

The Myth of Everlasting Torment

Death and Judgment in the Bible

Preachers warn about hellfire and brimstone. The Bible is clear: all rise to face judgment and those who reject God face unimaginable horror. There is no disputing this fact.

Preachers also say this suffering will never end. Are they correct? Many religions base their beliefs on the Bible, yet disagree with each other. They can show whatever they want if they only look at a few verses. We must examine the entire Bible, comparing Scripture with Scripture. Eternal torment is false doctrine. This is the conclusion based on rigorous analysis of the Word of God. You do not need 300 pages of commentary to see the truth. The Scriptures speak for themselves, so little commentary is needed. The case is clear. We analyze the Bible - what it says, and what it does not say. We can reject everlasting torment without rejecting the Word of God. In fact, we must reject this doctrine if we accept all Scripture.

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PREFACE

We long for security in this uncertain world. Failing to find security, some turn to Satanism, which offers excitement and instant gratification. Christians try to offer something better by saying, "The one true God is more loving, merciful and fair than you can imagine. If you reject this loving God, you will suffer throughout eternity!" This contradiction is a big reason why many reject Christianity.

Instead of scaring people into following God, this tactic turns them away. Bertrand Russell, for example, says Christ had a moral defect in His character for believing in endless suffering.¹ Another example is a man raised in a Baptist family, who told me he turned away from such a cruel God. Countless others also reject this image of a sadistic tyrant.

This belief also grieved me. I was 20 years old when I became a Christian. When I discussed my faith with my family and friends, they were not interested. Then I wondered what would happen to them if they reject Jesus. Christians said my family and friends would suffer endlessly.

Eventually, I began a thorough research of this subject and discovered the Bible does not teach endless torment. An in-depth analysis of death and judgment shows nonbelievers will cease to exist. I wish to share this view, since the idea of endless misery is detrimental to spreading the gospel -- the good news about God's love.

If you are willing to spend some time investigating, you will find a loving and fair God. He is not the merciless bully portrayed by some. You can verify almost everything I state in this book with a Bible, an exhaustive concordance, and a dictionary of Hebrew and Greek. Some facts need more research. All Scripture quotations come from the *New King James Version* of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

Notes:

1. Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian*, 1957, p. 17-18

1. QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR DESTINY

Death and the Afterlife

We all have to face it. Others die and we wonder where they are. Is death the end, or is there an afterlife?

Whether we realize it or not, this question plagues our minds. Although atheists may appear carefree, many realize Christians might be right. Christians, also, worry about the fate of those who do not believe. If there is an afterlife, denial will not change anything.

Target Audience

I do not try to prove the existence of God, nor the reliability of the Bible. Those debates are outside the scope of this book. This work is intended for those who trust the Protestant Bible, as decided by church fathers late in the fourth century.

If you are a convinced atheist, you will find little value in this work. You will also disregard this if you are firmly convinced that some other religion outside Christianity is correct.

Maybe you would consider Christianity without the doctrine of everlasting torment. If this is a hindrance to accepting Christ, then please read on. I hope you find this analysis useful.

Faith in Christ

While Biblical truth is important, being right with God is crucial. Whatever the penalty for turning away, it will not be pleasant. We must choose to follow the Lord.

We have many choices in life; some are trivial while others are critical. The best decision we could ever make is to follow Jesus, the only security in this uncertain world. He loves us and wants us to choose Him. Consider these assurances:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. Romans 8:18

For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:38-39

Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him. 1 Corinthians 2:9

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20-21

We should not turn down such wonderful blessings. These assurances are for the present as well as the future. Anyone who knows Jesus as Lord and Savior can have peace of mind in difficult circumstances, as we see in the following verses:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. Romans 8:28

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:6-7

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. Philippians 4:13

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:19

"Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. My yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30

"I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." John 10:10

Although God is loving and merciful, He is also just. We will all stand before Him at our judgment and receive our rewards and punishments as our works deserve (2 Corinthians 5:10). Do not think that death for nonbelievers will be instant. There is plenty of talk about torment, weeping, a burning lake of fire, and other horror. The wrath of God cannot be taken lightly (Hebrews 10:31). We can escape punishment if we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, according to these verses:

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God." John 3:17-18

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life." John 5:24

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. Romans 8:1

. . . that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9

Do you want eternal life? Jesus gives you an invitation:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne." Revelation 3:20-21

It is very simple to ask Jesus into your life. It is the best decision you will ever make. If you have not done it yet, I encourage you to do it right now.

Eternal Life Versus Spiritual Death

Those who put their faith in Jesus have eternal life right now (1 John 5:11-13). This leads to immortality. God promised eternal life to us long ago (Titus 1:2), and gives it to all who believe (John 3:15-16). We cannot earn our salvation by works; it is a gift (Romans 6:23). And Ephesians 2:8-9 says we are saved by grace because of our faith.

Hebrews 11 is the best chapter in the Bible about faith. We do not know who wrote Hebrews; some believe Paul wrote it, while others disagree. The writer talks about the faith of many righteous people in the Old Testament, showing that people were also saved by their faith before Christ.

In contrast, those who do not put their faith in God are spiritually dead. The Bible refers to the unfaithful as dead, even though they are physically alive. Here are some examples:

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins . . . even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ Ephesians 2:1, 5

And you, being dead in your trespasses . . . He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven all your trespasses . . . Colossians 2:13

But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. 1 Timothy 5:6

For this reason, the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit. 1 Peter 4:6

The above verses show people who were spiritually dead because they were not living a Christian life. Either we have eternal life, or we are spiritually dead. While believers will be in heaven forever, those who remain spiritually dead will die for their sins

Scripture clearly shows that we must know the Lord to have eternal life. When Jesus was praying to the Father, He said, "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." (John 17:3) We must pray and study the Bible to know Jesus.

Without the Lord's guidance, we are lost. Many believe they are doing right, yet Jesus says they are practicing lawlessness. They will not enter heaven because He will say, "I never knew you." (Matthew 7:23) What a tragedy.

2. BELIEFS AND EVIDENCE

Eternal Life for Believers

Faithful followers of God will spend eternity with the Lord. All serious Bible students can agree on this. There are, however, disagreements about when believers will be with Christ.

The Intermediate State

The condition between death and resurrection is called the *Intermediate State*. Most Christians believe we all have eternal souls that remain conscious after death; Christians are conscious in heaven, while nonbelievers are in conscious torment.

A different view says we are unconscious after death until our resurrection. Believers will rise and be with Christ in heaven, while nonbelievers will rise to face judgment. This belief is commonly called *Soul Sleep*.

Belief in Everlasting Torment

While we will briefly explore the intermediate state, the primary concern for this study is the final condition of nonbelievers. Most conservative theologians believe the unfaithful suffer endlessly. People who hold this position usually believe souls remain conscious after death.

Amazingly, everlasting torment was rarely challenged since the third century. A growing number of Christians doubt this doctrine. While everlasting torment has always been repulsive to compassionate humans, Bible scholars now realize it is also difficult to defend in Scripture. Many are finally examining this subject, instead of accepting tradition without serious study. This investigation is long overdue.

People who do not want to follow God can easily find excuses. Nonbelievers look at Christians and find their actions to be disgusting. What they see are the religious zealots who have killed millions throughout the centuries "in the Name of God." They also see preachers who are more concerned about money than salvation.

These skeptics see only the fruits of the hardened hearts of some Christians, not the heart of a loving God. When they hear an appalling doctrine that condemns people to

everlasting torment, this adds to their excuses. Is it any wonder why so many people have rejected Christianity?

Universalism and Conditional Immortality

When scholars realize everlasting torment lacks solid evidence, they subsequently come to other conclusions. One alternate view is *Universalism*, which says everyone will be restored to heaven. Some universalists believe everyone will go immediately to heaven at death; others say nonbelievers will first suffer transitory punishment then go to heaven.

Proponents of everlasting torment and universalists can both be called *immortalists* because they believe all humans are, or will be, immortal. The difference between these beliefs is where the unfaithful will end up. Since everlasting torment has been the traditional view of the church since the third century, we will call proponents of everlasting torment, *traditionalists*, for convenience and identification purposes. We will continue to call proponents of universalism, *universalists*.

While everlasting torment is very harsh, universalism suggests that our thoughts and actions do not matter. Throughout the Bible God gives us the choice between life and death. Our actions do matter.

A third view is *Conditional Immortality*, which says immortality is conditional upon putting our faith in Christ. *Conditionalists* believe that the unfaithful rise to face judgment, suffer, and then cease to exist.

While almost all traditionalists and universalists believe in continued consciousness between death and resurrection, many conditionalists believe in soul sleep. Although doctrines may vary on some of the details, all beliefs fall into one of three categories: traditionalism, universalism, or conditionalism. No matter how reasonable or unreasonable a doctrine appears to our limited human mind, we must believe what the Bible says. The true test of any doctrine is Scripture.

The Inspired Word of God

The writings in the Old and New Testaments should be our primary source of information. Although Bible scholars claim God inspired the Old Testament, many go to great lengths trying to justify dodging it. Is this because the Old Testament strongly

supports conditionalism and is almost void of support for other beliefs? Almost four times as big as the New Testament, the Old Testament is filled with crucial evidence that cannot be rejected or ignored.

God did not reveal everything immediately, so some issues may be vague in the Old Testament. As knowledge progressed, the New Testament clarified some issues. The Bible, however, cannot lie. Daniel did not understand everything he wrote. He said, "Although I heard, I did not understand." (Daniel 12:8) Even though the Hebrew prophets did not understand everything they wrote, God inspired truth.

Christ defended the Word of God when there was only the Old Testament. For example, Jesus referred to Deuteronomy 8:3 and said, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) He quoted more Old Testament Scripture on other occasions. Christ came to fulfill and explain the Old Testament, not destroy it (Matthew 5:17-19).

Paul also says all Scripture is "inspired by God." (2 Timothy 3:16) When he wrote this, the New Testament was not yet organized. In fact, some of it had not even been written.

When Paul preached, the Bereans searched the Old Testament to see if he was correct. Luke praised them for searching the Scriptures rather than accepting the words of others (Acts 17:10-12). We should be like the Bereans.

Although many scholars do not give enough attention to the Old Testament, all serious Bible students study the New Testament. While some believe the teachings of Jesus in the four Gospels are more important than the rest, all agree the whole New Testament is essential.

Bible Translations

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. There were also a few passages written in Aramaic. We can have a deep understanding of the Bible without knowing these languages. Lexicons, though not infallible, are great aids for those who want further study.

Studying Biblical languages helps when we have the time, because all translators are prone to error. Most people do not have the time to learn Hebrew and Greek, so they rely on these translators. Because of their bias, translators sometimes mistranslate Scripture to support their beliefs. While this may be unintentional, it hinders the search for truth.

The more literal the translation, the less likely it is to be corrupted. A literal translation takes what the original Biblical language says, and as much as possible, says the same thing in the new language. The translator must leave the interpretation to the reader under the Holy Spirit's guidance. Comments on the side and footnotes are the only places for personal opinion.

The American Standard Version (ASV) is very literal. Printings of this version are rare, though it is available on disc for computers. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) has replaced the ASV, and is almost as accurate. Another literal translation is the King James Version (KJV).

Although these translations are accurate, they are difficult to read. I chose the New King James Version (NKJV) for this book because it is much easier to read and still maintains most of the accuracy. When it is not literal enough, I quote from the NASB or KJV.

Even the most literal versions show some favoritism. Concordances can reveal this bias. They show which Hebrew or Greek words were in the original Bible, so we can compare other uses of these same words.

The ASV, NASB, KJV and NKJV are *word for word* translations. Sometimes the translators felt the passage needed clarification, so they added words that were not in the original. The ASV puts brackets around added words, while the other versions italicize these words. Skipping the added words gives an approximation of the original Hebrew and Greek.

Most modern translations, like the popular New International Version (NIV), are *thought for thought* translations. While such paraphrases are easier to read and useful for daily devotions, word for word translations are more accurate for serious study.

When we examine death and judgment in the Bible, we see that literal translations strongly support conditionalism. Unfortunately, when we compare these same passages in paraphrased versions, they show more support for everlasting torment. This obvious bias conceals the truth.

The Septuagint

There was a 400-year gap between the latest Old Testament books and the earliest New Testament books. Many Jews lived away from their homeland and did not speak Hebrew. They adopted Greek as their language.

These Jews needed to read the Bible in a language they understood. 70 scholars translated the Old Testament Hebrew into Greek, and called it *The Septuagint*. While this helped them tremendously, we cannot assume it is infallible.

Other Writings

The books in the Protestant Bible have passed rigorous scrutiny, so we must accept these as inspired. Other books in the Catholic Bible, called *The Apocrypha*, did not pass this test. The Apocrypha and other uninspired writings should only be used as reference material.

Although Protestants do not believe God inspired the Apocrypha, many emphasize these writings more than the Old Testament. Scholars study the Apocrypha and other ancient writings to better understand traditions, beliefs, and culture. This is part of *hermeneutics*.

Too much emphasis on what is fallible (tradition and culture) reduces the importance of what is infallible (Scripture). In the Old Testament, God repeatedly warned His people to remain separate from other nations and not to follow their beliefs (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 29:24-28, Judges 3:1-7, Psalm 106:35-42, Isaiah 2:6-9, Ezekiel 20:18-21). They did not, however, heed God's warning.

The Gospels also have several accounts where Jesus says traditional beliefs and customs were wrong. Here is one example where Jesus rebuked the Pharisees:

He answered and said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written:

'This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men--the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do."

He said to them, "All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition."

For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.' But you say, 'If a man says to his father or mother, "Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban"--' (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the

word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do." Mark 7:6-13

The Pharisees believed the soul was immortal and many traditionalists insist this was the uniform view of the Jewish people. This superficial assumption does not hold up. While the Pharisees did believe in an everlasting soul for everyone, the Sadducees, another major priestly group of the time, did not believe in life after death for anyone.

There was another group called the Essenes. First century historian, Flavius Josephus, claimed they believed the soul is immortal. Although Josephus was a Pharisee, he admits the Essenes got their belief from the Greek. Josephus says these beliefs were fables built on the supposition that the soul is immortal. Then he goes on to say that such beliefs, "were an unavoidable bait for such as have once had a taste for their philosophy."¹

It is significant that a Pharisee would acknowledge that the Essenes got their belief from the Greeks, instead of the Bible. Is he admitting that the immortality of the soul is not in the Word of God?

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was devastating to the claim that all Essenes believed in the immortality of the soul. These scrolls have strong evidence for conditionalism.

While studying historical beliefs can be helpful, they offer mixed results. People disagreed in the past, just like they do today. We should only *examine* uninspired writings, not *rely* on them. If we rely on tradition, we make the same mistakes the Pharisees made. We must rely on the Word of God, instead of making it of no effect through our tradition (Mark 7:13).

Early Christian History

The earliest writings of Christians outside the Bible also show mixed views. Many scholars have tried to prove there was a uniform belief during this time. They all fail miserably.

The only consistency in these writings is their loyalty to Scripture. The earliest church fathers used the same words and phrases we find in the Bible. Scholars only claim that beliefs were uniform because of their bias.

One obvious example is Adventist author L. E. Froom's two volume, 2,400 page, *Conditionalist Faith of our Fathers* (1965). He insists that all the earliest church

fathers supported conditionalism (Volume 1:757-852). When church fathers used words like *destroy* or *perish*, Froom always claimed they were conditionalists. This is an oversimplification because these words can mean a ruined state, rather than to be totally destroyed.

Froom was overly zealous, and sometimes took things out of context. Since traditionalists can find examples of this, many try to disregard his whole book. This is absurd! In spite of his prejudice, Froom's massive work provides valuable reference material for our study of this subject.

Traditionalists who claim their view was the uniform belief are also guilty of bias. Many try to categorize these early church fathers as proponents of everlasting torment because they used phrases like "fire will not be quenched." This works against them because a fire that will not be quenched is a fire that turns everything to ashes. When the fire runs out of fuel, it goes out (See Jeremiah 17:27, fulfilled in 2 Chronicles 36:19-21).

Another example of bias is when church fathers used the phrase "eternal fire." Traditionalists insist these church fathers believed in everlasting torment. When we examine this phrase in the Bible, it does not support their assertion.

Jude, for instance, tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah serve as an example of eternal fire (Jude 7). The fire was only eternal in *effect*, because these cities were totally destroyed and never rebuilt. Since that fire is not still burning, traditionalists cannot prove these church fathers believed in everlasting torment.

Conditionalists and traditionalists can both find support in writings of the earliest church fathers. Universalists can also find a little evidence for their belief. These writings were covered in more detail in Edward Fudge's, *The Fire that Consumes* (1982, republished in 2000). His condensed version, published in 1994, left this out.

The Shift to Everlasting Torment

While the earliest Christian writings showed mixed views, belief in everlasting torment grew stronger over time. Tertullian supported this view in the late second and early third century, while Augustine was the main proponent in the fourth century. These writings supporting everlasting torment also show a departure from strict adherence to Scripture.

While the earliest church fathers use phrases found in the Bible, later writers show phrases used by Plato that are not in the inspired Word of God. Conditionalists insist Greek philosophy and pagan religions brought this false doctrine into Christianity, while traditionalists claim their effect was minimal.

Since the later church fathers used phrases that are not in the Bible, traditionalists must, at the very least, acknowledge that their view is not clearly stated in Scripture. If their views were plainly stated in God's Word, these later proponents of everlasting torment would not need to add to Scripture.

Just as we had diverse opinions at the time of Christ, we also had different opinions during the first couple centuries after His ascension. The earliest church fathers followed the Bible, so we should do the same. Each side must support their doctrine in the Word of God.

Roman Catholic Dominance

The church in Rome became powerful and influential, and religious leaders kept the Bible from the people. They may have also destroyed writings that disagreed with their doctrines. In fact, it would be naïve to deny this possibility.

Since few had access to the Scriptures during this time, many errors crept into the church. The writers of the New Testament warn us to watch out for false teachings. Here are two examples:

Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. Colossians 2:8

But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time, their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber. 2 Peter 2:1-3

Other examples can be found in Acts 20:29-31, 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Hebrews 13:9, and Revelation 2:14-16. Many false teachings arose in Christianity. Some are still with us today.

The Reformation

When a few key people started reading the Bible, they discovered errors in Roman church doctrine and protested. This is what the Protestant Movement, or Reformation, was all about. These key people preached about doctrinal errors and translated the Bible into many languages so others could read it. As more people read and studied for themselves, the truths discovered by the first Protestants became more accepted.

Unfortunately, many people are content in their current, perceived, knowledge of the truth. Although we know more today than they did centuries ago, our work is not finished. We must continue searching the Bible and examining our beliefs.

While most conservative Christians still believe in eternal torment, conditional immortality is gaining ground. It is our duty to compare the evidence for both views and make an informed decision. The Reformation must continue.

Notes:

1. Flavius Josephus, *War of the Jews*, 2.8.11

3. EXAMINING THE BIBLE

Individual Responsibility

As Christians and seekers of Truth, we have a duty to study the Word of God. Paul tells us to test all things (1 Thessalonians 5:21) and warns that many will reject sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:1-4). Peter also says we must always be ready to give a defense for our hope (1 Peter 3:15). This requires consistent prayer and reading. God will show us the truth if we ask:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Matthew 7:7-8

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. James 1:5

Nowhere in the Bible does it say we need a Ph.D. in Theology to read the Word. John tells us that we have the anointing of understanding and do not need anyone to teach us (1 John 2:27). While writers can point out Scriptures and express opinions, believers have an obligation to verify references and then make their own informed, Spirit lead decisions. Books written by people are only *aids* to studying the Bible, not *substitutes*.

Prayer and Work Required

The Bible is massive. We can find a verse to say or defend just about anything. Writers can point us to rare verses that appear to prove a false doctrine. Suppose, for example, that we only look at these verses:

Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies. Psalm 139:21-22

"If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My Disciple." Luke 14:26

These verses imply that we should hate everyone. We might actually believe this if we do not know the Word of God. While this example may seem extreme, it shows we

can manipulate the Bible to support false doctrine. We search the Scriptures to find only what we are looking for, then ignore or misinterpret everything else.

Scholars can show many different beliefs in the Bible by placing undue emphasis on few verses. Not every view can be accepted, especially those that have very few or no texts for support. Several denominations and cults appear to support all their beliefs with Scripture. Many people only study the manmade doctrines of their own church and accept it without serious examination of the Biblical references.

The same problem occurs when we study the fate of nonbelievers. Traditionalists, universalists, and conditionalists can each show Scripture that seems to support their beliefs. If we have heard of or examined the views of only one doctrine, we will certainly tend to agree with that belief.

