

Precepts

Therefore all Your precepts concerning all things I consider to be right. Psalm 119:128a

December 5, 2021

Fate of the Wicked Part 4: Conditional Immortality

In our previous three articles in this series we have considered three views of what is going to be the final punishment of the wicked. We considered first the view most traditional in Christian circles that all the wicked are destined for eternal, conscious torment. Then, we considered the view that, while they may be punished for a while, all the wicked will eventually be saved, which view is often called universalism. Then, we considered the view that there is no future punishment for the wicked at all, but that when they die that is the end of them. This view concludes that all Biblical references to future punishment of the wicked refers to “wicked” believers who are going to be punished before they eventually receive their salvation.

We considered these three views against the evidence of the Bible and concluded that none of them stand up to the test of all Scripture. Thus in this article we move on to consider a fourth proposed destiny of the wicked in order to see if it matches what the Bible says about God’s future plans for the punishment of the wicked. This is the view often called the “conditional immortality” view, or more simply conditionalism.

This view holds that the ultimate end of the wicked is destruction. Like universalism, this is another alternative to the traditional idea going back to most ancient times. Unlike the views of eternal, conscious torment and of universalism, this view is based on the truth that we have established by our studies: that the soul is never spoken of as immortal. Thus, if the soul is not immortal then the wicked not only do not have to live forever anywhere: not in heaven, not in hell, not in the New Earth, nor anywhere at all. Thus they are free to truly die, to be destroyed, and to cease to live altogether.

The reason this view is called “conditional immortality” is because of what it teaches about immortality. The traditional view makes immortality an inherent right that every man has that even God Himself cannot violate. It makes us like God, never truly being able to die or to come to an end. But this view, since it says immortality is not inherent to man, makes immortality not something that we must have, but something that we may have only. The means by which immortality is granted to us is by God, and is based therefore on our salvation. Thus this view says we are not inherently immortal, but that we receive immortality as a gift from God based on our salvation. Immortality is then conditional on salvation, so thus this view is called “conditional immortality.” A shorter way of referring to it is “conditionalism,” which of course makes sense by the same logic.

Now while we are discussing the name for this view, we should mention that some do not know this view by either the name “conditional immortality” or “conditionalism” at all, but would refer to this view as “annihilationism.” Yet we would argue that this is not a very good name for this view, nor will we utilize this name in our studies. The first reason for this is that there is a view that might better be termed “annihilationism,” but which in some ways is fundamentally different from conditional immortality.

The view that might better be called “annihilationism” holds with the idea of the natural immortality of the soul, and aligns with traditionalism in thinking that the soul is immortal. However, this view then aligns with conditionalism in that it believes that God will “annihilate” the immortal souls of the wicked in hell, bringing an end to them as conditionalists believe will happen. Yet clearly this view takes a different tack from conditionalism. Conditionalism is based on the fact, as we have traced it out in Scripture in our studies of the Hebrew word *nephesh* for “soul,” that the souls of men are, in fact, not immortal at all, but are subject to death and are often spoken of as being dead; in Hebrew *muth nephesh*, a dead soul. Yet annihilationism denies this, holding with the traditional view of the immortality of the soul, yet then bridging that view into alignment with conditionalism by saying that God can annihilate immortal souls anyway! This view seems inherently contradictory, so why would some hold it?

Besides the obvious reason that many are not good enough students to go back to the Bible and to discover that souls are not, in fact, immortal in the pages of Scripture, there is one major reason that annihilationists want to look at things somewhat differently than conditionalists do. That is, that conditionalists generally make eternal life conditional not only on a gift from God but also conditional on resurrection. No one is going to receive his eternal reward short of his resurrection from the dead. Thus, this leaves the believing dead as remaining dead between death and resurrection and not already “in heaven looking down on us” or “gone to a better place” or “gone to be with the Lord” or any one of the comforting phrases that many traditionalists like to use to describe the current state of their beloved dead. This conclusion is unacceptable to annihilationists. They wish to think that the believing dead are still alive somewhere, are still in a better place, do still go to heaven when they die. In a lot of ways they want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to accept death on the part of the unsaved, but they want to deny death on the part of the saved. This is the basic reason for the view of annihilationism. Thus perhaps “annihilationism” would be best applied to anyone who believes that the wicked will ultimately be destroyed and cease to exist, yet who at the same time believes that the righteous go to heaven as soon as they die and do not have to wait for resurrection. This is not the traditional view of the conditionalist, but it is the view of the annihilationist.

