



# Understanding & Addressing Conditional Immortality

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**Note:** This cannot possibly cover every issue and you will have to pinch and zoom to read smaller texts on social media

# VIABLE POSITION OR HERESY?

James White, on the dividing line, when asked about Conditional Immortality, concedes: The vast majority of traditionalists believe in endless torment because of tradition, conditionalism is one of the hardest positions to deal with scripturally, that the arguments have significant weight, the traditional arguments struggle, conditionalist arguments are far better than most traditionalists are willing to admit, and so on. He remains staunchly against Conditionalism at this point in time.

It is acceptable according to historical articulations of heresy and orthodoxy. It was always present throughout church history; it does not reject any core doctrine of the Christian faith, either directly or by implication, nor was it rejected by any early church councils or creeds. It became dogma in the Roman Catholic Church but does that matter? William Tyndale, Martin Luther, and John Milton were supporters of conditionalism. In our modern context, many recognize it is secondary in nature. Many in New Testament scholarship hold to it (ex: of some evangelicals; Basil Atkinson, Richard Bauckham, E. Earle Ellis, Roger Forster, R.T. France, Michael Green, Harold Guillebaud, P.E. Hughes, David Instone-Brewer, Dale Moody, I. Howard Marshall, John Stackhouse Jr., John Stott, Richard Swinburne, Anthony Thistleton, Terrance Tiessen, Stephen Travis, John Wenham, and Nigel Wright. Many modern New Testament scholars also acknowledge the potentiality of conditionalist interpretations.



# STRAW MEN TRADITIONALISTS SHOULD STOP USING:

## Conditionalists/Annihilationists believe:

- People simply poof out of existence at the first or second death
- This view denies the reality of hell
- This view denies that the punishment of hell is eternal
- Some cults and fringe groups have believed it; therefore it is false
- The view is based on emotionalism
- Conditionalists deny that scripture is the Word of God
- Conditionalists take the easy path



Claim	Reality
Conditionalists believe People simply poof out of existence at the first or second death	Conditionalists believe that the wicked are raised at the final judgment and are punished in perfect measure in accordance with their sins with the final result being captial punishment - death to body and soul
Conditionalists deny the reality of hell	Conditionalists fully affirm the reality of hell
Conditionalists deny that the punishment is eternal	Conditionalists affirm that the wicked go into eternal punishment - the punishment is irreversibile and final.
Because some cults believe it, it must be false	Cults can believe truths along with their error, there are also many fringe adherents of eternal conscious torment.
Conditionalists base their view on emotions	Both positions have emotional appeals, but it is an error to suggest that conditionalists base their entire view on emotions when they have a robust arsenal of biblical texts. Additionally, discussions on divine justice as revealed in scripture are not emotional inherently. It is a part of divine revelation around God's nature and standard for justice.
Conditionalists deny that scripture is the word of God	There are and have been many conditionalists who fully hold to the conviction of scripture being the word of God.
Conditionalists take the easy path	While this could be argued theologically-emotionally, in truth many conditionalists are ostracized by the Christian community, making it a difficult path

# COMPARING POSITIONS:

	<b>Hell is...</b>	<b>Immortality is...</b>	<b>The Soul is...</b>	<b>Evil is dealt with...</b>	<b>Satan and Demons</b>
<b>Eternal Conscious Torment</b>	Eternal <i>punishing/ torment</i> of the wicked	Given to both those in Christ and the wicked	Immortal and functionally* indestructible	By being restrained	Are eternally being punished
<b>Conditionalism/ Conditional Immortality</b>	Eternal <i>punishment</i> of the wicked	Given only to those in Christ, not the wicked	It can be immortal, but is ultimately destructible by God	By being destroyed	Can be tormented eternally or suffer eternal destruction

\*functionally indestructible meaning that the views maintain the soul will not be destroyed, not necessarily that they believe the soul cannot be destroyed.

# POINTS OF CONTENTION:

## Eternal Conscious Torment

Human souls are inherently immortal

Destruction is being destroyed (continuous action) forever

Death is primarily spiritual, separation, and hell is a place of living in eternal death.