Since only one of these doctrines can be correct, it is our responsibility to determine which belief is the *best* interpretation of the *entire* Bible. Now let us consider the important factors for finding the Truth.

Interpreting the Bible

If we take everything in the Bible literally, there are contradictions. Since all Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), the Bible cannot contradict itself. Therefore, some Scriptures must be figurative or symbolic (John 16:25). The challenge is to determine what is literal and what is symbolic.

We must let the Bible interpret the Bible. While Scripture is symbolic in some places, there is usually an explanation found in the surrounding text. Cross-referencing words and phrases with similar uses in the Bible may also help us understand meanings.

Preconceived Ideas

Preconceived ideas are beliefs that we have acquired without solid evidence. They are assumptions without a basis in fact. Everyone has unfounded assumptions. They can be created by childhood beliefs brought into adulthood, misinformation taken as fact, or even half-truths espoused by an expert. Assumptions hinder our search for truth.

The soul is the most crucial factor to our study. In order to believe in everlasting torment, we must first assume the soul is eternal or immortal. This is neither stated nor implied in Scripture. In fact, there is a convincing case against this doctrine everywhere in the Bible.

Traditionalists, nevertheless, make their interpretations of Scripture conform to the preconceived idea that the soul is eternal. We must accept what the Word of God says, even if this goes against our prior biased opinions. Changing long-held beliefs is very difficult and many will never change their views despite overwhelming evidence.

History shows that several reformers supported conditionalism. Martin Luther, for example, said the immortality of the soul was another false doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. When Calvin and others fiercely attacked him, he decided that salvation issues were more important than belief in the immortality of the soul.

The Protestant Movement shows us we need to test our beliefs. Many Christians, however, accept the belief that the soul is eternal without examining it. Why does this premise escape the scrutiny that other beliefs go through?

The Weight of Scripture

Most mainstream Christians believe a lot of Scripture supports everlasting torment. This is not the case. Passages that appear to support everlasting torment only seem common and preponderant because they get overemphasized.

Several authors have written books supporting everlasting torment. Interestingly enough, these books quote only a few Scriptures. In many cases, authors will write pages and pages of commentary on very few verses in an attempt to support their thesis. Since so many authors have written in support of everlasting torment, they continually cite and reference each other more than the Bible!

Conditionalists, on the other hand, can cite over 200 passages of Scriptures to support their view. Many of these passages are clear and require little need for further explanation. Extensive commentary can be simply an attempt to read things into the Scriptures that are not there. Extensive commentary also contradicts 1 John 2:27, which says we do not need anyone to teach us except God's anointing.

Responding to Opposing Views

There has been fierce debate about hell. Instead, there should be fellowship and patient Bible study. The first step is to understand other views. Until we understand other beliefs, we cannot refute them. We must clearly state the opposing arguments, and then explain why we disagree.

This is evident in the writings of many conditionalists, who candidly respond to the strongest arguments of opponents. The authors of these books pose powerful arguments for conditionalism and honestly examine the best Scriptures used to support other views. They wish to continue this discussion, though few traditionalists seem willing.

Avoidance Tactics

Instead of openly responding to conditionalism, opponents attempt to keep people from studying it. One tactic is guilt by association. For example, if Jehovah's Witnesses believe in soul sleep, and are a cult, traditionalists say then only cults believe in soul sleep.

Guilt by association can cut both ways. For instance, if pagan religions believe in the immortality of all souls, and traditionalists believe in every soul's immortality, then only pagans believe in the immortality of all souls.

A growing number of well-respected Protestants now believe in conditionalism. This should help the cause by encouraging more people to compare the evidence. Instead, traditionalists discredit these Protestants. It is easier to label conditionalists as heretics than to respond to their arguments.

For example, Oscar Cullman's book, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?* was bitterly attacked on emotional, psychological, and sentimental grounds. Few books have provoked such hostility. Little was said, however, about his Scriptural arguments. If there are legitimate responses, with supporting Bible passages, someone should come forward.

Samuele Bacchiocchi uses a similar title in his book, *Immortality or Resurrection?* This rigorous analysis deserves serious consideration. However, Bacchiocchi is a Seventh-day Adventist, which is good ammunition for traditionalists. When opponents try to refute his book, they will say a lot about Adventism and avoid the Scriptural evidence.

So far, commentaries defending everlasting torment ignore most opposing arguments. Other responses are woefully inadequate. Many scholars, for example, make the sweeping generalization that all Scriptures supporting conditionalism only refer to the physical body.

Such an argument falls short. Jesus says the soul is more important than the whole world (Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36-37). This makes the body without the soul

insignificant. Verses and verses of Scriptures support conditionalism, so the Bible is "majoring in minors" if these passages only talk about the body.

Scripture Above Human Reasoning

Some conditionalists defend their position by putting human reasoning above the Bible. Their appeal against everlasting torment is emotional, rather than Scriptural. While feelings cannot be ignored, we must put the Word of God above everything. Although a few conditionalists have put feelings above the Bible to reach their conclusions, this cannot change the fact that Scripture supports conditionalism.

When traditionalists claim reliance on human emotions and disrespect for the Bible leads people away from their view, they could not be further from the truth. Respect for the Bible, instead of orthodox tradition, is the main reason conditionalism is gaining acceptance. Several former proponents of everlasting torment now realize it has little support in Scripture and see a more convincing case for conditionalism.

While we should not accept conditionalism over traditionalism simply because it makes more sense to our human minds, the repulsive nature of everlasting torment should make traditionalists at least consider other views. This has not happened. Several Bible scholars who claim to refute conditionalism totally misrepresent the case.

One possibility is that all conditionalists are such incompetent authors they cannot write clearly. A more likely possibility is that most traditionalists have never taken the time to honestly examine conditionalism. Then again, opponents might be deliberately distorting this position. Most Christians only hear about conditionalism from traditionalists. As long as this continues, Christians will never understand conditionalism.

Conditionalism Remains

Although the strategy of avoidance has worked well in the past, it is less successful today. As more Christians see the powerful case for conditionalism, cultic associations, misinformation, and preconceived ideas lose their effect. Conditionalism is growing today because of the Scriptural evidence.

Evangelicals are finally seeing the evidence and are taking a serious look at this view. Edward Fudge is one of the most famous conditionalists because of his editions of *The*

Fire that Consumes, first published in 1982. His book is a model of diplomacy, scholarship and objectivity.

Soon after Fudge's first printing, Robert Morey published his well-known book, *Death and the Afterlife* (1984). Morey sorely lacks both diplomacy and objectivity. Rather than respond to the best arguments for conditionalism, he evades them through masterful misinformation. By continually claiming *ignorance* as the reason people disagree with him, Morey reinforces mindless following of traditionalist thought. Fudge wrote an excellent review of Morey's dogma: [The Plain Meaning - A Review Essay](#).

Amazingly, Morey has effectively reinforced the traditional view because most Christians do not understand conditionalism. And after reading his book, they still do not understand! Time, however, is against him.

Since many traditionalists consider Morey's book the best defense of everlasting torment, we will address his book more than other books in our study. Conditionalism is based on the entire Bible, so a refutation of this belief must also examine the entire Bible. This has not yet happened.

4. CREATION, SIN AND DEATH

The Miracle of Life

Genesis 1 briefly explains the beginning of life. God created many different species and they reproduced (verses 22-25). God then made Adam and Eve in His image and gave them power over all the earth (verses 26-30).

A critical disagreement among Bible scholars is the relationship between our body and our spirit. The words *ruach* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek mean *spirit*. *Ruach* and *pneuma* are translated *spirit* in some places and *breath* in others. Occasionally, the Hebrew word *neshamah* is used for *breath*. *Neshamah* and *ruach* can be interchangeable (Job 27:3, Isaiah 42:5). When we discuss creation, we must start with the following verse:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life [neshamah], and man became a living soul. Genesis 2:7, KJV

God formed Adam out of dust and gave him life by putting a spirit in him. The Bible repeatedly says we are dust or clay (Genesis 3:19, 18:27, Job 10:9, 30:19, 33:6, 34:15, Psalm 30:9, 103:14, Isaiah 29:16, 45:9, 64:8, Jeremiah 18:4, 6, Romans 9:21). We *have* spirits; we *are* dust.

Our spirit is unseen and contrasts the physical, though it is not independent of our body. If we do not take care of our physical needs, our spirit cannot thrive. What we eat and drink, for example, affects how we think and feel.

Our thoughts and attitudes also affect our physical nature. One example is fear. If we become frightened, adrenaline makes us stronger. The physical and mental parts of our nature are clearly interdependent, rather than separate entities.

The Soul

Nothing is more critical to our study than an understanding of the soul. The words *nephesh* in Hebrew and *psuche* in Greek mean soul. Soul and spirit have some similar and many different meanings in the Bible.

The soul can refer to the life within us, which is similar to the spirit. Because of this, many assume they are the same and make critical errors interpreting Scripture. There are more differences than similarities between the spirit and the soul.

Scholars agree that the soul is the essence of our being, our consciousness. This is clearly one of the meanings.

Another meaning of soul is our whole being. According to many Scriptures, we *are* souls. Genesis 2:7 says Adam *became* a living soul when God put the breath of life in him. Here are other examples where the Bible refers to people as souls:

. . . and that day about three thousand souls were added to them . . . Then fear came upon every soul . . . Acts 2:41, 43

'And it shall be that every soul who will not hear that prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people.' Acts 3:23

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. Romans 13:1

Humans are Mortal Because of Sin

God told Adam and Eve they would die if they ate from the tree of knowledge (Genesis 2:17). Once they disobeyed, they were subject to death. God told Adam he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19) and banished Adam and Eve from the tree of life so they would not live forever (Genesis 3:22-24).

The Bible makes it clear that they passed on their sinful nature and mortality to the rest of humanity. Adam had a son in his likeness (Genesis 5:3). This was after he became subject to death.

Traditionalists disagree. They believe that once we are created, part of our being never dies. They also claim conditionalists rely solely on the Old Testament.

The case for conditionalism is even clearer in the New Testament. Paul plainly says we inherited the sinful nature and mortality:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned. Romans 5:12

We see this same message when we study immortality. In Romans 2:7, Paul says we seek for immortality. We would not seek for something we already have.

Traditionalists point to 2 Timothy 1:10, which says Christ brought immortality to light. To bring to light means to make known. In other words, Paul says Jesus showed us how to obtain immortality in the future; we do not have it *yet*.

We know this from Paul's first letter to Timothy. 1 Timothy 1:17 says, "Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen." While this implies that only God is immortal, Paul later says, ". . . the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality . . ." (1 Timothy 6:15-16) This is the only passage in the Bible saying who has immortality today.

Opponents of conditionalism deny the clear meaning of 1 Timothy 6:15-16. The *Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*, for example, says only God has inherent immortality and does not limit immortality to God (1992, p.1,429). They refer to Romans 16:27, which says only God is wise. Although we have some wisdom, we do not have the wisdom of God. This verse speaks about degrees of wisdom.

While Romans 16:27 and 1 Timothy 1:17 say only God is wise, other verses say we have wisdom. One example is James 1:5, which says God gives us wisdom if we ask. Many Scriptures also speak about the wisdom of Solomon. Verses saying only God is wise are misleading by themselves, so we examine all passages about a subject.

A study of immortality shows different results than a study of wisdom. The Bible does say we have some wisdom; the Bible does not say we have some immortality. Believers will not be changed from mortal to immortal until the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:51-56).

1 Timothy 6:15-16 says God alone has immortality today, and *nothing* in the Bible says otherwise. God does not inspire misleading passages without clarification somewhere else. Since no Scripture limits or redefines the meaning of 1 Timothy 6:15-16, we *must* believe what it *plainly* says!

Made in the Image of God

Traditionalists claim conditionalists spend too much time on Genesis 2:7. It is the clearest description of creation in the Bible, so we need to examine it. Traditionalists downplay the importance of it because it does not support their view.

Since plain Scriptures do not support their view, traditionalists read their assumptions into ambiguous passages. One example is that we were created in God's image (Genesis 1:26-27, 5:1). Since God is immortal, and we were created in His image, traditionalists conclude that we are also immortal.

If we are immortal because this is one attribute of God, then we should have all the attributes of God. We should be all knowing, all powerful, and sinless. Since we do

not possess these other qualities, then we cannot assume we are immortal. We are all sinners (Romans 3:23, Ecclesiastes 7:20) and destined to die once (Hebrews 9:27).

The Nature of the Soul

Another response is that immortality in the Bible only refers to the body. Traditionalists insist the soul is an eternal entity. We need to examine this belief in Scripture.

The Hebrew word for the soul [*nephesh*] appears over 750 times in the Old Testament. The Greek word for the soul [*psuche*] appears over 100 times in the New Testament. These 850 references should tell us more than we need to know about the soul, yet none say it is eternal or immortal. If the traditional view is correct, why did God inspire over 850 references to the soul without ever stating this?

Since the Bible never says the soul is eternal, we must examine what it does say.

The Soul Can Die

Several Scriptures show the soul can die. Dead bodies are literally called ‘dead souls’ (Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6; 19:11, 13). The Bible also says the soul that sins will die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Psalm 33:19 talks about those who hope in the Lord and says He will deliver their souls from death. Another example is James 5:20, which says we save a soul from death when we restore someone back to the truth.

Because the word *soul* has many meanings, traditionalists claim these passages only refer to the person, and do not include the immaterial soul. Since the soul refers to the whole person, it should include the immaterial part of the person. It is strange to assume that *soul* (whole person) does not include the *soul* (immaterial). It is also strange to claim that different uses of the same word have opposite meanings (mortal and immortal).

Another response is that Scriptures saying the soul can die are taken out of context. This argument is effective, since conditionalists cannot use the same strategy. Conditionalists cannot claim that verses saying the soul is eternal or immortal are taken out of context because none exist!

Death and Separation

Another response is that death only means separation. The Bible refers to people who were out of fellowship with God as dead, even though they were still physically alive (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:6; 1 Peter 4:6; etc.). This is spiritual death. Since they are spiritually dead and still aware, many believe consciousness continues after death.

This common response confuses different deaths. Bible scholars see the obvious difference between physical death and spiritual death, yet reason as if death has only one meaning. Whenever Scripture uses the word *death*, something is *dead*. If people reject God, their relationship to God is dead. When traditionalists say death *only* means separation, they deny the plain meaning of a plain word.

If death only means separation, God would have inspired Ezekiel to say the soul that sins will separate, using the Hebrew word *badal* (e.g., Isaiah 59:2). Instead, God inspired him to say the soul will die (Ezekiel 18:4, 20), using the word *muwth*. This implies an end of consciousness, if we do not assume the soul is eternal.

God would also have inspired a New Testament writer to say the soul that sins will separate, using the Greek word *chorizo* (e.g., Romans 8:35, 39). Instead, God inspired James to say we save a soul from death (James 5:20), using the word *thanatos*. Death and separation are different words in both Hebrew and Greek; they also have different meanings.

In the Day that you Eat of it you Shall Surely Die

Most translations of Genesis 2:17 say that God told them they would die on the day they ate the fruit. Since Adam and Eve did not die a physical death that day, many conclude that death can only be spiritual separation. Their relationship to God changed when they sinned, meaning the old relationship died.

Genesis 2:17 literally says, ". . . on that day, dying you shall die." When we examine the account, we see that God pronounced the death sentence that day. He told Adam he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19) and banished them from the tree of life so they would not live forever (Genesis 3:22-24). The aging process began that very day.

Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:4-5

While many passages say the soul can die, Jesus also says God can destroy the soul in Matthew 10:28. Two well-known passages tell us not to fear those who can only kill the body. They both show that only God controls our destiny:

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

"And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!" Luke 12:4-5

Both Scriptures say the same thing. Humans and the devil can cause the first death by killing the body. Matthew says they cannot kill the soul, while Luke says they have no more that they can do.

Many scholars take the first half of Matthew 10:28 as a proof text for an immortal soul. Since Jesus says do not fear those who cannot kill the soul, many assume the soul cannot be killed. If the soul cannot be killed, then God cannot kill the soul. And if this is the case, then Jesus says do not fear God! Is this the message traditionalists wish to convey?

Although Jesus does show that the soul and body can mean different things, He does not say the soul is immortal. In the second half of the verse, Jesus says fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Since *only* God can kill or destroy the soul, we should *only* fear God.

Matthew says destroy the soul in hell, while Luke says cast into hell. These passages do not say the soul is indestructible, since God can destroy it. Traditionalists presume the soul is eternal, so they insist that God will only ruin the soul while keeping the person conscious throughout eternity. We will discuss words like *destroy* in Chapter Nine and Chapter Ten. We will also revisit Matthew 10:28.

Scripture clearly shows we are mortal, including our souls. Instead of saying the soul is eternal or immortal, the Bible says the soul can die and be destroyed. To insist that our soul is eternal is to deny the inspiration of God's Word.

W. G. T. Shedd, Bible scholar in the 1800s, says the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, ". . . is nowhere formally demonstrated, because it is everywhere assumed."¹ This epitomizes the approach of traditionalists: first assume the soul is

immortal, then interpret all Scripture to fit this assumption. We must make our beliefs conform to the Bible, not the other way around!

There is no escaping the reason the Bible never says the soul is immortal: Scripture cannot contradict itself. Saying the soul is immortal would contradict many Scriptures saying the soul can die. The Bible never says the soul is immortal because this belief is false.

Death: Reverse of Creation

Adam started out as dust. When God put the breath of life in him, he became a living soul (Genesis 2:7). After Adam sinned, God told him he would return to dust:

"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are And to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19

Although God tells him he is dust, traditionalists believe his body is dust and he is a spiritual entity. God also tells him he will return to dust, yet most scholars say his body will return to dust and his consciousness will go somewhere else. This belief does not come from the Bible. Adam returns to dust because God takes away the life-giving spirit:

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God who gave it. Ecclesiastes 12:7

Ecclesiastes 12:7 is Genesis 2:7 in reverse. At creation, God formed Adam out of the dust of the earth and gave him the breath of life (Genesis 2:7). At death, the spirit returns to God who gave it and the dust returns to the earth (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Many conditionalists use the expression: body plus spirit equals soul. They believe Adam became a soul when his spirit and body united. They also claim the soul no longer exists when the body and spirit separate at death. People will become souls again when spirit and body reunite at the resurrection.

While this viewpoint makes more sense than traditionalism, there is a better interpretation: Adam was a lifeless soul when God formed him, then became a *living* soul when God gave him a spirit. Since Scriptures call a dead body a 'dead soul' (Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6; 19:11, 13), a body with the spirit is a living soul and a body without the spirit is a dead soul.

Several other verses reiterate the fact that the life leaves the body at death:

And so it was, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she called his name Ben-Oni, but his father called him Benjamin. Genesis 35:18

And he stretched himself out on the child three times, and cried out to the Lord and said, "O Lord my God, I pray, let this child's soul come back to him." Then the Lord heard the voice of Elijah: and the soul of the child came back to him, and he revived. 1 Kings 17:21-22

His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Psalm 146:4, NASB

Then her spirit returned and she arose immediately. Luke 8:55

. . he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life [soul] is in him." Acts 20:9-10

Traditionalists believe the body is only a temporary dwelling for an eternal soul. Robert Morey uses some of the above passages to claim that death and resurrection are consistently spoken of in terms of the leaving and returning of this eternal soul.²

The above passages support conditionalism because they always imply that the essence of our being remains with the body. Genesis 35:18, for example, says Rachel's soul was departing and she died; it does not say she was leaving. Similarly, 1 Kings 17:21-22 says his soul came back to him, not he came back. Psalm 146:4 also says his spirit departs and he returns to his earth; it does not say he departs and his body returns to the earth.

The New Testament gives the same message. In Acts 20:10, Paul says his soul is still in him instead of saying he is still in his body. Luke 8:55 also says her spirit returned and she arose, rather than saying she returned and arose. If consciousness leaves the body at death, there would be clear Scriptures. None exist.

Physical death is like an electric machine losing power. When the spirit departs, we stop functioning the way a machine stops when electricity is cut off. God gives life to dust (Genesis 2:7), and God takes life away from dust (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

Death: The Opposite of Life

If we accept Scripture as truth, we reject the belief that death *only* means separation. While it may *include* separation in *some* cases, death *always* means death. Death is not a *different form* of life; it is the *opposite* of life.

When people reject Jesus, they are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1, 5). We cannot deny that their relationship to God is *dead*, nor can we insist that they have a *living* relationship to God. Believers have eternal life and those who do not have the Son do not have eternal life (1 John 5:11-12). We are either spiritually *dead*, or we have eternal *life*. These are *mutually exclusive* conditions.

