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by Christopher M. Date

“What does God say about hell?” asks Kris Brossett, kicking off his two-article series on the topic.¹ Brossett proceeds to survey the three historic Christian views of hell—eternal torment, conditional immortality, and universalism—and commendably, he avoids offering readers simplistic, misleading caricatures of the two alternatives to the more historically dominant view (eternal torment). Brossett begins his second article equally commendably, rightly observing, “None of the positions I’ve examined in Part I deny [hell’s] existence. Instead, ‘they differ on what hell is like.’” This kind of honest representation of controversial views is refreshing; 4 proponents of such views are accustomed to being terribly misrepresented.

Nevertheless, as just such a proponent of one of the controversial alternatives to the majority report—what I will call conditionalism, and what Brossett calls “Annihilationism/Conditional Immortality (ACI)” —I would like to gently challenge some of Brossett’s claims. While his treatment of conditionalism is a good one overall, it is mistaken in at least one critical way. And I will argue that Scripture speaks about hell with a much clearer and more consistent voice than Brossett thinks it does.

Eternal (Not Finite) Punishment

In what I propose is his most critical mistake, Brossett suggests that, according to us conditionalists, “There will be an end to punishment, followed by complete annihilation.” Unfortunately, this does not accurately represent the conditionalist movement at large. Instead, Brossett offers a questionable interpretation of just one prominent conditionalist as if it is the view of conditionalism more broadly. The other conditionalist Brossett cites, however, explicitly teaches otherwise, siding with countless other conditionalists who wholeheartedly affirm that final punishment will be properly everlasting.

Brossett says conditionalists “take issue with how ‘eternal’ has been traditionally understood,” quoting conditionalist John Stackhouse as saying that the Greek adjective *alciivioç* can describe an event’s implications as everlasting in duration, without necessarily describing the event itself that way.⁸ So far, so good. The problem is that Stackhouse seems, at least on the surface, to identify that event with the noun. For example, concerning the phrase “eternal judgment” (Heb 6:2), he writes, “The author of this epistle cannot possibly have had in view a judgment that goes on forever.”⁹ Stackhouse thus appears to equate the noun (judgment) with the carrying out of its verbal idea (judging), an event that will be finite in duration. If this is indeed what he means, then yes, he must likewise think that, in the phrase “eternal punishment” (Matt 25:46), the noun (punishment) is to be identified with the carrying out of its verbal idea (punishing), an event he thinks will be finite in duration.

Had Brossett sufficiently consulted the other conditionalist he quotes, he would have discovered that the aforementioned interpretation of Stackhouse, even if accurate, does not represent the larger conditionalist movement. Brossett cites the late Edward Fudge’s popular-level book on hell, in which Fudge tries to stay extremely accessible. In his more academic treatise, where he can be more precise, Fudge writes, “the adjective [eternal] modifies a noun that names the result of an action.”¹⁰ He goes on to put it this way: “the adjective describes the result of the action (which is what the noun names), not the action itself (named by the noun’s cognate verb).” Thus, whereas Stackhouse seemingly identifies the noun (punishment) with the finite process of its verbal idea (punishing), Fudge identifies the noun with the everlasting result of that verbal idea. The difference is subtle, but it makes a world of difference, for it enables Fudge to affirm that the punishment is, properly speaking, everlasting: “This punishment . . . will last forever.” Fudge’s view, according to which final punishment is the properly everlasting result of a relatively brief process of punishing, is the view of many within the larger conditionalist movement. Twenty years before Stackhouse offered his take in the second edition of Zondervan’s *Four Views on Hell*, Clark Pinnock represented