The second reason we reject the term “annihilationism” in favor of “conditionalism” is that annihilation is not a Biblical word at all. The Bible never uses the term “annihilation.” In some ways, the idea of the annihilation of anything is unscientific. Science tells us that matter and energy are never truly created nor destroyed, but that they can only be converted into a different form. Annihilation as a concept then would seem to be neither Biblical nor scientific. We would far prefer to use a term from the Bible to describe what we believe than a questionable term of unbiblical origin. If men liked to refer to this view as “destructionism,” we might not have much problem with it. But annihilation is not a Biblical term, and so in some ways carries with it its own argument against itself.

The final reason we reject the term “annihilationism” is that it is clear from the spirit of many who use it that it is used purposefully to be a derogatory term. In other words, they like to call people who hold this view “annihilationists” because that “sounds bad.” No one wants to be an “annihilationist.” Never mind that traditionalists, who proudly boast of believing in eternal, conscious torment might accurately be called “tormentists,” which of course sounds even worse! Yet they would probably think themselves mistreated if we suggested any such thing, accurate or not. Yet clearly “annihilationist” is meant by many as an invective to be hurled, and this hardly seems like a term we would like to use to describe anyone. We have avoided using terms like “tormentists” for traditionalists, regardless of whether or not their views might warrant it. We will likewise avoid using a term like “annihilationists” for those who do not claim to believe in annihilation at all.

Now it does not seem necessary to spend a whole article dealing with the view of annihilated immortal souls set forth above that might accurately be termed “annihilationist.” There seems no reason to string this series out longer than need be, and the fact is that the arguments for souls not being immortal have already been dealt with in our series of word studies on the Hebrew word *nephesh*, wherein we learned that souls can be in danger of death, be dying, and even be dead. Moreover the idea that the righteous go immediately to heaven upon death as opposed to the idea that it is resurrection that brings saints to their final reward, while it is of course a crucial issue regarding conditionalism, really has more to do with the fate of the righteous at death, whereas this series is meant to examine the fate of the wicked at death. Thus we will view this kind of “annihilationism” as a mere offshoot of conditionalism that might better be dealt with elsewhere, and will continue to consider the more typical view of conditionalism as involving souls that are inherently not immortal, but which are subject to death and in need of resurrection.

Now as far as that goes, the view we discussed last, that there is no future punishment for the wicked but that at death they have already reached their final end, might also be viewed as a mere offshoot of conditionalism. Yet this is not the typical view of conditionalism going back to ancient times. Typical conditionalism teaches that there is a resurrection of the just and unjust, not just of good and bad believers, as Paul stated it in Acts 24:15, **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.** Thus typical conditionalism teaches that there is future punishment for the wicked, this punishment to come following on their resurrection.

Now there is no real consensus among conditionalists of just what that punishment will be, nor of how long that punishment will last. This hardly seems like a necessary conclusion to come to, however. God is the ultimate Judge, and it is certainly possible for conditionalists to leave all such determinations up to Him. However, whatever that punishment might be, conditionalism concludes that it will ultimately end in the death of every unsaved, unrighteous person. This is the final, decisive, eternal punishment of every unsaved individual, and the end of the wicked. Yes conditionalists believe in eternal punishment, but that eternal punishment is death, is destruction, is the ultimate and final end of life for all thus punished. In other words, conditionalists believe in death as God’s eternal punishment. What they do not believe in is eternal punishing. God does not have to keep the wicked alive to be continually punishing them, as traditionalists insist. What He has in store for them is the final, eternal punishment of death, of the end of their lives, of the end of their existence, and of their final, irrevocable perdition.

Now this view makes the lake of fire to be a fire that consumes. As we have pointed out, the alternative views we have considered all make the fire of the lake of fire to be preserving fire. Those who are cast into it are not burned up, but are kept alive by that fire to be punished by the pain of its great heat. This preservation is temporary in the view of universalists and those who believe in the “bad good” being sent there, and this preservation is permanent in the view of the traditionalists, but either way the fire is preserving. Moreover in the view of universalists and of those who believe that the lake of fire is for the unjust just, the lake of fire is remedial, to hurt those sent there in order to teach them a lesson, but not to burn them up.