Another plain truth is that physical death is *death* of the body. While traditionalists can try to claim that the spirit survives death of the body, they cannot ignore the fact that the body without spirit is *dead* (James 2:26). The body is no longer *alive* because *death* is the *opposite* of *life*. This is not complicated: death means death.

The Soul at Death

Since the Bible says the person goes to the earth, this implies the essence of our being also goes to the earth. The soul goes to what is called *Sheol* in Hebrew or *Hades* in Greek. Here are examples where the soul goes to Sheol:

O Lord, You brought my soul up from the grave [Sheol]; You have kept me alive that I should not go down to the pit. Psalm 30:3

But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave [Sheol], for He shall receive me. Psalm 49:15

For great is Your mercy toward me, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol. Psalm 86:13

What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave[Sheol]? Psalm 89:48, KJV

All souls go to Sheol at death, including the souls of righteous people. In Psalm 16:10, David says God will not leave his soul in Sheol. This shows his soul would spend some time there.

Peter explains this passage in Acts 2:25-35. He says David is still in Hades: "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day . . . For David did not ascend into the heavens . . ." (Acts 2:29, 34)

Peter also says Psalm 16:10 foretells Jesus' soul going to Hades. Peter says, " . . . he [David], foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption." (Acts 2:31) If His soul was not left in Hades because of the resurrection, then His soul *was* in Hades until the resurrection.

Although the spirit and soul have some similarities in Scripture, they clearly show differences in death. The Bible states that souls go to Sheol/Hades at death. The Word of God never says the spirit goes to Sheol. The spirit returns to God who gave it. Jesus' spirit also went immediately to God at His death when He said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." (Luke 23:46)

Since spirit and soul separate at death, they must be different. We cannot be conscious in two places at the same time, so only one can be our consciousness. While a few passages imply the spirit is conscious inside the body (e.g. Job 32:18, Psalm 51:10), this does not prove the spirit is a conscious entity outside the body.

On the other hand, the soul is more important than the whole world (Matthew 16:26, Mark 8:36-37). This makes it a better choice. We see throughout the Bible that the soul is our essence. Since the soul goes to Sheol/Hades at death, we will examine these words in the next chapter.

Notes:

1 John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, 1995, p. 215

2 Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 1984, p. 48-49

5. SHEOL AND HADES

The meanings of the words Sheol and Hades are major disputes. They refer to the realm of the dead. "Going to Sheol" simply means to die.

Some conditionalists insist Sheol is the same as the grave. This is not quite correct because Sheol is the same for everyone, while people have different graves. Others do not have any graves because their bodies are never found, or are totally destroyed.

Robert Morey goes through elaborate analysis trying to show that Sheol and the grave are different.¹ This does not accomplish his goal of proving that consciousness leaves the body, since the Bible shows many similarities between returning to the earth and going to Sheol. We will see some now.

Sheol and the Pit

In most cases, the Old Testament says the soul goes to Sheol. The body either returns to the earth, to dust, or goes to the pit, using the Hebrew word *Shachath*. Another commonly used Hebrew word for the pit is *bowr*. Since the body goes to the pit and the soul goes to Sheol, traditionalists insist the soul and body separate.

This argument does not stand up to analysis. Job refers to his soul going to Shachath four times (Job 33:18, 22, 28, 30). Hezekiah also thanked God for delivering his soul from the pit (Shachath) when he recovered from his illness (Isaiah 38:17). Hezekiah then says, "For Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit [bowr] cannot hope for Your truth." (Isaiah 38:18) He uses all three words interchangeably in this passage.

Psalm 30:9 also says dust goes to the pit: "What profit is there in my blood, When I go down to the pit [Shachath]? Will the dust praise you? . . ." Since the body returns to dust, this says the body goes to the pit, along with the soul.

Traditionalists also claim only disembodied souls go to Sheol. This does not hold up because Scripture talks about people going to Sheol alive (Numbers 16:30, 33; Proverbs 1:12). Another problem is Psalm 141:7, which says, "Our bones are scattered at the mouth of the grave [Sheol], as when one plows and breaks up the earth." Psalm 49:14 also says, "Like sheep they are laid in the grave [Sheol]."

No Distinction at First Death

When the Bible talks about spirits returning to God, many assume it is only talking about believers. Similarly, when Scripture talks about souls going to Sheol, many assume it is only talking about nonbelievers suffering in hell. There is no distinction in the Bible; all spirits return to God and all souls go to Sheol.

The translators of the KJV also assumed the unfaithful suffer in the intermediate state. When the passage talks about nonbelievers going to Sheol, they use the word *hell*. They translate the same word as *grave* when the passage refers to believers. This confuses many readers.

Most conditionalists believe in soul sleep for all, while most traditionalists believe everyone remains conscious after death. On the other hand, some scholars believe the faithful go immediately to heaven to be with Christ and the unfaithful are unconscious.

They appear to make a case for believers going to heaven, which we will examine in Chapter Seven. The evidence for nonbelievers in torment, however, is almost nonexistent. We cover the main arguments for conscious torment in this chapter.

Rephaim

The Hebrew word *rephaim* appears eight times in the Old Testament. Traditionalists claim this word means disembodied conscious spirits. They support this with uninspired writings.

The Bible, however, does not support their belief. Four passages use *rephaim* and the dead interchangeably (Psalm 88:10, Proverbs 2:18, Isaiah 26:14, 19). This does not suggest they are alive.

Scriptures show *rephaim* are in Sheol (Job 26:5-6, Psalm 88:10-11, Proverb 9:18, Isaiah 14:9-11). Job 26:5-6 says they are under the waters then talks about Sheol. Isaiah 26:19 also says the earth shall cast them out. Since *rephaim* are clearly associated with both Sheol and with the earth, this shows more similarities between Sheol and the grave.

The best support for rephaim being disembodied conscious spirits is Job 26:5. In many Bibles, this says they tremble. However, the word translated *tremble* could mean *are formed*. The KJV says, "Dead things are formed under the waters, and the inhabitants thereof." Job 15:7 uses the same word and says, " . . . Or were you made before the hills?"

Job believed Sheol would relieve his suffering (Job 14:13). His wife also told him to "Curse God and die!" (Job 2:9) Surely she would not want him to curse God and go into torment. This only makes sense if they believed death ended his suffering. Job and his friends (?) believed all would return to dust if God took back the spirit (Job 34:14-15).

Isaiah 14:9-11 and Ezekiel 32:21

Traditionalists use two other passages in the Old Testament to support their belief in conscious torment. One is Isaiah 14:9, which says they [*rephaim*] are taunting the king of Babylon. This passage is obviously symbolic language, since cypress trees and cedars are talking in verse 8.

When we examine this passage closely, we see more evidence that Sheol resembles the grave. Isaiah 14:11 mentions Sheol, then says, " . . . The maggot is spread under you, And worms cover you." Maggots and worms eat dead bodies in the grave.

Another proof text for traditionalists is Ezekiel 32:21. Since this says they speak from Sheol, it is a proof text for consciousness. This section (Ezekiel 31 and 32) also uses a lot of figurative language. We also see more similarities between Sheol and the grave. Ezekiel 32:21-27, for example, mentions Sheol twice and the grave three times. Their usage shows similar meaning in this passage.

The Mistranslations of Peter

Peter's epistles show cases of biased translating. One example is 1 Peter 3:18-20, which talks about the days before the flood. Christ preached to the spirits in prison at the time of Noah. A spirit in prison is someone who is in darkness (Isaiah 42:6-7), or lost. A similar concept is anyone who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34, Romans 6:16-18, 2 Peter 2:19).

Earlier, Peter says the Spirit of Christ was speaking through the prophets (1 Peter 1:10-12). In his second letter, Peter refers to Noah as a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5), which is similar to a prophet. Therefore, we may conclude that the Spirit of Christ was speaking through Noah before the flood.

Peter later says, "For this reason the gospel was preached also for those who are dead." (1 Peter 4:6) Traditionalists claim this passage proves the dead are conscious. Instead of physical death, it is describing spiritual death, similar to Ephesians 2:1, 5. In 1 Peter 4:6, preaching the gospel is an attempt to get them to "live according to God in the spirit." 1 Peter 3:18-20 and 4:6 are both examples of trying to get people to repent.

Although the NASB is a highly accurate translation, there is an error in 1 Peter 3:18-20. As stated before, when translators felt a verse needed clarification, they added words and italicized them. In verse 19, the passage reads, ". . . the spirits *now* in prison." The translators added the word *now* to the text, which causes confusion. If Christ preached to them after death, this implies they have a second chance to repent.

2 Peter 2:9 also shows biased translating. God reserves the unjust for punishment until the day of judgment. The NIV says "while continuing their punishment." A concordance of the NIV reveals there is no corresponding Greek for *while continuing* in this verse. Although it could be interpreted that way, this is not the most probable meaning.

The wording of 2 Peter 2:9 is similar to 2 Peter 3:7, which says, "But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men." We read about the judgment in 2 Peter 3:10, which says the earth will be burned up. Just as 2 Peter 3:7 foretells future judgment and perdition, 2 Peter 2:9 also foretells future punishment.

Sheol is a Place of Sorrows

Some verses talk about the sorrows of Sheol (2 Samuel 22:6, Psalm 18:5, 116:3), and scholars say they prove consciousness after death. 2 Samuel 22:6 is part of a quotation from David and he also wrote Psalms 18 and 116.

In these cases, Sheol refers to being close to death. There is pain and sadness when a person is near death. If this pain and sadness continue after death, then righteous people like David receive the same fate as nonbelievers. Psalm 16:10 shows David's soul went to Sheol, and he is still there (Acts 2:29, 34).

A good example of Sheol referring to time before death is in Jonah. God called Jonah to preach to the people of Nineveh; he ran away instead (Jonah 1:1-3). Then God prepared a great fish to swallow Jonah (Jonah 1:17). He thought he was dying, so he called the insides of the fish "the belly of Sheol." (Jonah 2:2) Although Jonah was conscious and in pain, he did not die a physical death.

A different example was Jacob. When he thought his son Joseph was dead, he said, "For I shall go down into the grave [Sheol] to my son in mourning." (Genesis 37:35) Morey claims he would be mourning with his son in Sheol after his own death.² Instead, he was saying he would never be happy the rest of his life; he would mourn until his death, which is going down to Sheol.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

A discussion about death and judgment must include the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). This is one of the strongest arguments against soul sleep, yet it is only a parable. Like in other parables, Jesus tells a story to teach morals.

Christ used examples in their daily life. There were many farmers who heard His parables; He talked about planting seeds, good soil, bad soil, good fruit, and bad fruit. There were also many shepherds in His audience, so He talked about shepherds and sheep.

Jesus directed the theme of the rich man and Lazarus to the Pharisees. They were wealthy and influential, so the rich man represented them. Christ spoke about consciousness after death because they believed in it. *Josephus' Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades* contains many details of this parable. We must remember that Jesus also warned about the false doctrines of the Pharisees (Matthew 15:14, 16:12).

This is a story to teach principles, not a doctrinal statement. Christ spoke many parables to the crowds, then later explained them privately to His disciples (Mark 4:34). Jesus also made it clear that many misunderstand parables:

And the disciples came and said to Him "Why do You speak to them in Parables?"

He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in

parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. And in them the prophecy is fulfilled, which says:

'Hearing you will hear and shall not understand, and seeing you will see and not perceive: For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, And their eyes they have closed, Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, So that I should heal them'

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it." Matthew 13:10-17

People miss the lesson of parables by trying to take everything literally. In John 16:25, Jesus says, "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father."

While some insist Luke 16:19-31 is not a parable, it cannot be literal. When we die, our physical bodies lie still in the grave. We decompose and eventually turn to dust. This includes our eyes, fingers, and tongue. Yet the rich man saw Lazarus, and wanted him to put water on his finger and touch the tongue of the rich man (Luke 16:24).

Another reason this is figurative is because Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). Abraham's bosom is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. Since many righteous people died before Abraham, they could not go to his bosom before it existed. This must be symbolic language.

The most important reason this is not literal is because the rich man answers to Abraham. There is one God and one Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5); Abraham is neither.

Using Real Names

Jesus uses the names Lazarus, Abraham, and Moses in this parable. Opponents of soul sleep claim His stories must be true when real names are used. Although scholars admit that some parts of this story cannot be literal, many still insist the rich man being in torment must be literal because Jesus uses real names.

This reasoning has a fatal flaw. The most important character, if they want to prove conscious torment for the unfaithful, is the rich man. Since the rich man is not given a name, their argument crumbles.

Lesson of the Parable

The first part of Luke 16 talks about money, and says the Pharisees loved money (verse 14). In the parable, Abraham reminds the rich man that he had pleasures in his former life and Lazarus had difficulties. Now it is reversed (verse 25). Once we die, it is too late to repent.

Then verses 27-31 show the main reason for this parable. The rich man wanted Lazarus to warn his brothers. Abraham said they did not listen to Moses and the prophets. The rich man replied that they would listen if someone came back from the dead. Abraham concluded by saying they would not even listen to someone who came back from the dead.

This explains why Jesus uses the name Lazarus in this parable. Jesus raised His friend Lazarus from the dead (John 11:38-44) and the church leaders did not listen to him. In fact, the chief priests tried to kill Lazarus because many believed in Jesus when they saw Lazarus alive (John 12:9-11). Jesus also came back from the dead, and the church leaders did not listen to Him either.

A Possible Interpretation

Interpreting prophecy in the Bible is very challenging. End-times prophecy was my favorite Bible subject when I first became a Christian. I read Hal Lindsey's famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and was certain that Christ would return within five or ten years.

That was 24 years ago! Studying end times prophecy is less important to me today. When I read different end-time scenarios of prophecy experts, I find little agreement or consistency.

Although interpreting prophecy is not my expertise, I will offer a possible explanation of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. We should start with the rich man. Since he talked to Abraham, he represented the Jews. Before the time of Christ, they were the fortunate ones who had the Word of God.

Lazarus ate crumbs from the rich man's table and dogs licked his sores (Luke 16:21). He represented the Gentiles, who rarely heard the Word of God before Christ. We see the similarity when we read about a Gentile woman who wanted Jesus to heal her daughter. She was called a dog, and she replied that even dogs get crumbs from the master's table (Matthew 15:22-30, Mark 7:25-30).

In the beginning of the parable, everything was going right for the rich man, while Lazarus was struggling. Then things were reversed when they died. Their death could represent the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant. Now the gentiles have the gospel, instead of the Jews. Here is a prophecy and fulfillment:

"Behold, the days are coming," says the Lord GOD, "That I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD. They shall wander from sea to sea, and from north to east; they shall run to and fro, seeking the word of the LORD, but shall not find it. Amos 8:11-12

Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, "It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles. Acts 13:46

Better Case for Talking Trees

If we start with a false premise, we do not interpret the Bible properly. We sometimes take symbolic language literally if it supports our preconceived ideas. In Judges 9:8-15, there is a story about trees talking to each other. Isaiah 14:8 also has trees talking. Other Scriptures say trees rejoice (Psalms 96:12) and clap their hands (Isaiah 55:12).

There is a better case in Scripture for trees talking than there is for humans suffering in the intermediate state. We could also make a case that mountains and hills sing (Isaiah 55:12), and that stones cry out (Luke 19:40). Since Bible scholars do not believe these things, they do not take these passages literally. On the other hand, many take the story of the rich man and Lazarus literally because it supports their assumption.

As we have seen, the case for conscious torment before the resurrection is very weak. The next chapter examines the case for soul sleep, while the following chapter responds to the case for believers being conscious with Christ after death.

Notes:

¹ Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, p. 74-77

² *ibid.*

6. THE BIBLICAL CASE FOR SOUL SLEEP

Most Christians believe we remain conscious after death. Few have seriously examined the case for soul sleep, or heard its main arguments. Even authors who claim to refute soul sleep do not appear to understand.

Throughout history, some Christians believed death is unconsciousness. As more Christians take the time to examine this doctrine, they realize it has solid support in Scripture and the belief is growing stronger today.

Death and Sleep

The most common word for death in the Bible is *sleep*. Since most of our sleep is unconscious, this is the best word to describe unconsciousness.

When the Bible calls death sleep, it implies that the essence of our being sleeps. For instance, Stephen was being stoned to death and cried out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60). If he were conscious in heaven, the Bible would say, "His body fell asleep."

Since sleep is unconsciousness, we sometimes sleep for a long time and it only seems like an instant. We become conscious again when we wake up. The Bible consistently describes the resurrection as waking up from sleep.

Lazarus is one example. When he died, Jesus told His disciples, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up." (John 11:11) The disciples did not understand, so He plainly said, "Lazarus is dead." (John 11:14)

Jesus does not support the belief that death and resurrection is the leaving and returning of a conscious soul. Although Lazarus was dead for four days, Jesus did not call him down from heaven. Jesus simply said, "Lazarus come forth." (John 11:38-44)

Opponents of soul sleep insist *sleep* is only a metaphor, so we should disregard it. There are 54 references to death as sleep in the Old Testament and another 18 in the New Testament. It is illogical to assume God would inspire 72 misleading metaphors. This recurring theme cannot be ignored.

Some traditionalists say sleep means to be with Christ, and claim that the Bible never says nonbelievers sleep. Scripture refutes this claim many times when it records the

reigns of the kings of Jerusalem and Israel. The Word of God usually says the king "slept with his fathers" (KJV and NASB) when he died.

These books did not distinguish between the saved and the unsaved. David, for example, was a believer (Hebrews 11:32). When he died, the Bible says he "slept with his fathers." (1 Kings 2:10)

We see the same phrase for evil kings. During Rehoboam's reign they did evil (1 Kings 14:22), yet Rehoboam slept with his fathers (1 Kings 14:31). Abijah reigned for three years, and walked in all the sins of his fathers (1 Kings 15:1-3), yet Abijah slept with his fathers (1 Kings 15:8). We would find about 20 other examples of nonbelievers being asleep at death if we examine more Scripture.

Death in the Bible is sleep. There is no distinction between believers and nonbelievers. All die and all sleep.

Soul Sleep

Although the term 'soul sleep' is not in the Bible, we see strong evidence for it. Scriptures refer to people as souls many times and dead people are called dead souls. People sleep when they are dead and people are souls, which implies that souls sleep.

As expected, traditionalists claim sleep only refers to the body. If they closely examine 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17, they realize they contradict themselves. They claim verses 13-15 talk about disembodied souls coming back with Christ, yet this passage also says they are asleep three times.

When the Bible is only talking about the spirit, the passage says the spirit (Ecclesiastes 12:7, Psalms 146:4). When Scripture is only talking about the body, the passage says the body. For example, Jesus mentions the body seven times during the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-7:27). The Bible would say the body sleeps if only referring to the body.

As we saw in the previous two chapters, body and soul return to the earth. Daniel 12:2 shows souls sleep during this time: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, . . ."

Unconsciousness Implied in the Old Testament

Psalms 146:4 says thoughts perish at death. This cannot refer to a body without the soul, since a physical body alone does not have thoughts. Only the soul has thoughts, and they perish.

This passage shows another example of how translators distort the truth. The literal translations (ASV, NASB, and KJV) correctly say, " . . .his thoughts perish." This is a clear indication of unconsciousness.

Unfortunately, many modern versions hide this. For example, the NKJV says, " . . . his plans perish." The NIV distorts it further by saying, " . . . his plans come to nothing." The Living Bible says, " . . . all he planned for himself is ended." This is not *translating*; it is *interpreting*.

Many other passages support soul sleep and do not make sense if only talking about the body. Here are some examples:

For in death there is no remembrance of You. In the grave who will give You thanks?
Psalms 6:5

What profit is there in my blood, When I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you?
Will it declare Your truth? Psalm 30:9

Will You work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You? Shall Your lovingkindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction? Shall Your wonders be known in the dark? And Your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? Psalm 88:10-12

The above verses are obvious and unnecessary if they are talking about a physical body without the soul. Bodies cannot remember God, give Him thanks, or praise Him. Bodies cannot know His truth, wonders, lovingkindness, faithfulness, or righteousness. Since these verses show a lack of thoughts or feelings, they imply unconsciousness.

This same message of an end of consciousness was evident when Adam sinned. God plainly told him he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19). Adam was not conscious before creation, and God made it clear he would return to that unconscious state. Thoughts occur in the brain, which stops functioning and starts decomposing at death. Thoughts perish at death, just as the Bible says so many different ways.

Solomon also supports soul sleep:

But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing; And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred and their envy have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share In anything done under the sun . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:5-6,10

Many Bible commentators will not accept Scriptures that contradict their preconceived ideas, so Ecclesiastes 9 causes them problems. For example, a footnote in The Living Bible says, "These statements are Solomon's discouraged opinion, and do not reflect a knowledge of God's truth on these points!" The Scofield Bible Commentary also has a footnote that says these verses are not a divine revelation from God.