conditionalism in the first edition. Concerning the phrase “eternal punishment,” Pinnock observes that its innate ambiguity “gives us the freedom to interpret the saying about hell either as everlasting conscious torment (eternal punishing) or”—and here is his reading—“as irreversible destruction (eternal punishment).”¹³ Christopher Marshall likewise writes, “when ‘eternal’ describes an act or a process, it is the consequences [i.e., the punishment] rather than the process [i.e., the punishing] that are everlasting . . . Eternal punishment is . . . everlasting.” Such is also the view of Terrance Tiessen; Greg Boyd; Glenn Peoples; and many others. Conditionalists who affirm this view of eternal punishment, as the everlasting outcome of a duratively finite process of punishing, accept the popular and straightforward meaning of the adjective *αἰώνιος*: “pertaining to an unlimited duration of time—‘eternal.’” What we contend, however, is that the noun it modifies refers to the result of its verbal idea, and not the process thereof. As I explain elsewhere, “linguists are well aware of the peculiar ability of what they call “action nominals” or “deverbal nouns” in multiple languages to refer either to a verb’s process or to its result. “This is a phenomenon,” one such linguist writes, “called logical polysemy,” a “central and widespread” type of which, closely related to these nouns, “concerns the distinction between process and result meanings of event referring nouns.” As another pair of linguists explain, the word “translation” refers to an event or process in “I have completed the translation of the first book,” but it refers to a result in “I wish to quote a translation of that wonderful text.” Similarly, although “punishment” may refer to a process of suffering, capital punishment refers to the lifelessness that results from being punished, as noted even by Augustine.

Thus, it may be true that some conditionalists think the risen lost will suffer a finite duration of punishment and then be destroyed. Many others of us, however, think the final punishment will be literally everlasting, consisting in the neverending privation of life—an infinite privation resulting from the finite process of being killed. The final punishment of the wicked will not come to an end, to be followed by destruction; rather, their punishment is destruction, and it will last forever.

Definitively Destroyed

Though I could pick at further nits, I will leave them behind and turn instead to Brossett’s conclusion that “all three belief systems must make inferences to arrive at their conclusions.” This is alleged to have been demonstrated throughout his two articles, as evidence that advocates of all three views go perilously beyond what is “definitive” or explicit in Scripture and lean too heavily upon inference where the teaching of Scripture is “mysterious” or unclear. As it turns out, where Brossett thinks statements in Scripture are definitive support for eternal torment, its defenders are in fact engaging in inference; and where he thinks we conditionalists resort to inference, Scripture is in fact definitive.

Brossett quotes Denny Burk as arguing that “the final state of the damned has at least three characteristics: (1) final separation, (2) unending experience, and (3) just retribution.” Citing eleven passages surveyed by Burk, Brossett then says the doctrine of eternal torment “hinges on the definitive statements in these passages about the three characteristics Burk identifies.” However, the second of Burk’s proposed characteristics, that of “unending experience,” is not definitive in any of the texts in question, and can only be inferred from them.

Isaiah 66:22–24 and Mark 9:42–48 say nothing about an unending experience of anything on the part of the damned. It is the *הַבָּשָׂרִים הַמֵּתִים*¹³—“the dead bodies of the men” (Isa 66:24; emphasis added)—whose “worm shall not die” and whose “fire shall not be quenched.”²⁴ These are not living immortals in pain, as Burk contends. Unending experience can only be inferred, and only if a number of assumptions are made, with the result that the definitive statement in the text—that it is corpses being devoured by fire and maggots—is contradicted by the inference. Meanwhile, Brossett suggests that Fudge engages in inference by saying, “Some day nothing will be left of these corpses.” This is not explicit, sure; but in light of how Isaiah’s language is used elsewhere, Fudge’s characterization is the definitive picture painted by the text. Like Isaiah’s and Mark’s undying worm, Jeremiah promises that the valley of the sons of Hinnom (of which “Gehenna” in the New Testament is an abbreviated transliteration) will one day be called “the Valley of Slaughter,” where “the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the beasts of the earth, and none will frighten them away” (Jer 7:32–33). That is to say, these “stouthearted scavengers,” as I have called them, “will not be prevented from consuming the corpses of the slain wicked.” Likewise, Isaiah’s warning that “their fire shall not be quenched” is an idiom used throughout Scripture to “refer to a fire which cannot be extinguished prematurely before it completely consumes the wicked” (e.g., Ezek 20:47–48; Jer 17:27;

Amos 5:6; Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17; 1 Cor 3:14–15). It is, therefore, conditionalism that rests upon the definitive statements in Isaiah 66:22–24 and Mark 9:42–48, while the doctrine of eternal torment hinges on inferences therefrom.