The wicked live forever in hell

## Conditionalism

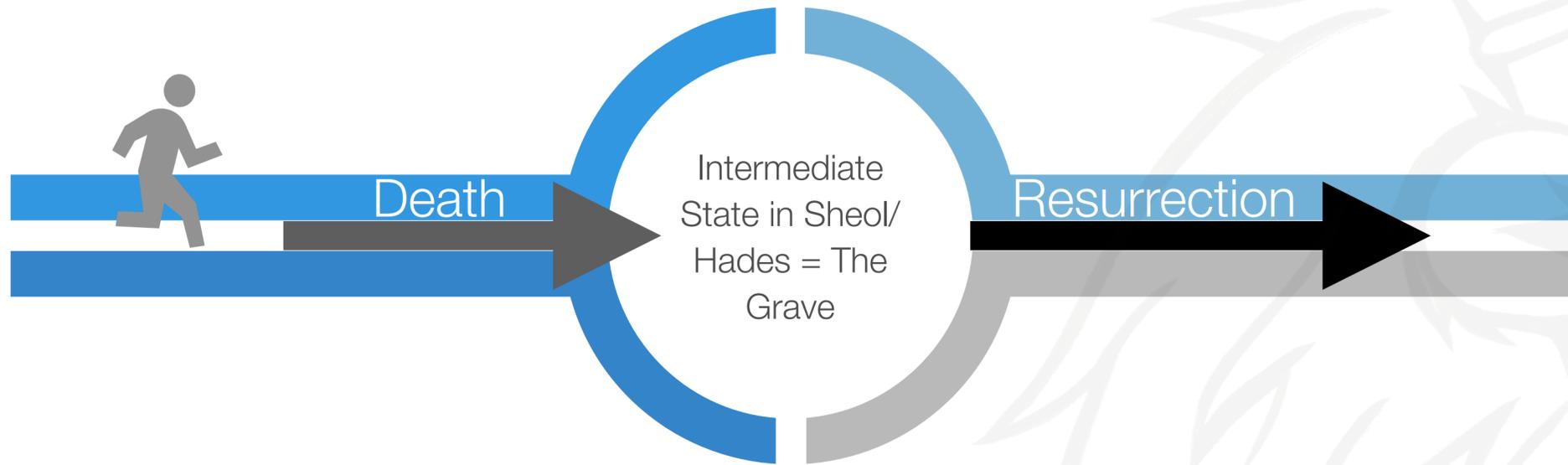
Human souls may be (or may not be) immortal, but they are not indesctrutbile in the hands of God

Destruction is being destroyed (being annihilated) forever

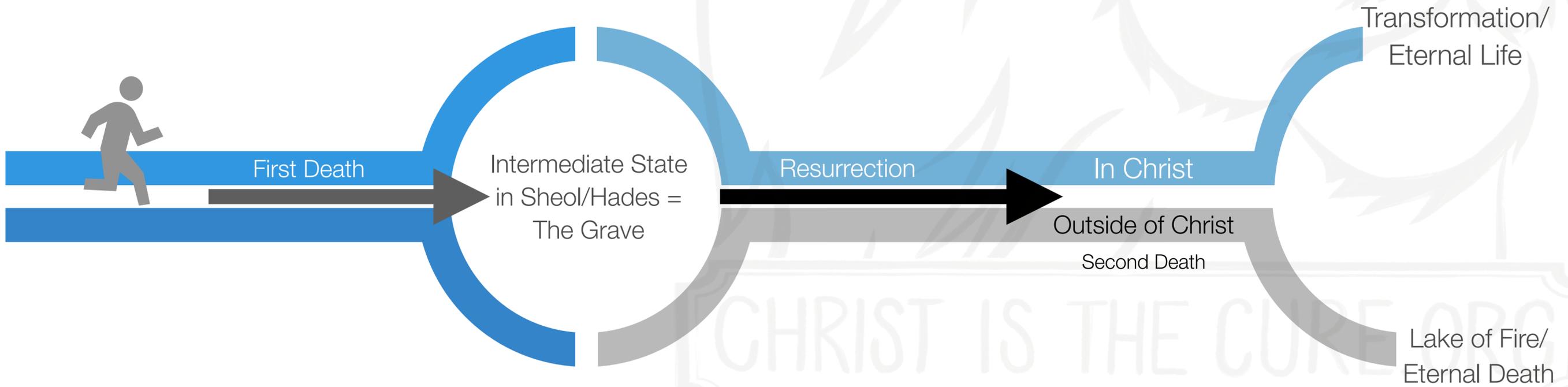
Death is *ultimately* wholistic. In the first death, the body dies and ceases to function (some adopt soul sleep), in the second death the whole person dies. Death does include separation, but it is not limited to that aspect.