Other scholars also deny the inspiration of this passage. Yet these same scholars use other verses in Ecclesiastes, as well as other writings of Solomon, to prove their case. Solomon knew spirits return to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). If the spirit is a conscious entity outside the body after death, Solomon contradicts himself in the same book.

Jesus talks about the wisdom of Solomon (Matthew 12:42, Luke 11:31) and the glory of Solomon (Matthew 6:29, Luke 12:27). Jesus, however, never says Solomon preached false doctrine. Denying the inspiration of God in Ecclesiastes 9 is putting assumptions above the Bible.

The Old Testament verses discussed in this section show the soul is unconscious at death. The Old Testament focuses more on the state of the dead, while the New Testament focuses more on the resurrection. When we examine the resurrection, we will see no contradiction to soul sleep.

1 Corinthians 15

1 Corinthians 15 is the great chapter on the resurrection of believers. Careful reading of this chapter reveals the dead are not conscious until the resurrection, which is also called the *Blessed Hope*.

In verses 12-17, Paul says some believe Christ had not risen and there is no resurrection. He concludes in verse 18, "Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished." This does not support the belief that people are already in

heaven before the resurrection, in which case they have not perished. The *only* hope for believers is the resurrection.

Paul then says, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each to his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming." (verses 22-23) Believers shall be made alive at Christ's coming, not at death.

Paul goes on to say that our actions do not matter without the blessed hope. In verse 32, he says, "If the dead do not rise, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." He tells us we should lead carefree lives if there is no resurrection because we would not face any consequences. Paul would not say this if believers have conscious joy while nonbelievers are tormented, since these are critical consequences.

In verses 51-54a, Paul writes about the resurrection of believers. He then says, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?" (verses 54b-55) Christians will not overcome death until the resurrection. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed (verse 26).

Awakening at the Resurrection

While 1 Corinthians 15 is the most important Scripture about the first resurrection, many other Scriptures also show that people do not awaken until the resurrection. Here are a few examples.

"So a man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, They will not awake Nor be roused from their sleep." Job 14:12

As for me, I will see Your face in righteousness; I shall be satisfied when I awake in Your likeness. Psalm 17:15

"This is the will of My Father who sent me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day . . . and I will raise him up at the last day . . . and I will raise him up at the last day." John 6:39-40, 44, 54

"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day." John 11:24

The above verses show people are not raised until the last day, and the wording implies the whole person. Jesus says four times in John 6 that He will, "raise him up at the last day." Jesus never says, "I will raise his body at the last day." The message is

clear that they are not raised until the resurrection. And the following passages also show they are still in the grave when they wake up:

"Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in the dust; For your dew is like the dew of herbs, And the earth shall cast out the dead." Isaiah 26:19

"At that time Michael shall stand up, The great prince who stands watch over the sons of your people . . . And at that time your people shall be delivered, Every one who is found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt . . ." Daniel 12:1-2

"Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." John 5:28-29

This reiterates the clear teaching that we are dust. At creation, God miraculously gave life to dust (Genesis 2:7). Since we have the sinful nature, this miracle ends at death and we return to dust (Genesis 3:19). The above passages show the resurrection is similar to creation, where God again gives life to those who sleep.

Although traditionalists insist the resurrection only refers to the body without the soul, Revelation 20:4-6 refutes them. Verse 4 talks about souls of martyrs who will live and reign with Christ for 1,000 years. After this, the passage says, " . . . This is the first resurrection. Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection . . ." (Verses 5-6) The first resurrection includes souls.

As we examine death and resurrection in the Bible, we see that it is not the departing and returning of an eternal soul. Instead, Scripture says death is sleep and resurrection is waking up from sleep. This is the best possible way to describe temporary unconsciousness.

Sleep always implies waking up in the future. While we sometimes say our sick pet was "put to sleep" when it died, Scripture never says animals sleep when they die. Nonbelievers will die the second death after judgment, which we will discuss later. The Bible does not call this death sleep because they will never be resurrected from the second death. In all cases in Scripture, sleep is temporary.

Rewards and Punishments at the Resurrection

The previous section shows both the righteous and the unrighteous remain in the grave until the resurrection. Daniel 12:2 talks about believers awakening to everlasting life and nonbelievers awakening to shame and everlasting contempt; John 5:29 also talks about believers coming forth to the resurrection of life and nonbelievers coming forth to the resurrection of condemnation.

Scriptures continually show believers and nonbelievers being treated the same until the resurrection. Here are examples where we do not receive rewards or punishments until the resurrection:

"But you, go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days." Daniel 12:13

And all these [Old Testament believers], having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. Hebrews 11:39-40

"Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age." Matthew 13:40

"He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him - the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day." John 12:48

"For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His Angels, and then He will reward each according to his works." Matthew 16:27

"And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Luke 14:14

Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God. 1 Corinthians 4:5

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give every one according to his work." Revelation 22:12

People cannot rejoice with the Lord or suffer in torment before the resurrection, since this contradicts the above verses. Being with the Lord is a reward, while being in torment is a punishment.

Paul did not believe he would face consequences at death. While in prison, he says, "I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a resurrection

of the dead, both of the just and the unjust. This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men." (Acts 24:15-16)

He does not say he needs a conscience without offense because he will face God at his death; the *only* reason he needs a clear conscience is because of the resurrection. This agrees with 1 Corinthians 15:32, where he says, "If the dead do not rise, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

When we honestly examine the Bible, we see that the dead sleep. They awaken and receive their rewards or punishments at the resurrection. In this chapter, we have shown that Scriptures are overflowing with references. In fact, they almost seem redundant!

No Legitimate Response to Soul Sleep

Many traditionalists claim the whole case for soul sleep rests in the Old Testament. They cannot come to this conclusion from studying conditionalism, or from rigorous analysis of the Bible. They only get this information from other opponents of soul sleep. Traditionalists either do not understand, or they deliberately mislead.

Robert Morey (*Death and the Afterlife*, 1984), for example, says conditionalists have an undue dependence on the Old Testament (p. 215). He does attempt to answer a few Old Testament passages like Psalm 6:5; 88:10, 11; 115:17; and Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10 (p. 215-216). He does not, however, explain the repeated emphasis that the dead awaken and receive their rewards or punishments at the resurrection. In spite of this, Morey claims they covered all arguments for conditionalism and left no stone unturned (p. 220).

Since the Old Testament is about four times larger than the New Testament, it contains more evidence for soul sleep. Although traditionalists claim the New Testament refutes soul sleep, we see this is not the case. The New Testament reveals new information about the resurrection, and agrees with the Old Testament. Soul sleep is a recurring theme that harmonizes throughout the Bible. The doctrine of continued consciousness after death does not.

Enoch and Elijah

The dead are unconscious, unless God makes an exception. God is the all-knowing, all-powerful Creator of the universe, and He occasionally chooses to treat some differently. We cannot generalize about unusual events.

Two examples of exceptions are Enoch and Elijah going directly to heaven (Genesis 5:24, 2 Kings 2:11). God spared them physical death, yet no competent Bible scholar will say God spares everyone physical death.

Saul and the Witch of Endor

Another possible exception is a story about Saul going to a medium to bring Samuel back from the dead (1 Samuel 28:7-20). Bible scholars are divided about whether this was only an illusion or if Samuel actually came back. While it is highly unlikely that this was truly Samuel, we will assume he actually returned for the sake of discussion.

If Samuel did return, God made this happen because He wanted Samuel to speak to Saul. The medium could not really bring dead people back. She was so surprised that she cried out in a loud voice. Then she realized God had intervened and she was talking to King Saul (verse 12). The essence of Samuel's being is still in the earth, so he ascended from the earth rather than descending from heaven (verse 13).

Samuel also said Saul would be with him tomorrow (1 Samuel 28:19), meaning Saul was going to die. The prediction came true; Saul died the next day (1 Samuel 31:4-6).

Everything in Scripture about Samuel tells us he was a faithful man of God. The Bible says Saul was not (1 Chronicles 10:13-14). If there is a distinction between the righteous and unrighteous in the intermediate state, they would not be together.

The Transfiguration

Moses and Elijah appeared to Peter, James, and John (Matthew 17:1-8, Mark 9:2-8, Luke 9:28-36). While traditionalists claim this is a strong argument against soul sleep, it lacks any evidence for their belief. The dead body and conscious soul of the same person refutes soul sleep.

David would be a great example. Peter plainly tells us that David, "is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day." (Acts 2:29) If David appeared to them, instead of Moses and Elijah, this would refute soul sleep. The whole case hinges on finding the bodies of Elijah and Moses.

We already know Elijah went up to heaven alive (2 Kings 2:11), so we need to examine the Scriptures to see what happened to Moses. No one knows where God buried Moses (Deuteronomy 34:6). Jude 9 also says Satan and Michael the archangel argued about Moses' body. This verse (Jude 9) does not make sense unless God did something unusual with Moses.

The word *archangel* only appears in Jude 9 and in a passage about raising the dead (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Michael is also mentioned at the resurrection in Daniel 12:1-2. Since Michael the archangel is involved with raising the dead, and was in a dispute involving Moses' body, this implies God resurrected Moses.

Jesus told His apostles not to mention the transfiguration until after Jesus rose from the dead (Matthew 17:9, Mark 9:9). They did not yet understand the resurrection, which involves both the dead believers being resurrected and living believers being translated (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). The transfiguration shows an example of each; Moses was resurrected from his sleep, while Elijah went directly to heaven alive.

Saints Resurrected at Christ's Death

God also made an exception by resurrecting some saints at Christ's death. This was a physical, literal resurrection. God opened their tombs and awakened whole beings, including their physical bodies (Matthew 27:51-53). They were not disembodied souls.

The examples discussed in these last four sections show God made certain exceptions. Even in these unique events, we cannot find a disembodied, conscious soul. In all cases, we have reasonable explanations involving physical bodies. It is better to look at these rare events as exceptions than to ignore the massive evidence for soul sleep.

Near Death Experiences

Many people, close to death, see unusual visions. Some also see images of dead people. Many show knowledge beyond their previous experience when describing these events. A few traditionalists claim these events prove consciousness after death.

While there are some similarities in these reports, they are not always consistent. This makes them unreliable. In fact, many others who appeared dead for several minutes did not have any conscious experience. As the phrase implies, 'near death' means close

to death, not death and resurrection. When a person is close to death, the brain has a shortage of oxygen and this can cause hallucinations.

As with any subject, we must look at the Bible only. There are several examples where God resurrected people, like Lazarus. There is no mention of near death experiences. If Lazarus was in heaven during the four days between his death and resurrection (John 11:38-44), he probably would not want to come back.

Some say Paul's vision of the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2-4) was a near death experience. Paul, however, twice stated that he did not know whether he was in the body or not (verses 2-3). If his soul departed from his body to heaven, he would be certain that he was out of his body. Paul did not know if he was given a vision, or physically taken away.

Apparitions

Another experience used for proof of consciousness after death is an apparition of someone who has died. There are many well-documented cases of this. Some involve Mary, the mother of Jesus.

There are also documented cases where people, who know the dead are unconscious, see images of people who have died. Not wanting to be deceived, they would say, "You are not who you claim to be! In the name of Jesus be gone!" Then the illusions disappear.

God gave strict warning not to contact the dead (Leviticus 20:27, Deuteronomy 18:10-12). Saul did not heed this warning and consulted a medium instead of inquiring of the Lord. He died in his unfaithfulness for this (1 Chronicles 10:13-14). Isaiah 8:19 also asks, ". . . should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?"

Relying on human experience and believing in eternal consciousness of the soul makes us vulnerable to deception. Satan and his angels work signs and wonders that deceive many (2 Corinthians 11:14, Revelation 13:13-14, 16:14). God warns us not to contact the dead so we will not be deceived by evil spirits posing as humans.

The next chapter is our final chapter on the state of the dead. We will address the strongest arguments for believers being with the Lord.

7. CASE FOR CONSCIOUS BELIEVERS

As we have seen in the last three chapters, there is evidence for soul sleep throughout the Bible. While the case for nonbelievers being conscious before the resurrection is almost void, there is a better case for believers being conscious. In this chapter, we will examine the main arguments for believers going to Christ at death.

Assuredly I Say to You Today You will be with Me in Paradise

Christ told one of the thieves crucified with Him that he would be in paradise (Luke 23:43). Most Bible translations of this verse suggest the thief would be in paradise that day. The NKJV says, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise." This implies today modifies "You will be with me in paradise."

Although this sounds like he would go immediately to heaven, there were no commas in the original Greek. When translating into other languages, translators inserted commas and other punctuation. Since many believe in continued consciousness, they placed the comma before today.

If we place the comma after today, the verse reads, "Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with me in paradise." This implies today modifies "I say to you." Today was the day Christ made the promise, not the day they would be in paradise.

Traditionalists insist only their punctuation and interpretation is valid. While this verse appears to support their case, it is one inconclusive verse, and nothing more. And since it is not conclusive, we must look for clearer Scriptures. We cannot magnify one vague reference and ignore passages that support other beliefs.

One problem with their view is the word translated *paradise*. This word also appears in Revelation 2:7, where John says the tree of life is in the midst of paradise. The tree of life will be in the new earth after the resurrection (Revelation 22:2, 14), so Jesus does not refer to the intermediate state.

Jesus' own words show He did not go immediately to heaven. Comparing His situation to Jonah, He said the Son of Man would be in the heart of the earth for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). And after the resurrection, Jesus told Mary He had not yet ascended to the Father (John 20:17).

Other Scriptures also show that Jesus did not go directly to heaven. Jesus' soul was in Hades between death and resurrection. David foretells this in Psalm 16:10, and Peter explains this passage in Acts 2:25-35. Verse 31 says He was in Hades during that time. (See *The Soul at Death* in Chapter Four)

Paul agrees and says Jesus died, was buried, and rose again on the third day (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). In another passage, Paul says Jesus first descended into the lower parts of the earth, then He ascended (Ephesians 4:9-10).

Opponents of soul sleep also contend that Jesus would not say *today* if only referring to the promise, since it was obvious He made the promise that day. Jesus emphasized today because the thief repented and believed in Jesus that day. The previous day he was lost.

Moses uses the word *today* similarly in Deuteronomy 30:16-18. In verse 16, he commands them today to follow the Lord. He was not saying they only had to follow the Lord that day. Just as Moses gave the command that day, Jesus gave the promise that day.

Then Moses says, "But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish . . ." (verses 17-18) They did not perish that day. In fact, they did not even perish the first day they turned away, because of God's patience and mercy.

Old Testament Believers Resurrected After Christ Died - Setting Captives Free

Many scholars believe the souls of righteous people who died before Christ went to Sheol, then were resurrected to heaven after Christ's death. They also believe the souls of New Testament Christians go directly to heaven.

Some point to the resurrection at Christ's death, which was more than a resurrection of disembodied souls. Graves were opened and whole people, including their bodies, were resurrected (Matthew 27:51-53). This did not include David, since Peter later said David's tomb was still with them (Acts 2:29). Since we know David will spend eternity in Heaven (Hebrews 11:32-33), the resurrection at Christ's death could not include all Old Testament saints.

Scholars also refer to the death of Steven to support their case (Acts 7:59-60). When he was about to be stoned, he said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." He was not saying

he was going to the Lord; he was showing his willingness to die. Jesus also committed His spirit to God at His death (Luke 23:46), then He went to Hades (Acts 2:31).

Spirits already returned to God at death in the Old Testament (Ecclesiastes 12:7, Psalm 146:4), and this includes spirits of nonbelievers. Psalm 146:3-4 talks about princes and most are not believers; nevertheless, their spirits depart. Steven's death was the same as in the Old Testament; his spirit departed and he fell asleep (Acts 7:59-60).

Ephesians 4:8-10 is probably their strongest argument to support the transporting of souls to heaven. In Ephesians 4:8, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18, saying Christ led captivity captive and gave gifts to men. Some interpret this to mean Jesus took the souls of believers to heaven. In verses 9-10, Paul talks about Jesus descending into the lower parts of the earth, then ascending to heaven. He does not mention anyone ascending with Jesus.

People were captive because of sin and Christ atoned for all sins with His death on the cross. They were also captive because they did not understand truth. In John 8:32, Jesus says, "And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Christ revealed many new truths through His life, death and resurrection.

When we read the whole context in Ephesians 4, we see it is talking about spiritual gifts. Verse 11 talks about gifts of being apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Verses 12-15 talk about maturing in Christ and discerning truth so we will not be deceived by false doctrines. The gifts in this context are for living believers, not dead souls.

Whoever Believes in Me Shall Never Die (John 11:26)

John 11:26 is a clear example of taking a verse out of context. This is right after Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live." (John 11:25) Since He says they may die in verse 25, then says they shall never die in verse 26, we know death has more than one meaning. In this passage, Jesus says believers cannot die the second death, which we will discuss in Part Three.

He made these statements just before resurrecting Lazarus, and Jesus will resurrect all believers in the future. Jesus says believers will not die the second death; He does not say they remain conscious.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were Living

The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife, so they asked Jesus an absurd question about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23-28, Mark 12:18-23, Luke 20:27-33). The Sadducees tried to trick Him.

The purpose of Jesus' response is to refute those who do not believe in a resurrection. Jesus made it clear the righteous would live again when He said Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were living (Matthew 22:29-32, Mark 12:24-27, Luke 20:34-38). Christ was referring to people who had eternal life, not people who were physically alive.

We can die the first death and still have eternal life (John 11:25-26). Jesus words about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob contrast Bible passages that refer to people as dead who were physically alive (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:6; 1 Peter 4:6; etc.).

Souls in Revelation

In the book of Revelation, John has many symbolic visions. Some verses reference souls, so traditionalists use these as proof texts for their case.

One example is persecuted souls asking God when He will avenge their deaths (Revelation 6:9-11). Chapter 6 talks about visions associated with Jesus opening seven seals. Each time Jesus opened a seal, John saw a vision that was symbolic. With each of the first four seals, John saw a vision of a man riding a horse. The men and the horses were not literal; they foretold future events.

When Jesus opened the fifth seal, John saw a vision of persecuted souls (verses 9-11). While traditionalists do not see the visions of men riding horses as literal, they insist the vision of souls under the altar is literal. Just as the first four seals foretold future events, the fifth seal foretold persecution for believers.

These souls are not happy, since they are in distress that God has not yet avenged their deaths. This does not support the belief that disembodied souls of believers are happy in the presence of the Lord. In Revelation 6:11, these souls receive white robes, which implies they are physical.

Another passage about souls is found in Revelation 20. Verse 4 talks about souls of martyrs and says they lived and reigned with Christ for 1,000 years, also called the millennium. If souls are always conscious, it is redundant to say they lived. Even the NIV says, "they came to life." The next verse says this is the first resurrection, which shows these souls will not live until then. Verse 6 reiterates verse 4 and says they reigned with Christ for 1,000 years.

Proponents of eternal souls claim *lived* in verse 4 means they lived with Christ. Many believe everyone is always conscious; some are with God and some are separated from God. To live means to be with the Lord.

If their interpretation is correct, then this passage supports universalism. Verse 5 says the rest of the dead did not live until the 1,000 years are over, using the same Greek word as in verse 4. This does not say they will never live; it says they will not live *until* the millennium is over, implying they *will* live afterwards.

If *live* means to be with Jesus, then everyone will be with Him after the millennium. There are only two options for this passage: soul sleep or universalism.

Spirits of Just Men Made Perfect (Hebrews 12:23)

Hebrews 12:23 talks about spirits made perfect and many believe this refers to conscious spirits in heaven. People assume Hebrews is talking about spirits of dead people, since it says they are made perfect. The word *perfect* in Hebrews 12:23 comes from the same root word as in Matthew 5:48, where Jesus commands us to be perfect *now*. These words could be translated *complete* or *mature*, rather than *perfect*.

Hebrews 12:18-24 compares Old Testament times to New Testament times. Verses 18-21 talk about the mountain where God performed miracles in the Old Testament. Verses 22-24 talk about the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament.

This passage is talking to the living believer. Christians are part of the heavenly church and are in fellowship with an innumerable company of angels, the general assembly, God, spirits of just men made perfect, Jesus and the blood. Believers are in spiritual fellowship with each other.

God Will Bring with Him Those Who Sleep (1 Thessalonians 4:14)

This verse says saints who are asleep will come with Jesus when He returns. Many use this verse to prove souls of believers are already in heaven. We need to look at the whole context:

But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Verse 15 says those who are alive will not precede those who are asleep. Verse 16 then says the dead in Christ will rise first, showing the dead will be raised an instant before the living. This explains why they will be with the Lord when He comes for the living. We cannot focus exclusively on verse 14 and ignore the rest of the passage, since verse 17 says we will be caught up together with them.