In contrast with these views, in the view of the conditionalist the lake of fire is neither preserving nor remedial, but consuming. It is a fire that destroys. In other words, in the view of the conditionalist, the lake of fire is typical fire! It is not some sort of strange pseudo-fire that preserves rather than consuming. In other words, the conditionalist view is the only view that makes the fire of the lake of fire actually act in a fire-like manner. Every other view makes the lake of fire out to be very much not like typical fire at all.

The view of conditionalism fits very well with II Peter 2:6 making the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah an example to the wicked. Starting in II Peter 2:4, **“4. For if God did not spare the angels who sinned,... 5. and did not spare the ancient world,...6. and turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly.”** It makes little sense that Sodom and Gomorrah are meant to be an example to the wicked if the ultimate fate of the wicked is not to be destroyed but preserved alive forever. Sodom and Gomorrah were reduced to ashes; in other words they were turned into nothing but dust. If this is what is ultimately going to happen to the wicked, then Sodom and Gomorrah are a great example of it. However if the wicked are to suffer in fire for all eternity and never be reduced to dust, or if the wicked are to suffer for a time and then ultimately be saved, then the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah would seem to be a rather poor example of that. If the fires of Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed those cities' inhabitants but the fire in store for the wicked today is going to preserve them alive for all eternity, then how is Sodom and Gomorrah an example of that?

Jude 7 also speaks of Sodom and Gomorrah as an example. **“7. as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a 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.”** Here Jude makes these cities an example of “the vengeance of eternal fire.” This is a refutation of the argument of many traditionalists, who would say that if the fires of hell are eternal, then so must be the suffering of those who are sent there. However this argument is proved a lie by Jude's own statement. If Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the vengeance of eternal fire and yet are gone, finished, reduced to ashes, and totally destroyed, then how can the vengeance of eternal fire in the lake of fire in the future be something totally different? Why did the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah suffer the vengeance of eternal fire and it resulted in their destruction, whereas the wicked who are sent to the lake of fire in the future suffer the vengeance of eternal fire and it results in their eternal, conscious torment? No, the illustration of Sodom and Gomorrah for the future of the wicked fits only if their future is destruction. It fits well with the conditionalism view, but is completely out of place with the traditional view. If Sodom is the example, then the fire the wicked are to expect is destructive, just as conditionalism teaches.

Conditional Immortality acknowledges the mortality of man, not only regarding his body but also regarding his “spirit” and his “soul” as well. It is the only view that truly acknowledges the teaching of I Timothy 6:15-16, **“the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who alone has immortality.”** The views of traditionalism and universalism grant immortality to man (as well as to heavenly beings) as a universal right and reality. Yet the Bible teaches that Jesus Christ alone is immortal. Thus Conditional Immortality alone fits with the Bible's teaching about death, the mortality of the soul, and the fact that Jesus Christ alone inherently has immortality.

Conditional Immortality, while it does not admit any inherent future life for mankind, also acknowledges the reality of the resurrection. We might wonder in the view of the traditionalists just why there is a need for resurrection at all, if man can live between death and resurrection quite nicely without it? The wicked can suffer their rightful punishment and the righteous enjoy their happy reward without resurrection ever occurring. So why then is resurrection even necessary? Traditionalists must come up with ideas like the rejoining of the soul and the body, but these ideas are found nowhere in the Bible and ultimately smell of excuses. Yet in conditionalism resurrection is vital, for without it, in the words of Paul, **“Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished,”** I Corinthians 15:18. Moreover conditionalists acknowledge resurrection of both the just and the unjust and acknowledge future punishment.

Conditionalism, unlike the traditional view, preserves the truth that death is a return found in Genesis 3:19: **“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.”**

Conditionalism preserves the truth that the wages of sin is death and that eternal life is a gift to be granted, not a right to be inherently enjoyed, as is stated in Romans 6:23, **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

Conditionalism preserves the truth that death, not unending torment, is the ultimate punishment for Adam’s sin as said in Genesis 2:17: **“but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”**

Conditionalism allows for universal resurrection as set forth in Acts 24:15: **“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.”**

And conditionalism leaves room for God’s wrath on the wicked following their resurrection, as in Romans 2:5-11: **“But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, 6. who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’: 7. eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; 8. but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, 9. tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; 10. but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 11. For there is no partiality with God.”**

In other words, conditionalism fits with the whole message of Scripture.