Only believers will live forever

# LUKE 16 TAKES PLACE IN THE INTERMEDIATE STATE REGARDLESS OF INTERPRETATION



Conditionalists also affirm texts that state “we were dead in sin” but hold they are texts speaking to the final destination. The statements are true but not realized yet. Just as Paul says, we are seated with Christ in Heaven (Col. 3) or have eternal life now when it is a future reality, so death is the outcome of those without Christ - they are dead men walking.



# WHAT IS THE CASE FOR CONDITIONALISM?

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The wicked are on a path to destruction (Phil. 1:28; 3:19; 1 Th. 5:3; 2 Th. 1:9; 2 Pet. 2:1; 2:12; 3:7). Weeping and gnashing of teeth can be indicative of the intermediate state (Luke 16) or the very real pain of being destroyed in the eschaton. The Bible says what that just as God crushed Sodom and Gomorrah and “condemned them to extinction,” he was making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6). Peter claims this is the state of these cities (“Extinction”) and the example is for the wicked. Jude describes it as “serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” (V. 7). It’s eternal, final, irreversible.

2 Thessalonians 1:9, “They [the wicked] will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.” This notion is seen throughout the text, even in the Psalms; the wicked are like chaff that the wind drives away, who will not stand in the judgment, and will perish [be destroyed] (Psalm 1:1-5). Those who do not fear the Lord will be broken into pieces like a vessel (2:7). They will not stand before the Lord but will be destroyed (5:5-6). They will be cast out (5:9). The nations perish, and their name will be blotted out forever and ever (9:5-6; 10:16). Like Sodom, the wicked will have coals, fire, and sulfur as their portion (11:6). They are like smoke that vanishes (Ps 37:20), wax that melts (Ps 68:2), and a dream that vanishes (Ps 73:20). The Lord preserves those who love him, “but all the wicked he will destroy [or exterminate, annihilate]” (Psalm 145:20). The Psalms repeatedly point to the end of the wicked, their destruction, and their memory is no more. Proverbs claims that the wicked will pass away, be overthrown, be cut off, be no more, their lamp put out (Prov 2:21–22; 10:25; 12:7; 24:15–20).

The words of Jesus and John the Baptist in the Gospels are pulled straight from the Old Testament. The imagery is Jesus with a winnowing fork, clearing the field, and throwing chaff in the unquenchable fire. The fire consumes the chaff. The stress on ‘unquenchable’ doesn’t phase conditionalists as the term means inextinguishable. Both sides agree that the fire (a symbol of judgment) cannot be stopped but will accomplish its purpose. The conditionalist would ask: Does this mean that the *fuel of the fire* is eternally non-consumable? No. To stress this point, unquenchable does not mean ever burning but irresistible. Because it cannot be thwarted in its intended purpose or stopped short of accomplishing its goal, unquenchable fire full consumes (Ezekiel 20:47-48), reduces to nothing (Amos 5:5-6), or burns up what is put into it (Matthew 3:12).

Using the Old Testament that Jesus and John allude to, Malachi 4:1 states, “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.” The arrogant and evildoers will be like stubble (straw), set ablaze, burning like in an oven, and rather than this text claiming an eternal non-consumption of this straw, it says there will be nothing left, “neither root nor branch.” The fire consumes its fuel. (cf. Leviticus 10:1-2 when it speaks about Nadab and Abihu, “fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.” The notion that the Lord is so holy that he consumes is found throughout the Bible.)