Paul says this to comfort them (verse 18), because they were sorrowful about those who already died (verse 13). When he says Christ will bring those who have died, the important message is that the living and dead believers will be reunited. Trying to say the dead are conscious is reading things into the passage.

Since they were sorrowful about those who had died, this was Paul's best opportunity to tell them their loved ones were happy in the presence of the Lord. Instead, he says the dead are asleep three times (verses 13-15), then says the dead and living believers will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air (verses 16-17).

Absent from the Body and to be Present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

Many Christians reference 2 Corinthians 5:6-8 first when asked if consciousness continues after death. Unfortunately, they misquote this and say to be absent from the body *is* to be present with the Lord. Instead, Paul says he wants to be absent from the body *and* to be present with the Lord. These were two things he desired.

Although Christians disagree about the intermediate state, they agree about the experience for the believer. According to all Bible scholars, the faithful die and their next conscious moment is with the Lord. Traditionalists claim believers die and their souls are immediately conscious in the presence of the Lord.

Conditionalists, on the other hand, claim believers are not aware of the passage of time because they are unconscious. It would only seem like an instant from death to resurrection, even if thousands of years pass. Sometimes we sleep for hours and it only seems like an instant.

Passages talking about dying then being with the Lord are worthless as proof-texts for continued consciousness during the intermediate state. While they prove an afterlife, they do not refute a time of unconsciousness before waking up. We cannot read things into Scriptures that are not there.

Traditionalists read unfounded assumptions into 2 Corinthians 5 and miss obvious references to the resurrection. In verse 1, for example, Paul says we will receive a new dwelling from God that is eternal. He called this being clothed (v. 2-3). By reading the next verse we know that being clothed refers to the resurrection:

For we who are in this tent groan, being burdened, not because we want to be unclothed, but further clothed, that mortality may be swallowed up to life. 2 Corinthians 5:4

At the resurrection, we will be changed from mortal to immortal and death will be swallowed up in victory (1 Corinthians 15:51-56). According to the above passage, being clothed happens when mortality is swallowed up to life. The correlation is unmistakable!

Since clothed in 2 Corinthians 5 means having the new body at the resurrection, unclothed obviously refers to the time before the resurrection. According to traditionalists, Paul desires to be present with the Lord before the resurrection (v. 8). Yet Paul says he does not want to be unclothed (v. 4). Did he change his mind between verse 4 and verse 8?

Paul also talks about appearing before the judgment seat of Christ (v. 10). This does not happen during the intermediate state. In spite of several clear references to the resurrection, traditionalists use this passage as one of their strongest arguments for consciousness in the intermediate state. Paul is only stating that he will be happy to discard this mortal body and receive his new body when Christ returns (Philippians 3:21).

To Depart and be with Christ (Philippians 1:21-23)

Traditionalists insist Paul's "desire to depart and be with Christ" in Philippians 1:23 proves immediate conscious presence with Christ. Since Paul preferred to depart than to keep on living, many insist that he would only prefer this if he would be conscious in heaven. They read too much into this passage.

Paul faced many persecutions and his suffering ended when he died. As pointed out in the previous section, traditionalists and conditionalists both believe that Paul's next conscious moment after death will be in the presence of the Lord. This is certainly better than continuing to endure hardship in this world.

Traditionalists also point to this passage because Paul does not mention a time between departing and being with Christ. They forget the common saying that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." Since people are unconscious between death and resurrection, this time is irrelevant.

A clear similarity is Hebrews 9:27, which says we die and then face judgment. Judgment happens after the resurrection, not at death. Hebrews 9:27 ignores the intermediate state because it is insignificant. When we die, the next significant event is judgment (Hebrews 9:27) and Paul will be with Christ at judgment (Philippians 1:23).

Although Philippians is not a strong argument against soul sleep, traditionalists place great emphasis on it. One example is the Christian Research Institute. Referring to Philippians 1:21-23, they say, "Now, of all the texts in the New Testament on the state of the believer after the death of his body, this one alone gives us Paul's mind on the subject, so we need to pay strict attention to what he says."¹

A closer inspection of Paul's writings reveals many Scriptures that disagree with the traditional belief. These Scriptures show believers will not be with the Lord until He returns at the resurrection:

Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.
Romans 8:23

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each to his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 1
Corinthians 15:22-23

For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 1 Corinthians 15:52

. . . holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. Philippians 2:16

. . . that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Philippians 3:10-11

When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory. Colossians 3:4

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand . . . Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:6, 8

. . . looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, Titus 2:13

In Philippians 1:21-23, Paul says believers who die will be with the Lord. He does not say *when* in this passage, yet he does in many others. Traditionalists ignore clear verses and read their assumptions into ambiguous passages. Since the Bible is so massive, people can find a few Scriptures to support many false beliefs. We must consider all passages to see the overall theme, instead of being deceived by rare exceptions.

The emphasis of being with the Lord, in Paul's writings as well as the rest of the New Testament, points to the resurrection. Numerous verses show this. If the soul is conscious in heaven before the resurrection, the resurrection is anticlimactic, not the blessed hope.

A Need for Consistency

As pointed out in Chapter Four, when Scripture talks about departure of the spirit or soul, we see that the essence of our being stays with the body. Examples given were:

Genesis 35:18 says, "her soul was departing," not "she was departing."

1 Kings 17:21-22 says, "the child's soul came back to him," not "the child came back."

Psalms 146:4 says, "his spirit departs, he returns to the earth." It does not say "he departs, his body returns to the earth."

Luke 8:55 says, "her spirit returned and she awoke," not "she returned and awoke."

Acts 20:10 says, "his soul is still in him," not "he is still in his body."

The above passages are consistent because they mention either the spirit or soul. We should expect all passages about death to follow the same design, yet we do not see this in two favorite proof texts against soul sleep. In Luke 23:43, for example, Jesus does not tell the thief that his soul will be with Jesus. Paul also ignores this pattern because he does not say his soul will be with Christ in Philippians 1:23. These two texts are clearly different from passages that emphasize death.

Instead, Luke 23:43 and Philippians 1:23 resemble Scriptures that emphasize the resurrection. Numerous passages say we will be with Christ when He returns (e.g. John 5:28-29, 6:39-40, 44, 54, 11:24, 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, Colossians 3:4, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). Why are Luke 23:43 and Philippians 1:23 different from these other texts?

Soul sleep follows a consistent pattern of interpretation. When the passage does not mention spirit or soul, it talks about the whole person. In Luke 23:43, Jesus makes the promise *that day* about the resurrection; in Philippians 1:23, Paul ignores the time of unconsciousness between death and resurrection because it is irrelevant. These two inconclusive passages should not be overemphasized at the expense of numerous other verses that support soul sleep.

Traditionalists are very subjective and inconsistent when they interpret these passages. If the passage could support conditionalism, they insist it is only talking about the body; if the passage could support continued consciousness, they insist it is talking

about the soul outside the body. Since their minds are already made up, God's Word is of no effect (Mark 7:13).

Conclusion Concerning the Intermediate State

The Bible does not support continued consciousness after death. Traditionalists defend this belief three questionable ways. One method is using obvious exceptions and applying this as a rule for everyone. The transfiguration, for instance, only concerned Elijah and Moses.

Another tactic is interpreting symbolic passages literally (Isaiah 14:9, Ezekiel 32:21, Luke 16:19-31, Revelation 6:9-10). Traditionalists put undue emphasis on figurative language because literal passages do not support their belief.

The third method is emphasizing ambiguous verses that could be interpreted several ways. Through extensive commentary and reliance on uninspired writings, traditionalists convince Christians that their belief is the only possible interpretation of these unclear Scriptures.

While the case for continued consciousness is suspect, Scripture contains tons of evidence for soul sleep. Many passages are clear and hard to interpret any other way. Opponents do not even offer a legitimate response to many of them. As pointed out in the previous section, their claim that all Scriptures supporting soul sleep only refer to the body is clearly inconsistent with the way they interpret other passages.

In the next chapter, we begin our discussion of the more important final state of believers and nonbelievers.

Notes:

1 *Kingdom of the Cults*, 1985, p. 451

8. CONDITIONAL IMMORTALITY

All Rise to Face Judgment

There are a few differences among conditionalists. Some claim the first death is the end of existence for the unrighteous. These conditionalists hurt the case because the Bible plainly says everyone will face judgment:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. 2 Corinthians 5:10

And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, Hebrews 9:27

These passages cannot be interpreted any other way. We discussed three other Scriptures in Chapter Six that also prove both the righteous and the unrighteous will rise (Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29 and Acts 24:15). Since traditionalists can easily show nonbelievers will be resurrected, many think the whole case for conditionalism is refuted and do not study it.

Paying the Penalty

The first half of Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. We are all sinners (Romans 3:23, Ecclesiastes 7:20), so we all deserve death. God is just and cannot overlook this. One sinful human cannot pay the penalty for another, since both deserve death. The only way to escape the death penalty is if a sinless person, who does not deserve death, dies in our place.

The second half of Romans 6:23 says the gift of God is eternal life. While wages are something we earn, a gift is free. Jesus paid our penalty so we can have eternal life.

This substitute death was foretold several times in the Old Testament. One example is Psalm 22, which describes death on the cross 700 years before the Romans started crucifixions. Another clear example is Isaiah 53, a very sobering chapter to read! Here is some of it:

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. All we

like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way; And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all . . . Because He poured out His soul unto death, And was numbered with the transgressors, And He bore the sin of many, And made intercession for the transgressors. Isaiah 53:5-6, 12

The New Testament shows Jesus fulfilled this prophecy. Here are some texts showing He died in our place:

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:8

For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 Corinthians 5:21

. . . who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works. Titus 2:14

. . .so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. Hebrews 9:28

. . . who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness -- by whose stripes you were healed. 1 Peter 2:24

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, 1 Peter 3:18

The First Resurrection

If we accept this free gift as payment for our sins, we have eternal life right now (1 John 5:11-13). This is different from immortality. We are mortal, perishable, and corruptible today. Believers will be changed into immortal, imperishable and incorruptible beings at the first resurrection. This is found in 1 Corinthians 15:51-55:

Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed -- in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"

This passage only talks about believers - those who are asleep and those who are still alive (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17). Although God kept Adam and Eve from the tree of life after they sinned (Genesis 3:24), believers will have access to it again (Revelation 22:14). After judgment, believers will reign with the Lord forever and ever (Revelation 22:5). *Amazing Grace* is a famous Christian song, and one of the verses says:

*When we've been there ten thousand years,
Bright shining as the sun,
We've no less days to sing God's praise,
Than when we'd first begun.*

The Second Resurrection

Some traditionalists insist believers and nonbelievers are raised immortal at the same time. This is not the case, unless we throw away Revelation 20. Although Revelation has a lot of figurative language, John plainly speaks about two resurrections.

Revelation 20:4 talks about martyrs that live and reign with Christ for 1,000 years. John twice calls this the *first* resurrection (verses 5-6). It would not be called the *first* resurrection unless there is more than one. Verse 5 says the rest of the dead did not live again until the 1,000 years were over, showing nonbelievers are resurrected after believers.

Another disagreement among Bible scholars is the millennium. Some could argue that it is not a literal 1,000 years, since Peter says a thousand years is like a day (2 Peter 3:8). This does not change the fact that there are two resurrections.

Although Daniel 12:2, John 5:28-29 and Acts 24:15 do not mention this gap between the resurrections, they all mention believers before nonbelievers. Gabriel says some rise to everlasting life, then says some to shame and everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2). Similarly, Jesus mentions the resurrection of life, then talks about the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28-29). Paul also says the just before he says the unjust (Acts 24:15).

Nonbelievers Remain Mortal

While Paul says believers will be changed from mortal to immortal at the first resurrection, Scripture never says the unfaithful will be immortal. Traditionalists insist, however, that nonbelievers will be immortal. One reason is 1 Corinthians 15:22, which says, "all shall be made alive." Traditionalists insist this chapter concerns both believers and nonbelievers, so it proves all will be raised immortal.

Traditionalists and conditionalists both agree that the biggest error of universalism is improper interpretation of words like *everyone* or *all*. These words can refer to a select group of people. Universalists, however, reference passages with these words to claim all will be saved (e.g. Romans 5:18, 1 Timothy 2:4, Titus 2:11). Passages used to support universalism, in many cases, only refer to believers.

Traditionalists eagerly point this out when responding to universalism, then make the same error when they reference 1 Corinthians 15:22. The next verse says, "But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming." Clearly, *all* only includes "those who are Christ's." If traditionalists believe 1 Corinthians 15:22-23 proves everyone will be immortal, they are espousing universalism by saying all are Christ's.

Jesus tells us that believers rise to the resurrection of life, while nonbelievers rise to the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28-29). This clearly shows that the resurrections will be different, so we cannot assume all resurrections result in immortality.

The Bible plainly shows this. Several people died and were brought back to life. Since they later died again, they were still mortal. Just as these people remained mortal after their resurrections, Scripture reveals that the unfaithful will remain mortal after their resurrections.

Paul tells us that believers will be changed to immortal (1 Corinthians 15:51-56). John reiterates this when he says the second death has no power over those who take part in the first resurrection (Revelation 20:6). Since believers will be immortal, they cannot die.

While the faithful cannot be harmed by the second death (Revelation 20:6), the unfaithful die the second death (Revelation 20:14-15). Since they die the second death, they are still mortal after the resurrection. This leads us to one inescapable conclusion: immortality is a conditional gift that God only grants to believers.

Careful Use of Revelation

In the previous chapter, I rejected a literal interpretation of the vision of souls under the altar in Revelation 6:9-11. Many have commented on my reliance on Revelation 20 above is similar.

There is a difference between the visions. In Revelation 6, each time a seal is opened there is a vision which symbolizes something else. When the first four seals are opened, John sees a different colored horse. The horse is not the focus of the vision; the horse represents future events. The souls under the altar represent persecution of believers.

The vision in Revelation 20 is not a horse that representing future world events, nor is it souls representing future persecution. The passage is about people facing judgment. These people facing judgment do not symbolize anything; these people are facing judgment. It should be self-evident that this passage is literal.

Apples and Oranges

Traditionalists do not offer any Scriptural response to the clear evidence that nonbelievers remain mortal after the resurrection. Instead, they force the Word of God to conform to their assumption that nonbelievers will be immortal. Traditionalists commonly reference phrases meant for believers and apply the same meaning when these phrases talk about nonbelievers.

The meanings of many words depend on the nature of the subject. Since immortals and mortals have different natures, traditionalists compare apples to oranges. We will discuss this in Chapter Eleven.

Other Scriptures Against Eternal Existence

Several more passages show only believers continue throughout eternity. Psalm 103:14-18, for example, says only the faithful will be everlasting:

For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. For the wind passes over it, and it is gone, And its place remembers it no more. But the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, And His righteousness to children's

children, To such as keep His covenant, And to those who remember His commandments to do them.

This says God's mercy keeps His followers from being like a flower that is gone and forgotten. Only those who fear God, keep His covenant, and follow His commandments, will continue from everlasting to everlasting. His mercy is conditional.

John reiterates this message in his first epistle. 1 John 2:17 says, "And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever." Another supporting passage is the famous Scripture about who has eternal life:

And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. 1 John 5:11-12

Those who do not have the Son do not have an unpleasant eternal life; they do not have eternal life at all. While traditionalists insist John talks about quality of life rather than duration, this passage is very misleading if nonbelievers have an eternal existence. God would not inspire such a misleading passage without clarification somewhere else in the Bible. Nonbelievers will pay the death penalty for their sins.

The Wages of Sin

The best place to start our analysis of the penalty for sin is with Jesus. So far, He is the only one to pay this penalty. The penalty obviously involves suffering, and we cannot dispute the fact that He suffered on the cross.

Another result of sin is separation from God (Isaiah 59:2). Christ was separated from the Father when He took on our sins. He even cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46, Mark 15:34, Psalm 22:1)

While the suffering and separation were horrible, they ended at death. The penalty that Jesus paid was temporary suffering and separation, followed by death. We would expect the same penalty for the unfaithful.

Some have even argued that Jesus, being God, was able to endure as much suffering during the crucifixion as nonbelievers will in eternity. This has no Scriptural support; it is only an attempt to fit their assumption.

In another attempt to refute conditionalism, proponents of everlasting torment point out that Jesus was not annihilated when He died on the cross. This does not support their case in any way because Jesus is no longer suffering. Since Jesus is now in heaven, this makes a better argument for universalism.

The case for universalism does not hold up because Jesus has a different nature than nonbelievers. As shown earlier, nonbelievers remain mortal when they are resurrected. Unlike Jesus, they will not rise again after they die the second death.

We will examine the judgment of nonbelievers in more detail in the next two chapters.

9. DESTRUCTION, RUIN AND ANNIHILATION

The Unfaithful Suffer

Another harmful doctrine among some conditionalists is the belief that death is instant. Since traditionalists can easily show some suffering, many claim they refute our whole case. This also keeps people from honestly examining conditionalism.

A more important reason this belief is harmful is because some do not take the threat seriously. Hell is a horrible fate, so we must warn nonbelievers about it. Many writers in the Bible make it clear that nonbelievers will suffer. Jesus left no doubt that the unjust would suffer, so we will examine what He says about torment for those who turn away.

More Profitable that One of Your Members Perish than Your Whole Body

"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell." Matthew 5:29-30

Jesus plainly says hell will be worse than losing an eye or a hand. He also says it is better to be crippled in this life and spend eternity in heaven than to miss out on heaven. While this shows the seriousness of judgment, it does not prove everlasting torment. A more important Scripture is Mark 9:43-48, which we analyze in the next chapter.

Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Jesus also warns many times about weeping and gnashing of teeth. Although this suggests nonbelievers will suffer, Jesus never says weeping and gnashing of teeth last throughout eternity, nor does anyone else. In fact, Psalm 112:10 says, "He will gnash his teeth and melt away . . ."

Better if He Had Not Been Born (Matthew 26:24)

Jesus said this when Judas was about to betray Him. This shows Judas will stand before God at the judgment. Since even temporary torment is worse than never being born, this does not prove everlasting torment.

Degrees of Punishment

Some passages show different levels of punishment. For example, Jesus says the day of judgment will be more tolerable for some than for others (Matthew 11:21-24).

Another example is Luke 12:47-48, where Jesus says, "And that servant who knew his master's will, and did not prepare himself or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few."

Traditionalists use passages like Luke 12:47-48 to support everlasting torment. If their belief is correct, both servants in Luke 12:47-48 should be beaten endlessly. The words *many* and *few* are not specific, though both are limited. The important message is that the punishment is worse for some than for others. While they all suffer, their fate is death.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Jesus already paid the penalty for those who accept His free gift. If this punishment is endless torment, then Jesus should still be in torment. While sinners only pay the penalty for their own sins (Ezekiel 18:20), Jesus paid the penalty for many, and His suffering ended.

Satan should get the worst penalty. Ezekiel 28:13-19 foretells the end of him. Although this passage addresses Tyre, it also refers to Satan. He was the serpent in Eden that tempted Eve (verse 13). (Compare Genesis 3 to Revelation 20:2.)

Ezekiel 28:17-19 says, "Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom . . . Therefore I brought fire from your midst; It devoured you, And I turned you to ashes upon the earth . . . you have become a horror, And shall be no more forever." Since Satan will be wiped out of existence, his followers will not receive worse punishment. We will now examine the final state for nonbelievers.

They will Perish

The Bible repeatedly says nonbelievers will perish. According to 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, this means to die without hope of resurrection. This is the fate of nonbelievers who die the second death, since there will not be a resurrection from the second death. Some warnings about perishing also say they die like beasts:

Nevertheless man, though in honor, does not remain; he is like the beasts that perish . . . A man who is in honor, yet does not understand, Is like the beasts that perish.
Psalm 49:12, 20

But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption . . . 2
Peter 2:12

Some would say this is only talking about the first death for nonbelievers. This does not make sense because many Christian martyrs die horrible deaths. In these cases, their death is worse than the death of nonbelievers.

The crucial difference between humans dying and beasts dying is that humans will live again. The above warnings cannot refer to the first death, since everyone will be resurrected. When God warns that nonbelievers will perish like beasts, this must refer to the judgment. The most logical interpretation is that consciousness ends when sinners die the second death, the same way consciousness ends for beasts.