Daniel 12:2–3 also says nothing about the damned experiencing something forever. Yes, they will “awake . . . to shame,” but their experience thereof is not said to be unending. Only תַּרְוָה, “contempt,” is said to be everlasting. This word does not refer to something experienced by the damned; it refers to something experienced by others, namely, the contempt in which the damned are held. Indeed, the word appears elsewhere only in Isaiah 66:24, where it describes the contempt in which the righteous hold the dead bodies of God’s slain enemies. Burk and other defenders of eternal torment can at best infer that the resurrected lost must remain alive forever—contrary to Isaiah’s definitive statements—in order to be forever held in contempt. Of course, we in the twenty-first century do not find it difficult to feel contempt for Hitler, despite his having died a half century ago, or for Judas Iscariot, despite his having died two millennia ago.

Matthew 18:6–9 does not say anything about unending experience, either. The doctrine of eternal torment can only be derived from this text by inferring that the “eternal fire,” into which Jesus says the wicked will be thrown, is so called because the immortal bodies of the resurrected lost will provide it with fuel forever. What is definitively stated here is that the alternative to being cast into hell is “to enter life.” The same is true of Matthew 25:31–46, where the alternative to “eternal fire” and “eternal punishment” is “eternal life.” Taken at face value—as we conditionalists take it—this suggests the damned will not remain alive forever after being raised and sentenced to hell. Indeed, Jude uses the phrase “eternal fire” to refer to the fire that came down from heaven and slew the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, and he says they thereby “serve as an example” of what awaits the ungodly (Jude 7; cf. Gen 19:23–25; 2 Peter 2:6). Once again, conditionalism rests on the definitive statements in these texts; eternal torment requires an inference that contradicts their definitive statements.

Second Thessalonians 1:6–10, like the aforementioned texts, says nothing at all about an unending experience on the part of the damned. It warns of “affliction,” “fire,” “vengeance,” and “eternal destruction,” but unending experience must be inferred. As with “eternal punishment,” discussed above, “eternal destruction” can refer to the everlasting result of an afflictive (painful, distressing) destructive process. In fact, since “destruction” is a telic concept and is said to be a penalty paid “when he comes” (v. 10), it is difficult to interpret “eternal destruction” as an endless process without invoking the irrational concept of “never living, never dead, but endlessly dying . . . when death itself shall be deathless.” This is true whether the destructive process takes place “away from” the Lord, as some translations render the Greek preposition ἀπό, or is “from” the Lord, in the sense of being caused by his presence. Either way, the phrases πυρὶ πλογός (“flaming fire”) and διδόντος ἐκδίκησιν (“inflicting vengeance”) appear together only in the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 66:15, in which the result of God’s fiery vengeance is that “those slain by the LORD shall be many” (emphasis added). Although not quite explicit, the “eternal destruction” of the finally impenitent seems definitively to be the everlasting privation of their lives.

The only biblical texts that definitively speak of an unending experience of torment are Revelation 14:9–11 and 20:10–15, but the case for eternal torment nevertheless rests upon inference from them, too. This is because unending suffering, definitively described in these texts, takes place in the symbolic imagery of the apocalyptic vision they record, and one can at best infer that it corresponds to eternal torment in reality. Meanwhile, John sees the harlot, Mystery Babylon, suffering unending torment with the same kind of imagery (compare 14:9–11 with 18:6, 9–10; and 19:3), but an angelic interpreter definitively tells him that the city she represents will in fact be destroyed (18:21). John then sees Death and Hades thrown into the lake of fire (20:14), where presumably they suffer eternal torment alongside the devil, beast, and false prophet (20:10). After all, these are equally conscious beings in the imagery: the fourth horseman of the apocalypse and his squire (6:8). However, God definitively states, “death shall be no more” (21:4), indicating that the fate of these riders in the fire symbolizes a fate consistent with the annihilation of death itself (cf. 1 Cor 15:26) and the realm of the dead. Thus, though defenders of eternal torment infer that the unending experience of torment in John’s vision predicts an unending experience of torment in reality, the angel’s and God’s definitive statements suggest instead that the lost will be destroyed in hell, and that after all who remain have been made immortal (cf. 1 Cor 15:53–54), no one will ever die again. Death will have been annihilated.