When the truth of the Conditional Immortality view is seen and accepted, one can find confirmation of this view on just about every page of Scripture. The definition of death given at the very beginning of the Bible fits with conditionalism when death is said to be a return, the body to dust according to Genesis 3:19, and the spirit to God Who gave it according to Ecclesiastes 12:7, **“Then the dust will return to earth as it was, And the spirit will return to God Who gave it.”** Death being a return fits conditionalism. It does not fit the traditional view.

Conditionalism fits with the concept of Sheol as found in the Old Testament as a place, or more accurately as a condition (of being dead) into which both the wicked and the righteous pass at death. This is plain from the very first use of the word in Genesis 37:35, when Jacob said, **“For I shall go down to the grave (sheol) to my son in mourning.”** It fits with David’s description of death and Sheol in Psalm 6:5, **“For in death there is no remembrance of You; In the grave (sheol) who will give You thanks?”** It fits with the silence of the wicked in Sheol, Psalm 31:17, **“Do not let me be ashamed, O LORD, for I have called upon You; Let the wicked be ashamed; Let them be silent in the grave (sheol).”** In short, it fits with the Bible’s picture of the fate of all after death, both righteous and wicked, as being in a place of silence, of no memory, of no thankfulness. Conditionalism fits with the concept of Sheol in Scripture. Traditionalism does not.

Conditionalism fits with many statements in the Bible regarding the fate of the wicked. Their fate is described as being no more in Psalm 37:10, **“For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place, But it shall be no more.”** Even Satan is said to end up being no more in Ezekiel 28:19, **“All who knew you among the peoples are astonished at you; You have become a horror, And shall be no more forever.”** The fate of the wicked is also described like disappearing into smoke in Psalm 37:20, **“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.” One vanishes into smoke when he is burned up by fire, but not when he remains in fire being tortured for all eternity. Paul describes the fate of the ungodly as destruction in Philippians 3:19, **“Whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.”** Statements such as these might be multiplied, but these will suffice. The Bible teaching regarding the fate of the wicked fits with conditionalism, but not with the view traditionally held.

Conditionalism fits with the statements of the Bible that make death and life to be opposites. Isaiah the prophet spoke to King Hezekiah in II Kings 20:1 and told him, **“Thus says the LORD: ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’”** God speaks of the families of the Kohathites among the priests and says, **“But do this in regard to them, that they may live and not die,”** Numbers 4:19, which again makes death and life to be opposites. Moses says of Reuben, **“Let Reuben live, and not die, Nor let his men be few.”** The teaching of Scripture is that death and life are opposites. Yet traditionalism makes death unreal and life continuous. There is no contrast in traditionalism between death and life. Yet conditionalism fits with death and life being opposites.

Conditionalism fits with the illustration of death, especially for God’s people, as a sleep. Psalm 13:3 says, **“Consider and hear me, O Lord my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death.”** Illustrating death as a sleep, especially in the light of resurrection which will someday wake us out of it, makes sense if death is in reality an end and cessation of life. But how does this make sense if the dead are often conscious and awake? The Lord Jesus says in John 11:11, **“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’ 12. Then His disciples said, ‘Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.’ 13. However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep.”** At the martyr Stephen’s death we read in Acts 7:60, **“Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”** This beautiful euphemism makes perfect sense if death is a cessation of life until resurrection, but makes no sense at all if, the instant he died, Stephen found himself alive in heaven. Only conditionalism fits with the illustration of death as a sleep.

Conditionalism fits with many statements of Scripture that a person is dead. Jehovah says in Joshua 1:2, **“Moses My servant is dead.”** How was this true if he was then currently alive in heaven? David says in II Samuel 2:7, **“Your master Saul is dead.”** The Lord Jesus said plainly to His disciples in John 11:14, **“Lazarus is dead.”** What shall we do with these statements if death is unreal, just a transplanting from one place to another like an uprooted tree, as many make it out to be? Only conditionalism fits with such statements.

Of the four views we have examined, traditionalism assumes the immortality of the wicked, which is not taught by Scripture, and denies the reality of death as the wages of sin. Universalism denies that the end of some is destruction, a truth clearly taught in the Bible. The universality of resurrection proves that the wicked must someday be raised to be judged, which proves that the idea that the wicked dead have already received their final punishment is not correct. Only conditional immortality fits with all the Biblical statements regarding the future of the wicked. Thus, we conclude from our studies that it is the Conditional Immortality view, the view that we might call conditionalism, that fits with a study of all that the Bible has to say on the subject.