Consumed, Devoured and Burned Up

The Bible uses many terms to express the utter destruction of the wicked. When we take the Bible literally, it does not imply everlasting consciousness. Here are a few examples of the many Scriptures supporting an end of existence:

May sinners be consumed from the earth, And the wicked be no more. Psalm 104:35

Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. Psalm 73:18-19

For behold, the day is coming, Burning like an oven, And all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up . . . That will leave them neither root nor branch. Malachi 4:1

But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men . . . But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. 2 Peter 3:7, 10

But the whole land shall be devoured By the fire of His jealousy, For he will make a speedy riddance Of all those who dwell in the land. Zephaniah 1:18

Destroyed and Forgotten

As we saw above, Scriptures show the unrepentant will pass away. The Bible also says they will be forgotten:

You have rebuked the nations, You have destroyed the wicked; You have blotted out their name forever and ever. O enemy, destructions are finished forever! And you have destroyed cities; even their memory has perished. But the Lord shall endure forever; . . . Psalm 9:5-7

Because the former troubles are forgotten, And because they are hidden from My eyes. For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. Isaiah 65:16-17

They are dead, they will not live; They are deceased, they will not rise. Therefore You have punished and destroyed them, And made all their memory to perish. Isaiah 26:14

Yes, they shall drink, and swallow, And they shall be as though they had never been. Obadiah 16

And He will destroy on this mountain The surface of the covered cast over all people, And the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever, And the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces; The rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; For the Lord has spoken. Isaiah 25:7-8

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea . . . And God will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away . . . Behold, I make all things new. Revelation 21:1, 4, 5

According to 1 Corinthians 15:26, the last enemy to be destroyed is death. Isaiah 25:8 and Revelation 21:4 also say there will be no more death. If nonbelievers were still conscious and spiritually dead, there would still be death. Since the lake of fire is the second death (Revelation 20:14), then the lake of fire will no longer exist, nor will anyone who is thrown into it. If there is no more death, then the dead are no more.

There will also be an end to sin (Daniel 9:24). One of the commandments is not to take the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7), and people blaspheme God when they suffer wrath (Revelation 16:9, 11, 21). If people suffer throughout eternity, they will continue to blaspheme God and there will be no end to sin, contradicting Daniel 9:24. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), and there will be no more death.

Revelation 21:4 also says there will be no more sorrow, or crying, or pain. If nonbelievers were still alive in the lake of fire, there would be sorrow, crying, and pain. While many say this verse only refers to believers, they have family and friends who would suffer, and believers could not be happy while their loved ones continue to suffer.

Extinct or Still Suffering?

The Bible repeatedly says the righteous will forget about the unrighteous. According to traditionalists, this means believers will be happy because they will be unaware that nonbelievers are still suffering. The Bible also says God will reveal everything to us (Matthew 10:26, Luke 12:2, 1 Corinthians 4:5, etc.).

These passages strongly suggest they will be no more:

For evildoers shall be cut off; But those who wait on the Lord, They shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed you look carefully for his place, But it shall be no more . . . But the wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the Lord, Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away . . . When the wicked are cut off you shall see it. I have seen the wicked in great power, And spreading himself like a native green tree. Yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more; Indeed I sought him, but he could not be found . . . But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; The future of the wicked shall be cut off. Psalm 37:9-10, 20, 34-36, 38

Behold, all those who were incensed against you Shall be ashamed and disgraced; They shall be as nothing, And those who strive with you shall perish. You shall seek

them and not find them -- Those who contend with you. Those who war against you Shall be as nothing, As a nonexistent thing. Isaiah 41:11-12

While some scholars insist nonbelievers will be suffering somewhere unknown to the faithful, this is not a reasonable interpretation of Psalm 37. Verse 10 says the wicked shall be no more, then says you will look carefully for his place, then says his place shall be no more. Verse 36 says he passed away and was no more, then says I sought him and he could not be found; verse 38 says they are destroyed together and their future will be cut off.

Psalm 37 does not say believers already forgot about them; it says the faithful will look for them, yet not find them. Statements saying they could not be found are surrounded by statements that they will be no more. The reason they cannot be found is because they no longer exist.

Isaiah 41:11-12 follows the same pattern. Verse 11 says they shall be as nothing; verse 12 says you will seek them and not find them, then says they shall be as nothing and as a nonexistent thing. We can only conclude that these passages mean total extinction.

The Bible Compared to Other Writings

While numerous passages imply the dead will cease to exist, traditionalists do not agree. They claim words like *destruction* meant everlasting torment to the culture, tradition, and historical setting of the time they were written.

It is easy to show that traditionalists are very selective about which Bible verses they choose to discuss, since Bibles are available. On the other hand, it takes more effort to show how selective they are about other ancient writings. Even this is easier today, since more writings are available to the public.

One example is the Dead Sea Scrolls, written in Hebrew and Aramaic by the Essenes. They show many did not believe in everlasting torment. This passage clearly distinguishes between torment and destruction:

. . . And all the ages of their generations they shall spend in bitter weeping and harsh evils in the abysses of darkness until their destruction, without there being a remnant or a survivor among them. 1QS 4.13-14

If *destruction* and *bitter weeping* are the same, then this passage does not make sense. The word *until* implies there will be a change. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls believed destruction meant an end to bitter weeping. They believed the unfaithful would cease to exist, just as the Old Testament says so many times and so many different ways.

This also holds when we compare the New Testament to other Greek writings. Evangelical author Edward Fudge wrote a compelling case for conditional immortality. He cites two well-known books published over 100 years ago showing strong arguments for conditional immortality.¹

They compare the New Testament to earlier well-known Greek writings. One example was Plato's *Phaedo*, which spoke of the death of Socrates. Socrates welcomed death because he believed his immortal soul would be released from the imprisonment of his body.

Socrates' friend, Cebes, disagreed and said the soul would no longer exist after death. When we examine Paul's writings, we see that he uses the same Greek words to describe the second death that Cebes uses to describe physical death.

Plato stated many times that everyone has an immortal soul. He believed some souls would suffer endlessly because they possess immortality and are indestructible. None of the words he uses to describe the soul are in the New Testament to describe the present or future condition of the lost.

Plato and the Bible say the exact opposite things. Plato says the soul would never perish, die or be destroyed; Paul uses the same Greek words to describe the destiny of those who resist God. Plato says the soul [*psuche*] cannot see death [*thanatos*]; James 5:19-20 says when we turn a sinner from error, we save a soul [*psuche*] from death [*thanatos*].

Although the New Testament contradicts traditionalism, it agrees with those who did not believe in any conscious life after death. The Sadducees were Jews with this belief, while the Epicureans were Greeks with the same belief. The Sadducees and the Epicureans use the same Greek words to describe the first death that the New Testament uses to describe the second death.

The language of the New Testament clearly disagrees with the philosophers who believe the soul is always conscious (Socrates and Plato), and agrees with those who believe consciousness ends at death (Cebes, the Sadducees, and the Epicureans). This powerful correlation strongly supports conditionalism. The fact that traditionalists have never responded to these arguments only strengthens the case.

Arguments Against Annihilation

According to laws of science, *annihilation* is impossible. Things do not disintegrate; they only change form. One example is something burning up. Rather than disappear, it changes to ashes, heat and smoke. Traditionalists claim words like *destroy* and *perish* never mean annihilation in the strict sense of the word.

This is either a clever deception, or further proof that they do not understand conditionalism. They are correct when they say the Bible does not support annihilation; they are wrong to imply that Scripture does not support conditional immortality. Conditionalism is not the belief that physical remains disintegrate; it is the belief that consciousness will end for the unfaithful. *Extinction* is a better word than *annihilation*.

When something burns up, are the remaining ashes in conscious torment? Broken vessels (Psalm 31:12), ruined wineskins (Matthew 9:17), moth-eaten cloth (Luke 12:33), and spoiled meat (John 6:27) are not in conscious torment, yet traditionalists claim nonbelievers are conscious throughout eternity because these materials are not annihilated.

A better example is a beast dying. Using the logic of traditionalists, we would conclude that the beast is still conscious because the physical body remains. Unless traditionalists believe this, they must acknowledge that warnings about nonbelievers perishing like beasts (Psalm 49:12, 20; 2 Peter 2:12) support conditionalism.

The language in the Bible for utter destruction is extensive. R. F. Weymouth, Greek scholar and translator of the New Testament, clearly expresses how irrational the traditional viewpoint is:

My mind fails to conceive a grosser misinterpretation of language than when the five or six strongest words which the Greek tongue possesses, signifying 'destroy', or 'destruction', are explained to mean maintaining an everlasting but wretched existence. To translate black as white is nothing to this.

In the next chapter, we discuss how God will destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28).

Notes:

¹ Edward Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes*, 1994, p. 166-167. He refers to two books: Edward White, *Life in Christ* (1878); and Henry Constable, *Duration and Nature of Future Punishment* (1886).

10. HELL IN THE BIBLE

Words Translated Hell in the Bible

The Hebrew word *Sheol* and the Greek word *Hades* are sometimes translated *hell*. We examined them at length in Part Two. They do not tell us anything about the final state of nonbelievers, since they only concern the intermediate state.

Another Greek word, *Tartaroo*, is a verb that means to send to *Tartaros*. *Tartaroo* only appears once in 2 Peter 2:4, where it says angels are delivered to chains of darkness reserved for judgment. Humans go to Sheol/Hades and angels go to Tartaros.

Traditionalists get a lot of information about Tartaros from uninspired writings, though Biblical evidence is very limited. Sheol and Hades tell us nothing about the final state for nonbelievers; Tartaros tells us even less since it talks about angels.

Geena is the only word for hell that talks about nonbelievers at judgment. Jesus uses this word several times and James uses it once. In Mark 9:43-48, Jesus uses the word *Geena* and says, "Where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." This phrase also appears in Isaiah 66:24. We will now inspect these passages.

Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:43-48

And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. Isaiah 66:24

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire--where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" Mark 9:43-48

When Scriptures support conditionalism, traditionalists insist the Bible passages only talk about the body. They make the opposite mistake with the above Scriptures.

Isaiah talks about the corpses of men, indicating dead bodies. Mark also talks about your hand (v. 43), your foot (v. 45) and your eye (v. 47). Matthew 5:29-30, similar to Mark 9:43-48, warns about your *whole body* being cast into hell. Nevertheless, traditionalists still insist this is talking about a soul that cannot die.

Their Worm does not Die

Some misquote this phrase by saying their worm *never* dies, when it really says their worm *does not* die. Although traditionalists try to interpret this passage symbolically, it is literal. Worms eat bodies:

The worm should feed sweetly on him; Job 24:20

Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, And the sound of your stringed instruments; The maggot is spread under you, and worms cover you. Isaiah 14:11

For the moth will eat them up like a garment, And the worm will eat them like wool; Isaiah 51:8

. . . And he was eaten by worms and died. Acts 12:23

The Bible warns about destruction so devastating there would not even be anyone to bury the dead. They will rot in the streets. Here is an example:

I will make Jerusalem a heap of jackals. I will make the cities of Judah desolate, without an inhabitant . . . Even the carcasses of men shall fall as refuse on the open field, Like cuttings after the harvester, And no one shall gather them. Jeremiah 9:11, 22

"Their worm does not die" means worms will continue eating their bodies until nothing remains.

The Fire is not Quenched

While this expression appears in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:43-48, John the Baptist also warns about an unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12, Luke 3:17). Traditionalists believe this fire will never go out. The Biblical evidence, however, supports utter extinction.

To quench a fire means to put it out before it burns everything up. An unquenchable fire cannot be put out until only ashes remain. Once it runs out of fuel, it dies. Here is a Biblical example:

"But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched."
Jeremiah 17:27

Then they burned the house of God, broke down the wall of Jerusalem, burned all its palaces with fire, and destroyed all its precious possessions. . . to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed her Sabbaths. 2
Chronicles 36:19, 21

The fire was not quenched because it turned Jerusalem to ashes before it stopped burning. After it went out, Jerusalem was later rebuilt.

Saying the fire will not be quenched shows how powerful this fire will be. It is very difficult to burn flesh, so people must add fuel to keep the fire going. Many areas in the world are littered with half burned bodies of animals because people could not keep the fire burning long enough.

This fire will burn nonbelievers to ashes (2 Peter 2:6, Ezekiel 28:17-19). If they continue burning, they would be called embers or burning coals, not ashes. Isaiah 47:14 says, "It shall not be a coal to be warmed by, Nor a fire to sit before!"

Malachi 4:3 also says they will be ashes under the soles of your feet. If they were still hot, we would not touch them with our feet. The Bible calls the unfaithful stubble (Malachi 4:1), trees (Matthew 3:10), chaff (Matthew 3:12), tares (Matthew 13:40), and other matter that burns up quickly.

Gehenna

Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, near Jerusalem. This valley was a massive garbage dump with the dead bodies of humans and animals. God calls it the Valley of Slaughter (Jeremiah 7:31-8:3, 19:1-13). Maggots and worms covered the dead bodies and the smell was so bad they started a fire to burn the carcasses.

These events explain the phrase, "Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:43-48. All flesh either rotted (their worm does not die), or burned up (the fire is not quenched). Nothing remained of their original bodies.

As we saw in the previous chapter, believers will forget about the unfaithful. Isaiah 66:24 says believers will look upon their corpses, so this cannot be the final state. How can the faithful forget about nonbelievers while still looking at them? The only logical explanation is that believers will watch them waste away, then forget about them.

Matthew 10:28 Revisited

Our examination of hell in the Bible sheds new light on this critical passage. Since Jesus says God can destroy both body and soul in hell, the debate hinges on the meaning of the words *destroy* and *hell*.

The Greek word translated *hell* in this passage is *Geena*, so it concerns the final state. Since Jesus does not use the word *Hades*, He is not talking about the intermediate state.

Although traditionalists claim *destroy* only means a ruined condition, this does not fit Matthew 10:28. In *Geena*, every cell of the body was decomposed, digested by worms, or burned up in fire. We would have to violate laws of science to destroy the body any more completely!

Since Jesus warns that God can destroy both soul and body in *Geena*, God will destroy the soul as completely as the body. The Valley of Hinnom was a graphic example of complete destruction. If Jesus wants to warn about endless misery, He would tell us to fear Him who is able to *preserve* the soul in hell.

The Lake of Fire

Although the lake of fire is not translated *hell* in the Bible, it is similar to the Greek word *Geena*. The lake of fire appears five times in the Bible, all in Revelation. Each reference talks about who will be in it. When Christ returns, the beast and false prophet go into it (19:20). After the millennium, Satan goes into it (20:10), followed by death and Hades (20:14), then nonbelievers (20:15). Revelation 21:8 reiterates the fact that nonbelievers go into it.

Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 refer to the lake of fire as the second death, and this death is the wages of sin (Romans 6:23). References to the lake of fire talk about burning fire and brimstone. The crucial question is whether or not this burning continues throughout eternity. We will now examine two common arguments for the traditional viewpoint.

Beast and False Prophet in the Lake of Fire 1,000 Years

The beast and false prophet are cast into the lake of fire before the millennium (Revelation 19:20). Satan is cast into the lake of fire after the millennium and the beast and false prophet are still there (Revelation 20:10). Many scholars use these verses to show that consciousness in the lake of fire is eternal, since it continues for 1,000 years.

This first beast mentioned in Revelation 13 is more than an individual, since it has seven heads and ten horns (Revelation 13:1). The seven heads represent seven hills and seven empires, while the ten horns represent ten kings (Revelation 17:9-12). This beast cannot be just an individual. It is a religious and political system.

Daniel 7 also talks about this beast with ten horns. In verse 8, he talks about a little horn coming up in the midst of the ten horns, which has eyes and a mouth of a man. If this horn alone were cast into the lake of fire, it would represent an individual. The entire beast is thrown into the fire, not just this little horn.

When Christ returns, the beast and false prophet are thrown into the fire. One thousand years later, Satan deceives the nations to attack and God destroys them (Revelation 20:7-9). The beast and the false prophet are not mentioned among these nations because they are already destroyed.

Just as the beast and false prophet are not individuals, death and Hades are not individuals, yet they are thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14). Death is the

last enemy to be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:26), and death is thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), which is the second death (Revelation 20:14, 21:8). Yet there will be no more death (Revelation 21:4). This confusing language is filled with symbolism, and we must be careful not to rely too much on figurative language.

Revelation 21:8

Traditionalists claim this last reference to the lake of fire proves it is everlasting. John talks about the new heaven and new earth in Revelation 21:1-2, then talks about nonbelievers in the lake of fire in verse 8. Assuming this is all chronological, traditionalists conclude nonbelievers will still be in the lake of fire after we have the new heaven and new earth. This implies there is no end for nonbelievers.

While all Scripture is inspired by God, verse and chapter breaks are not. The first five verses of Revelation 21 should be in Revelation 20, since this continues the vision in the same verb tenses. There is the judgment, then everything is made new and the old has passed away. This chapter break diminishes the clear support for conditionalism, since the lake of fire is the second death (20:14) and there will be no more death (21:4).

A more logical chapter break is Revelation 21:6. Verb tenses change because this is a *reiteration*, instead of a *continuation*. Verse 6 reaffirms Christ, while verse 7 talks about future rewards and verse 8 talks about future punishments. Verses 7-8 are similar to many statements offering us the choice between life and death (e.g. Romans 6:23, John 3:16).

We covered some arguments for the traditional view in this chapter, and we will address the main ones in the next chapter.

11. FOREVER AND EVERLASTING

The strongest arguments for everlasting torment are Scriptures with the words *forever* or *everlasting*. While many assume these words always mean throughout eternity, several examples in the Bible show they can mean a limited time. In other cases, only the *effect* is everlasting.

Owlam in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word *owlam* is usually translated *forever* or *everlasting* in the Old Testament. Since humans are mortal, this only means until death. Here are some examples:

"If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years; and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing . . . But if the servant plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go free,' then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever. Exodus 21:2, 5-6. See also Deuteronomy 15:17

". . . then I will take him, that he may appear before the Lord and remain there forever . . . Therefore I also have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the Lord." 1 Samuel 1:22, 28

Another example is Jonah. While in the belly of the big fish, he said, "The earth with its bars closed behind me forever." (Jonah 2:6) He thought he was going to die inside the fish. While this was forever to him, it was only three days.

Shame and Everlasting Contempt (Daniel 12:2)

Gabriel tells Daniel that some will awaken to shame and everlasting contempt. Traditionalists acknowledge that *owlam* (everlasting) can be temporary, yet they insist it means throughout eternity when it concerns the fate of nonbelievers after the resurrection. Robert Morey quotes a summary of *owlam*, in Girdlestone's *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (p. 317). This clearly expresses the traditionalist's position:

*"Eternity is endlessness; and this idea is only qualified by the nature of the objects to which it is applied . . . When the word is applied to man's future destiny after the resurrection, we naturally give it the sense of endlessness without limitation."*¹

The first part of Girdlestone's quote is correct; in Daniel 12:2, the duration is qualified by the nature of nonbelievers. The Hebrew word for *contempt* in Daniel 12:2 also appears as *abhorrence* in Isaiah 66:24. This expresses how the faithful will look at nonbelievers. Clearly, the unfaithful will sense the contempt of believers for the rest of their existence.

The last part of Girdlestone's quote, however, rests on the traditionalist's assumption that nonbelievers will be immortal after the resurrection. This contradicts Scripture.

Aion and Aionios in the New Testament

When the New Testament says *forever*, it is usually the Greek word *aion*. This is misleading because *aion* means an age. We get the word *eon* from this Greek word. This time on earth is an age, and many passages referring to this time use the word *aion*. For example, *aion* is translated *age* or *world* in these passages:

"So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just . . ." Matthew 13:49

"And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Romans 12:2

These verses cannot mean throughout eternity, since this world will pass away (Matthew 24:35, Mark 13:31, Luke 21:33, 2 Peter 3:10).

The Greek word *aionios* is a form of *aion* and is usually translated *eternal* or *everlasting*. This is also misleading because it can be temporary. A literal translation of *aionios* is *age-lasting*. Robert Morey even admits that *aion* and *aionios* can be of indefinite duration.² We will now examine New Testament passages about judgment using the word *aionios*.

Eternal condemnation (Mark 3:29)

Some translations of Mark 3:29 say eternal sin or eternal damnation. In this passage, Jesus talks about sins that will never be forgiven (Mark 3:28). A similar passage is Matthew 12:31-32.

Although believers sin, God forgives them. In fact, God promises to blot our sins out and not remember them anymore (Isaiah 43:25, Hebrews 8:12). This shows that sins of believers are not eternal. An eternal sin is a sin that will never be forgiven.

Mark 3:29 makes a good argument against universalism, since nonbelievers cannot enter heaven with unforgiven sins. Everlasting torment is certainly a possible reading of this verse. It is not the only interpretation though, since extinction also fits.

