apocrypha are books found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and, later, in the Roman Catholic Bible. The pseudepigrapha ("false writings") have never been included in the canonical Scriptures, although, as the name indicates, they purport to have been written by ancient biblical characters.

The Dead Sea Scrolls reflect the ideas held by an ascetic community of Jews who lived at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, during the first and second centuries before Christ. The Apocrypha and pseudepigrapha were not easily available in English until early in the 1900s; the Dead Sea Scrolls were first translated in the mid-twentieth century. Before these documents came to light, advocates of the traditional position commonly argued that first-century Jews taught everlasting conscious torment and that since Jesus did not explicitly dispute the point, he must have held the same view himself. For such a supposedly uniform Jewish view they relied on Edersheim or Josephus or even Philo of Alexandria.<sup>8</sup>

This resulted in a twofold error. First, traditionalists ignored the rich Old Testament background of the teaching of Jesus and failed to take his teaching on its own terms. Second, they mistakenly assumed from secondary and dubious sources that Jewish intertestamental thought was united on this subject. The simple fact is that these intertestamental Jews were living, breathing, thinking folks who sometimes disagreed on theological subjects.<sup>9</sup> Informed scholars today acknowledge this fact and reject the older notion that Jesus' contemporaries all held one opinion about the destiny of the lost.<sup>10</sup>





The Apocrypha generally repeats Old Testament language concerning the final destiny of the lost. It warns the wicked that they will not escape God's judgment but will surely die. Worms will be their end. They will pass away like smoke or chaff. They will burn up like straw. The righteous may hope for a resurrection and blessed life with God, the Apocrypha says, but the wicked have no such hope.

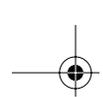
The single exception in the Apocrypha to this Old Testament view occurs in the book of Judith (150-125 B.C.), the account of a Jewish heroine who saves her people from an evil king. In the end, Judith leads Israel in a great victory song that concludes with the words:

Woe to the nations that rise up against my race;  
The Lord Almighty will take vengeance of them in the day  
of judgment,  
To put fire and worms in their flesh;  
And they shall weep and feel their pain for ever. (Judith 16:17)

Judith's fire and worms come straight from Isaiah 66:24, but she gives them a meaning entirely different from the prophet's. Isaiah envisioned the unburied corpses of God's enemies, exposed to shameful destruction by fire and worms. Judith introduces the novel idea of everlasting conscious pain—an idea borrowed, no doubt, from the pagan Greek notion that souls are immortal and cannot die. Judith's fire and worms do not destroy. They torment. They do not consume their victims from outside. They create horrible agonies inside the bodies of the wicked. Instead of being destroyed by the fire and worms, the damned in Judith's story "feel their pain forever." This is the first time this concept appears in Hebrew literature. It is certainly not found in the Old Testament Scriptures, the authors of which consistently expect the wicked to die, to perish and be no more. Our choice of authorities is clear: the prophet Isaiah or the uninspired author of the book of Judith.

The pseudepigrapha also shows a variety of Jewish ideas regarding the final fate of the lost. Some passages in the pseudepigrapha, like Judith in the Apocrypha, seem to express the expectation that the lost will suffer unending conscious torment.<sup>11</sup> Most often, however, the books known as the pseudepigrapha simply reflect the Old Testament writers' view of the sinner's ultimate total extinction. These texts say repeatedly that God will





destroy the lost by fire. The overwhelming testimony of these books is that sinners finally will perish from the earth, never to be seen again.

Of the Dead Sea Scrolls translated so far, all agree that the lost will be totally destroyed, body and soul, forever. Their unknown authors evidently agreed with the consistent teaching of the Old Testament on the subject. They also agreed, as we have seen, with most of the pseudepigrapha and with all of the Apocrypha, with the exception of the one passage in the book of Judith.

Because the vast writings of the Apocrypha, pseudepigrapha and many of the Dead Sea Scrolls are now available in English, even nonscholars today can know that not all first-century Jews believed in everlasting torment. There is no longer any reason for anyone to conclude that Jesus endorsed the notion of everlasting torment because it was “the Jewish view.” Instead of being misled by a minority view expressed in intertestamental literature, we must examine New Testament teaching in its context and take it at face value unless there is good reason to do otherwise. As we attempt to understand the New Testament, our most valuable tool will be the inspired revelation contained in the Old Testament. On this subject, as on all others, the Bible is its own best interpreter.