Thus we can come to no other conclusion than that conditionalism is correct and that death, destruction, or the final and irrevocable end of their lives is the true fate of the wicked set forth by Scripture. While other punishments might precede that final fate, making such statements as that made regarding Judas possible, **“It would have been good for that man if he had never been born,”** Mark 14:21; still death is the ultimate and final punishment that

all the wicked, all the unsaved, will experience. This is the teaching of the Bible, and it is the teaching that we believe and will teach and support. We pray that this view might become the view of all our readers as well.

Nathan C. Johnson

Letters to Precepts

(On "Fate of the Wicked Part 3: No Future Punishment")

Letter: Thank you for sending the study of "Fate of the Wicked 3: No Future Punishment."

Nathan: You are welcome.

Precepts: By this view, then, believers who have lived an unworthy life are the ones who will be punished in the lake of fire before achieving their final salvation and reward.

Letter: I met Oscar Baker when he used to travel to Milwaukee for conferences sponsored by Open Bible Fellowship in the late 70's/early 80's. I was aware of this position as I used to hear it proposed however I never researched it thoroughly as I found it noticeably inconsistent with Scripture from the start. I was not aware of the element where the proponents would move the lake of fire to be a place of remediation for the saved who did not walk worthy. This feature is doubly ridiculous and almost seems a counterpart to the Catholic concept of purgatory.

Nathan: Generally I think they would assign the lake of fire to Israelites who did not walk worthy, more than believers today. They make Revelation to be all about Israel (which it is) so that everything there only affects Israel (which is not the case). Therefore they put the lake of fire as remediation for Israelites. What the remediation for unfaithful believers today would be according to their view, if it is not the lake of fire, I am not sure. Mr. Baker certainly does make clear that he expects that the passages that speak of future punishment all have to do with bad-acting believers or God's people. That includes the lake of fire and all other passages. I agree that this does not fit with

Scripture. Making the lake of fire to be for God's people and again a matter of ongoing punishing, not destruction, seems to me to be little better than the traditional view. At least they do not teach that it is "eternal" in the duration of the punishment, which I guess means this ends up being infinitely less terrible than the traditional view. It is still a terrible view of God, however, that His punishment, on His people no less, is of such a nature.

Letter: With regard to Acts 24:15

Precepts: It just does not make sense that Paul could call believers, who in Christ ARE the just, the "unjust." This would make them the "unjust just," which makes no sense.

Letter: Little sense is to be made from beliefs that one tries to force into Scripture, and the fate of all those who try is to one day be ashamed. May there be many who are losing their imagination that the Word supports the beliefs of man.

Nathan: Scripture teaches universal resurrection, not just resurrection for the saved. It teaches future punishment, not just for sinful believers but for all the wicked. Their end may be destruction, but that does not mean that they have reached their end when they die the first time. The road they take to get to their destruction has a detour which involves their resurrection and judgment. That is the teaching set forth by God's Word.

Precepts: We did not start out suffering unendingly and then somehow get removed from it to live our lives. There is no return, there is no end of life, about believers suffering in fire. This again redefines death contrary to the Bible.

Letter: Does one who identifies as a believer really want to be contrary to the

Author and Finisher of his faith? But the flesh protests, “but it feels right, so it must be.” I suppose both of us have been involved in counseling others where the protest is “oh but I feel, I feel, I feel.” This belief that is contrary to Scripture is ultimately just another one of the “I feel” ideas that man loves. Might we all learn that the things loved by God are the only things worth loving.

Nathan: Yes, many do try to define truth by how they feel about it. One feeling that many people have is that they do not want to believe that death is really death. Yet it seems sad to get halfway there and admit

the destruction of the wicked, then turn around and proclaim that the second death in the lake of fire is not death after all! Why could not we just realize the freedom to make death consistent? Of course, there are many other things that people want to feel are true. That they will get away with their sins is one. That God's rules do not really apply to them is another. That all their behavior is excused is a third. Yet someday it is God's truth, not man's feelings, that will set in order this world. All will have to bow to the reality of His truth at that time.

Nathan C. Johnson

Next issue: Presenting more comments I have received on my website, precepts.wordpress.com. Comments as well as an interesting article from a Russian author about sex in the resurrection life. A new reader, Vincenzo, discusses the issue with me. Then, our previous commenter WorldQuestioner asks questions about Bible laws on clean and unclean animals, as well as presenting his thoughts on “Old Earth Creationism.”