Everlasting Fire

Jesus twice warns that those who do not follow Him will go into everlasting fire (Matthew 18:8, 25:41). These same Greek words in Matthew's Gospel are also in Jude 7, which says, " . . . as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."

That fire is not still burning; only the *effect* is everlasting. Jude also says they were an example, and they are totally destroyed.

Traditionalists disagree. They claim it serves as a sample of an endless fire. While the example is temporary, traditionalists insist the fire of judgment will never go out.

Their interpretation could stand if we ignore 2 Peter 2:6. This parallel passage says, " . . . and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemning them to destruction, making them an example to those who would live ungodly." This example says all that remains is ashes.

Conditionalists believe the unfaithful will suffer temporarily, then cease to exist. Warnings about Sodom and Gomorrah plainly show this. First, they serve as an example by suffering in fire (Jude 7). The fact that they were reduced to ashes and the fire went out also serves as an example (2 Peter 2:6). This is undeniable support for conditionalism.

While some traditionalists respond to Jude 7, they are at a loss to explain 2 Peter 2:6. Most do not respond at all. John Blanchard (*Whatever Happened to Hell?*, 1995), for example, references Jude 7 three times as the punishment of eternal fire (p. 140, 149, 243). He never addresses the fact that the fire is not still burning.

Blanchard only references 2 Peter 2:6 in the last paragraph of his section, *Was Peter a Universalist?* This same paragraph also contains his only reference to 2 Peter 2:12, which warns that the unjust will utterly perish like brute beasts. Blanchard concludes, "If that is the language of a universalist, words are meaningless." (p. 196) Words are also meaningless if that is the language of a traditionalist.

Robert Morey (*Death and the Afterlife*, 1984), like Blanchard, only mentions 2 Peter 2:6 in his chapter about Universalism (p. 254). Regarding Jude 7, Morey says they serve as a warning of everlasting fire (p. 140-141). If that is the case, what kind of warning is turning them into ashes?

Robert Peterson also says Jude 7 is a warning of everlasting fire in *Hell on Trial* (1994, p.83-85). He never addresses 2 Peter 2:6 in this book. In a dialogue with Edward Fudge (*Two Views of Hell*, 2000), he says, "it is better to take Peter's words as more generally predicting the downfall of the wicked than to understand them as foretelling their precise fate - reduction to ashes." (p. 156) Fudge responds, "If Peter could hear the conversation, he would probably scratch his head and wonder how he could have possibly written more plainly." (p. 200)

Everlasting Punishment

Some traditionalists consider Matthew 25:46 their strongest argument. Everlasting punishment is a completed act. Jesus does not say eternally punishing; He says everlasting punishment. Everlasting torment is certainly one *possible* interpretation, though not the *only* interpretation.

When someone misses out on the joy of heaven, this is punishment. Since the joy of heaven is everlasting, then missing out on it is everlasting punishment, whether they are conscious or not. Taking everlasting life from someone is everlasting punishment. We will say much more about Matthew 25:46 later in this chapter.

Paul's Warning of Everlasting Destruction

... in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power
2 Thessalonians 1:8-9

Everlasting destruction, like everlasting punishment, is a completed act. While the effect is everlasting, it is not an everlasting act. If the destruction were an endless process, Paul would say eternally destroying, not everlasting destruction.

The expression, "from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" could be interpreted two different ways. One meaning is that the destruction comes from the Lord; God is the source of this destructive power.

Another interpretation of this passage is that they are away from the Lord. Traditionalists prefer the second meaning, since it implies continued consciousness. Even this does not prove their case. Without God's power they cannot live, since God's power sustains everything (Colossians 1:17, Hebrews 1:3). Away from His power, nonbelievers cannot continue. Since God is everywhere, nonexistence is implied.

Is Everlasting Redundant?

A common response from traditionalists is that the word *everlasting* is redundant. If *destruction* and *punishment* mean extinction, then *everlasting* is unnecessary in phrases like 'everlasting destruction' and 'everlasting punishment.'

Destruction and punishment are not always everlasting. God destroyed the world at the time of Noah. This punishment was temporary destruction, since He will later resurrect them. The *duration* of this punishment was from the day of the flood until the second resurrection, which is temporary. Since they will be raised from the dead, we cannot call their destruction 'everlasting punishment.'

When nonbelievers rise to face judgment, their punishment will be destruction and they will never rise again. This makes their punishment everlasting, which distinguishes final judgment from temporary destruction. Just as the everlasting fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7) ended when it accomplished its mission, everlasting punishment will end when it accomplishes its mission. It is only endless in effect.

Hebrews also uses *aionios* for acts that are only eternal in effect. Two examples are eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:9) and eternal redemption (Hebrews 9:12), which refer to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. These verses do not say Jesus is still hanging on the cross.

Another example is eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:2). The day of judgment will have eternal consequences. Judgment day, however, does not continue throughout eternity.

Same Words and Phrases for Believers and Nonbelievers

When speaking about final destinies, the same phrases used to describe the fate of believers are sometimes used to describe the fate of nonbelievers. Traditionalists commonly say that if we cannot be certain of eternal existence in hell, then we cannot be certain of eternal existence in heaven.

Their favorite example is Matthew 25:46, where Jesus mentions both everlasting punishment for nonbelievers and eternal life for believers. The Greek word *aionios* is used for both. Since eternal life means eternal consciousness, many insist everlasting punishment also means everlasting consciousness.

Matthew 25:31-46, which traditionalists reference so frequently, shows differences between the two groups. One difference is that believers are called sheep that go to the right, while nonbelievers are called goats that go to the left (v. 32-33). Another difference is that believers inherit the kingdom (v. 34) while nonbelievers are cast out (v. 41).

In spite of the obvious differences, traditionalists tie everything together because one word (*aionios*) is used for both groups. This is the best example of their fundamental error of ignoring the different natures of believers and nonbelievers after the resurrection. We can be certain believers will be alive throughout eternity because they will be immortal. We also know that nonbelievers will never be immortal, so we cannot insist they will be conscious throughout eternity.

Jesus contrasts the eternal destinies of the righteous and the unrighteous. While the righteous and unrighteous are both changed, these processes do not continue throughout eternity. According to 1 Corinthians 15:51-55, believers are changed from mortal to immortal "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (v. 52). Changing mortals into immortal beings and destroying the unfaithful are both temporary acts with everlasting results.

Matthew 25:46 is not the Only Verse in the Bible

Edward Fudge (*The Fire that Consumes*) goes through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and examines the major passages about final judgment. His objective approach gives proper attention to the evidence. He discusses all the important passages without giving undue emphasis to any. He shows how the Bible states over and over that the wicked will pass away, and passages against this view are vague and scarce.

Proponents of other views cannot use this method because it exposes their weaknesses. Since few Scriptures support everlasting torment, traditionalists continually overstate these rare passages.

My biggest surprise when I began researching this subject was that the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ only appears once in the entire Bible (Matthew 25:46). Considering the enormous emphasis scholars give this phrase, I was certain I would find it numerous times.

John Blanchard (*Whatever Happened to Hell?*, 1995) mentions a form of this phrase (‘everlasting punishment’, ‘eternal punishment’, or ‘endless punishment’) on pages 44, 138, 149, 152, 164, 168, 176, 195, 207, 210, 211, 214, 219, 220, 224, 225 (four times), 226, 231, 232, 246, and 270. Robert Morey (*Death and the Afterlife*, 1984) references Matthew 25:46 alone, or as part of the larger passage, on 13 different pages. Robert Peterson (*Hell on Trial*, 1995) also references Matthew 25:46 on 16 different pages.

This is not a balanced approach, since it is not the only verse in the Bible. Repeated emphasis on Matthew 25:46 is redundant when presenting the case for everlasting torment. It is absurd when responding to the case for conditionalism. Yet Peterson does this.

In the recent book, *Two Views of Hell* (2000), Peterson dialogues with Edward Fudge. Each presents their case, while the other responds. On pages 83-113, Peterson is supposed to respond to Fudge’s case. Instead, he spends more time responding to Fudge’s response to his belief. The focus remains on his favorite proof-texts, like Matthew 25:46. How is this a *response to conditionalism*? Amazingly, Peterson accuses Fudge of selective and prejudicial use of the evidence (p. 99)!

Referencing Matthew 25:46 *ad nauseam* is a subconscious acknowledgment that few Scriptures can support everlasting torment. Conditionalists do not need to reference

the same verse over and over again, since hundreds of passages support this view. All Scripture is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16), not just Matthew 25:46.

Traditionalists should not call their belief everlasting punishment; it is everlasting torment. While everlasting torment is one *possible* interpretation of everlasting punishment, it is not the *only* one. Conditionalists also believe in everlasting punishment.

An objective conditionalist must admit that ‘everlasting punishment’ sounds more like everlasting torment than utter extinction. We only point out that this one inconclusive phrase does not deserve such tremendous emphasis. We acknowledge it is one good argument for everlasting torment. Since it is only one inconclusive verse, we need a more balanced emphasis.

An objective traditionalist, on the other hand, must admit the phrase is not conclusive. Even Jonathan Edwards, best known for his horrifying sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, acknowledged this. In *Two Views of Hell*, Fudge points out that Jonathan Edwards concedes irreversible extinction would properly be called everlasting punishment.³

Fudge is certainly aware that Jonathan Edwards was a staunch proponent of everlasting torment. Fudge simply points out that Edwards admitted the phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ is not conclusive. Although Fudge's point is obvious, Peterson missed it.

Peterson responds harshly, yet evades the point. He wastes a page and a half documenting the fact that Edwards believed in everlasting torment (p. 89-90), even though Fudge never denies this. This avoidance should not go unnoticed. Why would Peterson respond this way? Consider the implications:

1. Matthew 25:46 is one of their strongest arguments.
2. The phrase ‘everlasting punishment’ only appears once in the entire Bible.
3. Even Jonathan Edwards acknowledged the phrase is not conclusive.

This is devastating to their case. No wonder Peterson evades the point.

Summary of Aionios

Bible writers frequently use the word *aionios* to assure believers that they have eternal life. The Gospels, for example, have 20 references where Jesus promises eternal life to the faithful using the word *aionios*.

Proponents of everlasting torment are quick to point out that Jesus spoke more about hell than heaven. If the torment in hell lasts as long as the joy of heaven, we would expect at least 20 references in Jesus' warnings using *aionios*.

In all Jesus' warnings about hell, *aionios* appears only four times. Two are warnings about everlasting fire (Matthew 18:8, 25:41), one warning is everlasting punishment (Matthew 25:46) and another is everlasting condemnation (Mark 3:29).

Paul also uses *aionios* nine times to assure believers of eternal life. Although he makes numerous warnings to the unfaithful, he only uses *aionios* once in his warning about everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

This lopsided use of *aionios* should not be ignored. Warnings to nonbelievers using *aionios* are rare and inconclusive. In every case, utter extinction is a valid interpretation. Warnings using *aionios* are nothing more than good arguments against universalism.

The Only Challenge is Revelation

When asked for the best arguments for everlasting torment, three passages stand out. Matthew 25:46 is one, while the other two are in Revelation. Matthew 25:46 is the weakest of the three. Revelation 14:9-11 and 20:10 present better challenges to conditionalism. Without these two passages, it is doubtful many Bible scholars would support everlasting torment. We need to examine them and see if they are conclusive.

Day and Night

Revelation 14:11 and 20:10 both use the phrase "day and night," and many insist this means throughout eternity. While this does suggest the torment continues as long as they exist, it cannot prove torment is everlasting. There are several examples where "day and night" or "night and day" were temporary (Acts 9:24; 1 Thessalonians 2:9, 3:10; Revelation 12:10).

Forever and Ever

While other warnings use a form of the word *aion* once, Revelation 14:9-11 and 20:10 use it twice. Most Bibles translate this as "forever and ever." While traditionalists admit that one use of *aion* can be limited, they insist that the two combined in this way must be endless. Is this the case?

This same expression appears in the Old Testament with a temporary meaning. The Hebrew word *owlam* is similar to *aion* in the New Testament. Jeremiah uses *owlam* twice in the phrase "forever and ever" while talking about the land God gave their fathers (Jeremiah 7:7, 25:5).

These verses in Jeremiah could not mean throughout eternity. When the Israelites turned away from God, He allowed their enemies to take them away from the land as a punishment. Even if they had remained faithful, they would not have lived in the land throughout eternity, since the earth will pass away.

Young's Literal Translation more accurately translates these phrases in Revelation as ". . . to the ages of the ages" rather than "forever and ever." Both uses of *aion* are plural. If we take this literally, John says there will be *at least* four future ages. This seems to contradict other passages that imply there is only one endless age after judgment.

This idiomatic phrase, in the most symbolic book in the entire Bible, is the only legitimate argument traditionalists have. Can we base our whole doctrine on it?

Revelation 14:9-11

Revelation 14:9-11 says the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever. A similar expression appears in Revelation 19:3, which says the smoke that burns Babylon rises up forever and ever. John also tells us that Babylon will not be found anymore (Revelation 18:21).

Revelation 14:9-11 also says they will be tormented in the presence of the Lamb and the holy angels. This presents several problems for traditionalism. One problem is that it appears to contradict 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, which says nonbelievers will be away from the presence of the Lord. How can we reconcile these conflicting warnings?

Conditionalism offers the best solution. First, they will be tormented in the presence of the Lamb for the rest of their existence (Revelation 14:9-11). Eventually, they will be totally destroyed and away from the presence of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:8-9) because they will be no more, like so many Scriptures show. This reconciles the apparent contradiction between Thessalonians and Revelation.

Another reason conditionalism makes more sense is because Scripture plainly shows that the faithful will forget about the unfaithful (see Chapter Nine). Believers will also be with the Lord, so it would be hard to forget about nonbelievers if they are being tormented in the presence of the Lamb throughout eternity.

We discussed a similar problem in the previous chapter. Isaiah 66:24 says we will watch as worms and fire devour their bodies. How can the faithful forget about nonbelievers while looking at them with abhorrence (Isaiah 66:24) in the presence of the Lamb and holy angels (Revelation 14:9-11)? Believers cannot forget about them until they are totally destroyed, so Isaiah 66:24 and Revelation 14:9-11 cannot be endless.

Revelation 20:10

As shown in the previous chapter, the best interpretation of Revelation 20 and 21 is extinction. The millennium is one time period (Revelation 20:4-6), and the judgment is another (Revelation 20:11-15). Neither is endless.

Immediately after the judgment, Revelation 21:1-5 says the old things have passed away and everything is new. Since the lake of fire is the second death (Revelation 20:14), and there will be no more death (Revelation 21:4), it will be no more. Only those who cannot die (immortal) will remain.

The beast, the false prophet, and the devil are in the lake of fire in Revelation 20:10. The beast and false prophet are political and religious systems, not people. The devil is the serpent of old (Revelation 20:2), and Ezekiel tells us he will be no more (Ezekiel 28:13-19). Revelation 21:1-5 reiterates this by saying the old things have passed away.

Conclusion Concerning the Fate of Nonbelievers

The only way to truly express eternity is in the negative. For example, Jesus' kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:33). This plainly tells us that His kingdom is endless. God could have inspired some Bible writer to say there will be no end to torment, yet He did not. Instead, God says the *end* for the unfaithful is *destruction* (Philippians 3:19) and *death* (Romans 6:21). In contrast, the *end* for believers is eternal life (Romans 6:22).

Another example of expressing eternity in the negative is *immortality*. This literally means not mortal, or no death. When the Bible uses words like *forever*, it depends on the subject. If the subject is immortal, this means throughout eternity. Hebrews 13:8, for example, says Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. Since Jesus is immortal, He is the same throughout eternity.

Another example is 1 Peter 1:25, which says the Word of God endures forever. The Word is God (John 1:1), so the Word endures throughout eternity.

Believers will be immortal (1 Corinthians 15:51-56), then reign forever and ever (Revelation 22:5). In this case, they will reign throughout eternity because they will be immortal.

Forever cannot mean throughout eternity to mortal beings. The Bible plainly shows that only God is immortal today, and only believers will be immortal in the future. We confirmed this in chapters four and eight. In the next chapter, we will respond to further attempts to deny this truth.

Notes:

1 Robert Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, 1984, p. 113.

2 *ibid* p. 130.

3 Fudge and Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*, 2000, p. 46. His footnote (p. 211) says: Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the Punishment of Those Who Die Impenitent," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, rev. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (Carlisle, Penn.: Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.), 2:524

12. THE BIBLICAL CONCLUSION

Denying the Obvious Meaning

Traditionalists make it impossible to show conditional immortality. Even though the Bible is filled with unsurpassable words to describe conditionalism, they twist the meanings of plain words.

One example of this twisting is the view of the intermediate state. Scripture repeatedly calls the first death *sleep* and consistently says the dead *wake up* at the resurrection. It is difficult to express temporary unconsciousness any better. Traditionalists, however, insist *sleep* means consciousness separates from the body and *wake up* means consciousness reunites with the body.

Clear, Biblical, language also supports an end of existence. The opposite of life is *death*, yet traditionalists tell us death is only separation. What word could better describe the end of life than death?

The warnings given to those who reject God also contain an exhaustive vocabulary of words that describe utter extinction. Again, traditionalists deny the obvious meaning of words like *destroy* and insist they only mean *ruin*. As pointed out in chapter nine, the issue is consciousness, not physical remains.

If we deny conditionalism, then we must believe that sleep does not mean sleep, wake up does not mean wake up, death does not mean death, and destroy does not mean destroy. This twisting of plain meaning is necessary because the best words to describe conditionalism are abundant from Genesis to Revelation.

Nature Determines Destiny

The answer lies in the nature of nonbelievers. In chapter four, we saw that all humans are mortal because of sin. We also searched for evidence that the soul is eternal and found that this belief is contrary to Scripture. Then in chapter eight, we examined the resurrections and saw that only believers will be immortal.

Since nonbelievers do not have eternal souls and will never be immortal, destruction means destruction. We also conclude that warnings discussed in the previous chapter are only everlasting in effect. Mortal beings cannot be conscious throughout eternity.

Traditionalists continue to insist that everyone has an eternal soul. Because of this assumption, they conclude that warnings using the word *everlasting* must mean everlasting consciousness. They also claim destruction can only mean an eternally wretched existence. Now we will examine the traditionalist's efforts to bypass clear Scriptural evidence.

Future Age is Everlasting

While this present age is temporary, the future age is everlasting. Since the future age is everlasting, traditionalists insist torment is everlasting. Bible scholars commonly say, "You will spend eternity in one of two places . . ."

As we saw in the previous chapter, slaves sometimes chose to remain with their masters forever (Exodus 21:6, Deuteronomy 15:17). We see another example in the New Testament, where Paul says, "For perhaps he [Onesimus] departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever." (Philemon 15)

Traditionalists fail to realize that the duration of the age was not the determining factor. Instead, the mortal nature of the slave was the issue. *Forever* only lasted until the slave died, even though the age continued for those who were still alive. The relationship was not age-lasting; it was only until death. Just as this age ends for individuals at their first death, the next age also ends for those who die their second death.

The temporal age we live in is not the same duration for everyone. Some may die as infants while others live to be over 100. Since this age is shorter for some than for others, it is invalid to insist the next age is the same duration for everyone. Everlasting consciousness for *some* does not prove everlasting consciousness for *all*. Since some remain mortal and others become immortal, we must not fall into the trap of comparing apples and oranges.

Robert Morey (*Death and the Afterlife*, 1984) also denies conditionalism because the future age is everlasting. He agrees that "eternal judgment" and "eternal redemption" refer to a permanent and irreversible verdict, rather than an endless process. Morey then dismisses these examples because they deal with the present age and "everlasting punishment" deals with the future age (p. 132-133).

Morey is mistaken in his assumptions. We must let the Bible interpret the Bible. Scripture shows that everlasting can mean a verdict that is only everlasting in effect, instead of an age-lasting process. Since the action does not continue throughout the

age, then it does not matter if the age is temporary or endless. Either way, only the *effect* is age-lasting.

Everlasting Warnings Prove the Soul is Eternal

As we have shown, everlasting warnings only mean everlasting torment if the soul is eternal. Traditionalists insist torment is everlasting because they believe the soul is eternal. When asked for proof that the soul is eternal, they claim phrases like ‘tormented forever and ever’ and ‘everlasting punishment’ prove the soul is eternal. It would be very difficult to give more obvious examples of the circular reasoning used by traditionalists to prove their viewpoint.

Distinction from Greek Views

Another appeal from traditionalists is that the writers in the Bible did not want to confuse their beliefs with the Greek views. Platonic dualism, for example, claims we had an eternal existence in the past as well as the future. Since traditionalists do not believe we existed before conception, there is a clear distinction between beliefs.