The Bible's Not-So-Mysterious Teaching on Hell

Again, Brossett is to be commended for his overall very fair treatment of conditionalism, but I contend that he makes one critical mistake in how he characterizes it, and that he inaccurately accuses conditionalism and eternal torment of standing on equal footing. Though some conditionalists think final punishment will be limited in duration, many or most others wholeheartedly accept that a truly everlasting punishment awaits the resurrected lost in hell: everlasting capital punishment, the cessation and unending privation of their lives. This they embrace because of numerous definitive biblical statements to that effect—including those which must be overridden and contradicted if one is to infer that they instead teach eternal torment, as many of its defenders do.

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Yes, the Bible says “both mysterious and definitive things about hell”; but on the question of whether God will immortalize the resurrected lost or kill them, finally and forever, Scripture is anything but mysterious. As Glenn Peoples puts it, “Conditional immortality is taught at least as clearly as the other doctrines that Scripture most clearly teaches and which are important to Christian orthodoxy. The exegetical case is simply overwhelming . . .” Roughly ten years ago, this came as a shock to me, and I did not want to believe it. I was content to believe that the damned would live forever in hell, and I knew that if I were to change my mind, I would be treated as a pariah by many of my fellow conservative evangelicals. However, when I began following Christ a decade earlier, I committed to bowing my knee in subjection to the teaching of God’s breathed-out word (2 Tim 3:16), a commitment which forced me, kicking and screaming, to reject the ecclesial tradition of eternal torment and to embrace the biblical teaching of conditional immortality.

Do count the cost, but I encourage you to rethink hell with a freshly opened mind. God willing, you will discover what an increasing number of us have discovered, namely, that one can simply let the Bible speak for itself as to the nature of final punishment. As the most famous verse in Scripture puts it, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16; emphasis added). It is a wonderful blessing to be able—finally!—to accept this without reservation or qualification. The cost, grievous as it is, is well worth the blessing.

On Saturday, March 20, Chris Date will be joined by fellow conditionalist Mark Corbett in Landrum, South Carolina, for a live and in-person, two-on-two debate with their friends, Keith Sherlin and Brannon Poore, who will defend the doctrine of eternal torment. For details, visit the event page on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/events/299829294769439>.

1. Kris Brossett, “What is Hell? Three Views (Part 1),” theLAB: The Logos Academic Blog, February 20, 2021 (accessed March 5, 2021), <https://academic.logos.com/what-is-hell-three-views-part-1/>.

2. For a visual comparison of the three views, see Rethinking Hell, “‘Hell Triangle’—Christian Views of Final Punishment,” Rethinking Hell, April 7, 2016 (accessed March 5, 2021), <http://rethinkinghell.com/2016/04/07/hell-triangle-christian-views-of-final-punishment/>.

3. Kris Brossett, “Hell: What Will You Infer? (Part II),” theLAB: The Logos Academic Blog, February 27, 2021 (accessed March 5, 2021), <https://academic.logos.com/hell-what-will-you-infer-part-ii/>.

4. For this reason, I’d like to thank Brossett, as well as The Logos Academic Blog for publishing his article. I have been a fan of Logos Bible Software for several years, and after the publication of Brossett’s article, I’m a fan all the more.

5. Consider, for example, the mischaracterizations of conditional immortality and annihilationism by popular internet apologist Matt Slick, as documented in Chris Date, “Keep CARM and Carry On: Responding to Matt Slick and CARM.org (Part 1)—What Is Annihilationism Really?” Rethinking Hell, February 8, 2021

(accessed March 5, 2021), <http://rethinkinghell.com/2021/02/08/keep-carm-and-carry-on-responding-to-matt-slick-and-carm-org-part-1-what-is-annihilationism-really/>.