This distinction cannot explain why the Bible repeatedly says believers have eternal life, even though we did not exist in the past. It also fails to explain why Paul says believers will be changed to immortal at the resurrection. The Biblical writers do not avoid terms like *eternal life* or *immortality*; they *only* use these terms to describe God or *believers*.

The Bible is Silent

We must search the Bible to find the truth. Unfortunately, we make our minds up ahead of time and do not see the evidence. If we do not find our belief, we conclude that the Bible is silent on the subject.

When traditionalists find little evidence for their beliefs in the Old Testament, they claim it is almost silent about their subject. According to many traditionalists, only two verses in the entire Old Testament speak of final judgment (Isaiah 66:24 and Daniel 12:2).

Biblical truth seekers find plenty of evidence in the Old Testament. One example is Psalm 37. The language of this Psalm undeniably supports conditionalism. Traditionalists avoid the evidence by claiming it is only talking about the present world.

One indicator of final judgment is that believers will inherit the earth (Psalm 37:9, 11). Jesus uses the same language when He says the meek will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5). We know from the context that Jesus is speaking about final judgment.

Several statements in the beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) make this absolutely clear. Jesus speaks of the poor in spirit and the persecuted, then He says theirs is the kingdom of heaven (v. 3, 10). Jesus also talks about rewards in heaven (v. 12), and says the pure in heart will see God (v. 8).

Another plain indicator is that Psalm 37:12 says the wicked gnash their teeth at the faithful. Traditionalists point out examples of weeping and gnashing of teeth to show torment, yet they ignore Psalm 37:12. They also ignore Psalm 112:10, which says they will gnash their teeth and melt away.

We find more references about judgment in the Old Testament prophets. Many foretell the future age. Isaiah speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, so he is obviously talking about the future age when he says the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind (Isaiah 65:16-17).

Many also conclude in error that the Scriptures are vague regarding immortality. Traditionalists support their belief that everyone is immortal with ambiguous passages that say Jesus brought immortality to light (2 Timothy 1:10), or we were made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Anyone who thinks these passages prove their claim has a very creative imagination! Why not accept plain Scripture that says only God has immortality (1 Timothy 6:15-16)?

Another example of misinterpretation is on the nature of the soul. Since the Bible never says the soul is eternal or immortal, traditionalists claim the Bible is silent on this subject. They insist this is not proof against their belief. How can this be?

God is not sloppy or careless. God did not forget to mention that the soul is eternal in the Bible. He chose to leave it out. Not only that, God made it clear, through His Word, that He can destroy the soul and inspired several writers to say the soul can die. These writings would be very deceptive if the soul is eternal. Since one of the names for the devil is deceiver, it is hard to imagine God would choose such a misleading approach.

Clearly, the Bible is not silent.

Spiritual Death is the Second Death

Death has several meanings in Scripture. Traditionalists claim the first death is physical (Hebrews 9:27) and the second death is spiritual (Ephesians 2:1, 5; Colossians 2:13; 1 Timothy 5:6; 1 Peter 4:6; etc.). Since nonbelievers are still aware when they are spiritually dead, traditionalists claim the unfaithful will be conscious throughout eternity.

Traditionalists are correct when they say the first death is physical. They are incorrect, however, when they claim the second death is the same as spiritual death. Since people are *already* spiritually dead and have not *yet* died the second death in the lake of fire, these two deaths cannot be the same.

Just as eternal life leads to immortality, spiritual death leads to the second death. Traditionalists understand the difference between eternal life and immortality, yet they overlook the exact same difference between spiritual death and the second death. Eternal life and spiritual death are present conditions; immortality and the second death are future consequences.

The first and second death are both physical. We are all subject to the first physical death, then we will all be raised in a physical resurrection. Believers will be raised immortal, so they cannot die again (1 Corinthians 15:51-56, Revelation 20:5-6). Nonbelievers are raised mortal and die another physical death in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:14-15).

Sin separates us from God (Isaiah 59:2), which is a temporary condition. When sin is full-grown, it brings forth death (James 1:15), the everlasting condition. The second death is the final destruction of both body and soul (Matthew 10:28).

A Question of Loyalty

Sola Scriptura is a Latin phrase used by the reformers to say they rely on Scripture alone. Amazingly, many proponents of *Sola Scriptura* still try to defend the doctrine of everlasting torment. Consider the evidence:

The Bible does not say:

Everyone has eternal life.

Nonbelievers have eternal life.

Everyone has immortality.

Believers and nonbelievers will both be changed from mortal to immortal when they are resurrected.

The soul is eternal or immortal.

Instead, the Bible says:

Believers have eternal life (too many to list!).

Those who do not have the Son do not have eternal life (1 John 5:11-12).

God alone has immortality (1 Timothy 6:15-16).

Believers are changed to immortal (1 Corinthians 15:51-56) and the second death has no power over them (Revelation 20:5-6); nonbelievers die the second death (Revelation 20:11-15).

God can destroy the soul (Matthew 10:28) and the soul can die (too many to list!).

Supporting *Sola Scriptura* and everlasting torment is impossible. Traditionalists who claim to rely on Scripture alone must either denounce their indefensible doctrine, or admit that tradition weighs heavily in their decision. If the Bible is our only authority, conditional immortality is our only conclusion.

Other viewpoints rely on questionable sources. When we examine the historical evidence outside the Bible, we see most scholars believed in everlasting torment. Tradition is on their side. Nevertheless, their case rests on the assumption that the soul is eternal, which contradicts Scripture.

During the first century, most people believed the earth was flat and the sun revolved around the earth. We do not believe this today because improved technology (telescopes, satellites, etc.) refutes these assumptions. Similarly, honest examination of Scripture refutes the assumption that the soul is eternal.

Our beliefs reflect our loyalty. God said, "You shall surely die." (Genesis 2:17) Satan contradicted God by saying, "You will not surely die." (Genesis 3:4) This was the first lie in the Bible. Unfortunately, most Christians believe Satan instead of God.

Greek philosophers and pagan religions say the soul is everlasting, and everyone possesses immortality. Most Bible scholars agree with them. Where are our loyalties? Should we be loyal to God and the Bible, or to Satan and pagans?

13. JUSTICE, REASON AND COMPASSION

As we have already seen, the Bible is very complex. We can study it all our lives and still learn. The pursuit of truth requires discipline and dedication.

While there is a powerful case for conditionalism, a few passages can support other viewpoints. We need to compare the evidence. Although Scripture always comes first, we must consider God's character.

Justice and Mercy

When we think of God judging the world, two thoughts come to mind: God is just and God is merciful. We either get what we deserve, because He is just, or we get better, because He is merciful.

This is plainly spelled out in Romans 6:23. The first half of the verse says the wages of sin is death. Wages are what we earn. If God were *only* just, we would all receive the death penalty.

In the last half of Romans 6:23, we see that the gift of God is eternal life. We do not earn this gift; we only receive it because of God's mercy. All Christians agree that we only receive eternal life because of God's mercy. Conditionalists believe that the unfaithful receive death because of God's justice; universalists believe that the unfaithful will receive eternal life because of God's mercy.

Conditionalists and universalists can each make their case based on God's character. Traditionalists, however, face a serious dilemma. They either believe that God is unjust, or they believe that the wages of sin is everlasting torment. Scripture denies both suppositions of the traditionalists.

Reason also denies the traditionalist's inherent belief of God's character. Is it just for people to be tormented throughout eternity because of temporary disobedience? We are taught that people reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7). Is there any sin deserving of endless misery? God gives everyone freedom of choice; if the result of this choice is unbearable unending torment, then this is not freedom.

In the Law of Moses, people received penalty commensurate with the harm they inflicted upon others (Exodus 21:24-30, Leviticus 24:20-21, Deuteronomy 19:21). According to Moses, one must inflict everlasting torment upon others to merit

everlasting torment as one's penalty. Humans are not capable of doing this. Jesus states that we must treat each other better than this law (Matthew 5:38-39).

Thousands of years ago, people sacrificed their sons and daughters in fire. God did not command this, nor did it even enter His mind (Jeremiah 7:31, Jeremiah 32:35). It is a strange act for God to destroy people (Isaiah 28:21). It is against God's character, which by definition is love, to make His creation suffer eternally.

God loves us and wants to have fellowship with us. If we choose to have fellowship with Him, the rewards are immeasurable. If we choose not to have fellowship with Him, we are wiped out of existence. The choice is life or death, not eternal life with God or eternal life in misery.

Reason and Human Error

When we discuss the injustice of endless suffering, traditionalists immediately respond that we cannot question God or His justice. Proponents of endless misery insist it is fair, though we are too limited in wisdom to understand. They claim conditionalists rely on human reasoning instead of the Bible.

This tiresome argument works both ways. While conditionalists may misunderstand justice, traditionalists may misinterpret Scripture. We cannot question God's justice. We can, however, question the way traditionalists analyze the Bible.

As we have seen throughout this book, Scriptures used to support the traditionalist view are inconclusive at best. Their entire case rests on the assumption that the soul is immortal. Rather than make their beliefs conform to Scripture, they make their interpretation of Scripture conform to their assumption that the soul is an eternal entity. The Bible does not support this belief.

God Chooses

Another common response is that God does not choose endless misery, people choose it. Does anyone choose to be born in the first place? This world is corrupt, and sometimes the most faithful followers of God give in to temptation.

Jesus tells of people who think they are doing right. They will not find out otherwise until it is too late (Matthew 7:21-23). Do they choose endless misery?

W. G. T. Shedd's book, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, was recently republished. He dedicates a third of his book trying to justify endless punishment. None of his arguments relieve the ultimate responsibility from God.

God is the omnipotent Creator of the universe, and nothing is outside His control. He knows most people will not follow Him and He chooses to create them anyway. The longer He waits to return, more people are born, and most choose not to follow Him.

If the smallest sin deserves endless torment, why has God allowed sin to continue for so long? How is it merciful to delay the return of Christ so more people face everlasting torment? God should have destroyed Adam and Eve before they reproduced offspring with their sinful nature. In fact, God should have immediately punished Eve in front of Adam so he would not follow her into sin.

Impossible Commands

Jesus commands us to love God and our neighbor (Matthew 22:37-39). He even tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44), which means we must love nonbelievers. He also makes it clear most people will perish (Matthew 7:13-14). If everlasting torment is correct, billions of people (whom we must love) are going to suffer throughout eternity. Some are family and friends.

People have not seriously considered what this means. There are graphic documentaries on television about war, starvation, disease, crime, child abuse, and other suffering. Many get very upset and cannot watch these disturbing programs. These same people, however, believe and preach the doctrine of endless torment, which is far worse than any temporary hardship today.

When finding a seriously injured animal, most people put it out of its misery. Although God is more loving and merciful, many believe God would miraculously keep people conscious throughout eternity for the sole purpose of tormenting them.

God could keep Satan and others from tempting people, yet God allows it. It is impossible to love nonbelievers and a God who makes people suffer throughout eternity, especially when God allows them to be tempted.

Does the thought of everlasting torment motivate us to preach the Gospel? What happens when someone accepts Jesus? Instead of five billion people suffering throughout eternity, only four billion, nine hundred ninety-nine million, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine people will suffer throughout eternity!

A Tie Breaker

Many Bible scholars finally see the case for conditionalism. Once people truly understand the arguments and search the Scriptures, they cannot deny it is a valid interpretation of the Word of God. Some Christians quickly adopt conditionalism. Others cannot decide between this view and everlasting torment because they can see a legitimate case for either view.

If both cases appear equally valid in Scripture, it is time to use the intelligence God gave us. Logical reasoning says endless misery for temporary disobedience does not make sense. Every attempt to justify eternal torment falls hopelessly short.

God also gave us the capacity to love, and commands us to love our enemies. If the thought of billions of people suffering, year after year, century after century, millennium after millennium, does not put us in a severe state of depression, then we need to ask ourselves if we truly love our enemies.

It is our duty to examine questionable doctrine; it is inhumane *not* to question endless misery. The belief that God would make people suffer throughout eternity is unimaginable. It is also difficult to defend in Scripture. Hard to imagine and difficult to defend, eternal suffering is also harmful to the body of Christ. The remainder of this chapter will deal with identifying some of these unfortunate consequences.

Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians

Many Christian organizations have outreaches to cultic religions. This is commendable, since it is critical that they know Jesus as Lord and Savior. Belief in everlasting torment, however, is not a salvation issue.

Trying to convince Jehovah's Witnesses of everlasting torment is not a waste of time, it is much worse! Most Jehovah's Witnesses know the Bible very well, as many find out when discussing Scriptures with them. Traditionalists will never convince them that the soul is eternal, since this is not in the Bible.

Protestants lose credibility with Jehovah's Witnesses and Christadelphians because of this doctrine. They ask themselves the obvious question: if Protestants are wrong about this, how many other things could they be wrong about? This closes the door to more important issues.

I have many fruitful discussions with Jehovah's Witnesses. When I tell them about this book, they realize we have common ground. This makes them receptive to my message. Christadelphians and Jehovah's Witnesses will be more interested in mainstream Christianity if traditionalists quit insisting that the soul is eternal.

Extinction as a Deterrent to Sin

When shown powerful arguments for conditionalism, some reply philosophically, saying extinction is not a big enough deterrent to scare people into obedience. Perhaps this explains why many do not accept conditionalism despite the evidence. Do they continue to hold the traditional viewpoint for pragmatic reasons? Do they believe there would be anarchy without belief in everlasting torment?

Since, in our world today, most people do not believe in God, the situation would not be any worse than it is. To the nonbeliever, a loving God who tortures people endlessly is ludicrous. Comedians make a mockery of Christianity because of this. In the minds of many, this is such an obvious contradiction that they more readily accept the theory of evolution than creation by a capricious God. Preaching everlasting torment supports evolution more than any scientist can.

The more believable conditionalist view of the threat of suffering and death for turning away, combined with the alternative of eternal life when we follow God, is an effective tool. In the final analysis, people must choose to follow the Lord because of love. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love."

It is difficult to explain why God allows so much suffering in the world. This is possible only because all suffering is *temporary*. Many Christians struggle with everlasting torment, and some even doubt the infallibility of the Bible. It is easier for many to believe the Bible has errors than to accept this repulsive belief.

It is time to quit causing grief and confusion to well-meaning Christians. We can be certain from the Bible that loved ones will not suffer endlessly. Those who reject God will not spend eternity in heaven, though they will be out of their misery. This is their choice. This is fair and logical.

14. COMPARING DOCTRINES

This debate should not turn us away from Jesus Christ. It also cannot allow us to take God's judgment lightly. The Bible makes it absolutely clear that those who reject God will suffer. We cannot deny this if we believe the Word of God.

Our question is whether or not this suffering will ever end. Traditionalists believe this will never end, while conditionalists believe it will end in utter extinction. Several factors determine which view holds up better to scrutiny.

Preponderance of the Evidence

Traditionalists can support their view when they tell us which verses to focus on. If we examine only these passages, we think of everlasting torment. Certainly, traditionalists can find evidence for their view in Scripture.

Conditionalists can also point to Scripture that supports their view. When we read these passages, without preconceived ideas, we think of total extinction. Clearly, conditionalists can also support their view in the Bible.

One consideration is the amount of Scripture. Conditionalism is a recurring theme that runs throughout the Bible. Although traditionalism can be shown in rare instances, these passages are needles in the haystack compared to Scriptures supporting conditionalism.

Another consideration is the reliability of the passages in question. We know that not all Scripture is literal. Jesus tells us that some language is figurative (John 16:25). When we study the case for everlasting torment, we see undue reliance on Revelation, the most symbolic book in the Bible. We also see the strongest argument against soul sleep for nonbelievers is a parable (Luke 16:19-31).

When we examine all Scripture, conditionalism manifests itself. Proof-texts used to support traditionalism are extremely rare. More importantly, the best passages supporting this view are highly symbolic and unreliable. The preponderance of the evidence plainly favors conditional immortality.

Resolving Conflicts

The Word of God challenges scholars with passages that appear to conflict with one other. We know that all Scripture is inspired by God, so it cannot contradict itself. We must reconcile these difficulties.

In our study of final judgment, we find Scriptures that appear to say opposite things. One example is that warnings of fire conflict with warnings of blackest darkness (Jude 13). Another problem is that some verses say they will be in the presence of the Lord (Revelation 14:9-11) and others say they will be away from the Lord (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10). While these examples are important, the biggest challenge is warnings of torment compared to warnings of death and utter destruction.

Conditionalists see these passages as a sequence of events. They are tormented in the presence of the Lord (Revelation 14:9-11), then they are utterly destroyed and out of God's presence (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Traditionalists, instead, believe these apparent conflicts describe different aspects of hell, all occurring at the same time. Death is only separation and destruction is only ruination, so nonbelievers remain in conscious torment throughout eternity. Traditionalists also claim that the Bible never shows the proper sequence for conditionalism.

This is a puzzling response. Although we have already discussed the following passages, they must be repeated here. One clear example of torment followed by destruction in the Old Testament is Psalm 112:10, which says, "he will gnash his teeth and melt away." How much plainer could that be?

Another example is the Dead Sea Scrolls passage discussed in chapter nine:

... And all the ages of their generations they shall spend in bitter weeping and harsh evils in the abysses of darkness until their destruction, without there being a remnant or a survivor among them. 1QS 4.13-14

The word *until* implies there will be a *change*. If *destruction* and *bitter weeping* are the same, then this passage does not make sense.

In the New Testament, the best examples are reminders of Sodom and Gomorrah. As any rational Bible scholar realizes, fire tormented them until it turned them to ashes. Obviously, this is the only possible order of events. The warnings that they serve as an example because they suffered in fire (Jude 7) then were reduced to ashes (2 Peter 2:6) could not be any clearer!

These references plainly show torment followed by extinction. The only way to interpret them any differently is to read into them the assumption that nonbelievers have immortal souls. This goes against Scripture.

My Decision

Once I read the Bible, without assuming the soul is eternal, it became clear. There is so much evidence for conditionalism, it practically jumps off the pages when I read. I wonder why I did not see it sooner.

When I first believed in conditionalism, I thought I was almost alone in this belief. This did not discourage me, since the Biblical evidence is overwhelming. As Paul says, "Let God be true but every man a liar." (Romans 3:4) I later realized several Christians agree with me.

After extensive research, I am astonished that so many scholars still hold the traditional view. While traditionalists wonder why many are abandoning their view, I wonder why it is taking so long. Conditionalism is growing, and this trend will continue as long as people rely on the Bible instead of orthodox tradition.

The battle for truth must continue. Martin Luther was one of the first major Protestants and he found many errors in church doctrine. When the religious leaders tried to persuade him to recant his beliefs, he replied:

Since then Your Majesty and your lordships desire a reply, I will answer...Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason - I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other - my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen.

I am forced into the same position. Many proponents of everlasting torment point out that they have studied the Bible longer than I have. Many also say they know Hebrew and Greek better than I do. None, however, give valid Scriptural responses to many arguments presented in this and other books on conditionalism. They are either unwilling or unable to respond. Until they respond, I will assume they have no response.

Your Decision

Among conservative Christians, everlasting torment is still the majority opinion. People should base their decisions objectively, yet three obstacles are difficult to overcome.

One hindrance to truth is preconceived ideas. People have heard that the soul is eternal all their life. Many insist they have read this in the Bible. They have read it in many commentaries and accept it as truth without studying it.

Another obstacle to conditionalism is peer pressure. I have had many discussions with proponents of evolution who disagree with my belief in creation. They do not insult me as much as Christians who disagree with my views about death and judgment.

A third factor is time limits. Many do not devote enough time to fully research this subject. The longer and more thoroughly we research this subject, the more certain we can be of our belief.

Your belief is your decision. You must research the evidence and weigh all sides. Which view has more Scripture? Which view has clearer Scripture, rather than ambiguous Scripture? Which view has better responses to opposing Scripture? Which view is more in line with the character of God?

While I believe conditional immortality is the answer to all these questions, you must make your own decision. Believing in everlasting torment because you believe it is more Scriptural is a valid position; believing in everlasting torment because your pastor believes it is unacceptable.

The choice between conditionalism and traditionalism is not the determining factor in your salvation. There are people on both sides of this issue who are saved. There are also people on both sides of this issue who are not saved.

Belief in Jesus Christ is the most important choice you will ever make. You can enjoy temporary pleasure on earth. It does not satisfy you; it only makes you desire more. Every pleasure on earth will not even compare to the true happiness of heaven.

Do not allow the hellfire and brimstone preachers to turn you away from a loving God. Reject their doctrine, not God or the Bible. You will not suffer throughout eternity if you turn away. You will, however, cry bitter tears when you realize what you gave up.