6. Brossett, “Part 1.”

7. Brossett, “Part 1.”

1. Brossett, “Part 1.”

2. John G. Stackhouse Jr., “Terminal Punishment,” *Four Views on Hell*, edited by Preston M. Sprinkle, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 68; emphasis added.

3. Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment*, 3rd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 38; emphasis added.

4. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 41; italics in original.

5. Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 42.

6. Clark H. Pinnock, “The Conditional View,” *Four Views on Hell*, edited by William Crockett (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 156; emphasis added.

7. Christopher D. Marshall, “Divine and Human Punishment in the New Testament,” *Rethinking Hell: Readings in Evangelical Conditionalism*, edited by Christopher M. Date, Gregory G. Stump, and Joshua W. Anderson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 217–8n40.

8. “Eternal punishment need not connote eternal conscious punishing; indeed it cannot do so, if God grants eternal (in the sense of endless) life exclusively to those whom he saves in Christ.” Terrance L. Tiessen, “My Long Journey to Annihilationism,” *A Consuming Passion: Essays on Hell and Immortality in Honor of Edward Fudge*, edited by Christopher M. Date and Ron Highfield (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 30; italics in original.

9. “Scripture certainly teaches that the wicked are punished eternally, but it does not teach that the wicked endure eternal punishment. . . . the damned do not undergo an eternal process of punishment or destruction. But once they are punished and destroyed [i.e., once the process of punishing is completed], it is forever.” Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 286–7; italics in original.

10. “The disagreement over this verse is not over the meaning of ‘eternal,’ but rather over the content of the punishment. . . . [2 Thessalonians 1:9 is] more specific in that it actually specifies what type of punishment is in view, namely destruction. . . . Of course the act of annihilating cannot be eternal, but the resulting ‘annihilation’ or ‘destruction’ clearly could be.” Glenn A. Peoples, “Why I am an Annihilationist,” *RightReason.org* (accessed March 6, 2021), 22–23; italics in original.

18. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (eds.), *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, Introduction and Domains, 2nd ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 641.

11. Christopher M. Date, “The Hermeneutics of Conditionalism: A Defense of the Interpretive Method of Edward Fudge,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2018), 80; italics in original. Available online at https://www.academia.edu/36022773/The_Hermeneutics_of_Conditionalism_A_Defense_of_the_Interpretive_Method_of_Edward_Fudge.
12. Brossett, “Part II.”
13. Brossett, “Part II”; italics in original.
14. Brossett, “Part II”; emphasis added. Quoted from Denny Burk, “Eternal Conscious Torment,” *Four Views on Hell*, edited by Preston M. Sprinkle, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 21.
15. Brossett, “Part II”; italics in original.
16. Mark 9:48 is a nearly word-for-word quote from Isaiah 66:24.
17. Brossett, “Part II.” Quoted from Edward William Fudge, *Hell: A Final Word* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood, 2012), 77.
18. Christopher M. Date, “Their Worm Does Not Die: Annihilation and Mark 9:48,” *Rethinking Hell*, July 17, 2012 (accessed March 6, 2021); italics in original.
19. Christopher M. Date, “The Fire Is Not Quenched: Annihilation and Mark 9:48 (Part 2),” *Rethinking Hell*, November 20, 2012 (accessed March 6, 2021).
20. The Hebrew reads לִשְׁמֹתָ לְיָיָהּ (“to shame”) and אֲרִדְדָּלְמָלְךָ (“to everlasting contempt”). The adjective describes only the contempt.
21. Augustine, *City of God* 13.11.2; in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 2, *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine* (Buffalo: The Christian Literature Co., 1887), 250.
22. As a footnote in the ESV reads, “Or destruction that comes from” (italics in original).
23. Thessalonians has δίδωμι where Isaiah has τρέφω, but these are practically synonyms. δίδωμι is from δίδωμι, meaning “to give,” and τρέφω is from τρέφω, meaning “to give back” or “to repay.”
24. Brossett, “Part II”; italics in original.
25. Glenn A. Peoples, “Sure as Hell: Is Scripture Really Clear About Final Punishment?” *Rethinking Hell*, February 17, 2016 (accessed March 6,