# WHAT IS THE CASE FOR CONDITIONALISM?

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A lot of the imagery comes straight from the eschatological text of Isaiah 66, which also brings up the worm that will not die. To summarize a great deal, we read about the evil in particular, "the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many" (v. 15-16). In contrast, those who sanctify themselves enter the gardens and the wicked "shall come to an end together" (v. 17). When the passage moves to the subject of the New Heavens and New Earth, we read that all flesh shall come to worship before the Lord (v. 22-23). At this point in the chapter, the wicked are no more. They have been slain. Those who remain are those faithful who come to worship, "And they [those faithful] shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." As most are familiar with Jesus' teachings on Hell, we see that this text is essential. The wicked are not pictured as being conscious but dead bodies that are abhorrent. As we read in v. 16, the slain are many, so much so that the worm shall not die as the worms consume the bodies. If one is to suggest that the worm is immortal, this does not make the collection of corpses conscious, nor does this imply that the worm's interaction with these corpses is equative to torment for those corpses. Worms or maggots are confirmation of death; they are not tools of torture (cf. Isaiah 14:11; Job 17:13-14; 24:19-20). Further, the fire will not be quenched until it has finished its work of consuming these corpses (cf. 2 Kings 22:17, the wrath will not be quenched; Isaiah 1:31; etc.).

For Conditionalists, Eternal Conscious Torment struggles in explaining how things look in the New Heavens and New Earth. Paul says the "plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:7-10). This is the restoration of all things, "and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." (Colossians 1:20). The problem, however, is that for Traditionalists, not "all things, things in heaven and things on earth" are at peace, united with Christ, and reconciled to him. There is instead a pocket of enemies remaining in eternal conscious torment. Pain, suffering, and evil remnants remain in God's cosmos in the ECT scheme; they are merely contained. While Paul contradicts this and says that Every rule, authority, and power, is destroyed, and every enemy is under his feet and the last enemy to be destroyed is death. God is "all in all" when all enemies are destroyed. (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Here it is postulated that the clear solution is in the text's clear meaning - "all enemies will be destroyed," and all that remains are those who are united to Christ. For the wicked? The second death is their destiny. They will perish. "But we [Christians] are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls" (Hebrews 10:39). Peter speaks that the outcome of one's faith is the salvation of their soul (1 Peter 1:9) and that Christ is the Shepherd and overseer of our souls (1 Peter 2:25). While men can kill the body, they cannot kill the soul. In contrast, God can destroy both in hell (Matthew 10:28).

Isaiah 10:18, when speaking against the Assyrians, we read that God will "will destroy, both soul and body, and it will be as when a sick man wastes away." In Isaiah 55, when there is an invitation to turn to God, "Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live; and I will make with you an everlasting covenant" (v. 3). The prophet Ezekiel is told that his soul will be delivered (3:19; 21). The Lord further states, "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4) and "The soul who sins shall die" (v. 20).

# WHAT ABOUT REVELATION?

The conditionalist side responds well to those texts often used by the traditionalist perspective and usually based on the OT. Examples here: in Revelation 14, the imagery is used for Sodom, Gomorrah, and Edom originally. (See Isaiah 34:10 and Genesis 19:24-28). While the same language is used for these historical cities, the fire consumed them. They would also point to Babylon in Revelation (18:8-10; 19:1-3), where her plagues come “in a single day,” and she is burned up with fire by God’s judgment (v. 8). Those who lived with Babylon watch and weep when “they see the smoke of her burning.” (v. 9). When they stand “in fear of her torment,” they say, “for in a single hour your judgment has come.” (v. 10). Then they would point out that Babylon is mentioned later, but not with weeping. Instead, a multitude in heaven praises God for his judgment, saying, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.” (19:3; 1-3). Yet it has been said numerous times that Babylon has been burnt up, and destroyed, yet, “the smoke from her goes up forever and ever.”

To quote from traditionalist, Beale, on the text of Revelation here: “Does the portrayal mean that unbelievers are to be annihilated, so that their existence will be abolished forever? Or does this text refer to a destruction involving not absolute annihilation but the suffering of unbelievers for eternity? The OT context of Isaiah 34 could support the former view, since there the historical annihilation of Edom is portrayed. The image of continually ascending smoke in Isaiah 34 serves as a memorial of God’s annihilating punishment for sin, the message of which never goes out of date (see Wis. 10:6–7; cf. Sodom in Gen. 19:28). Likewise, to an escalated degree, in Jude 7 Sodom is “set forth as an example of [others] undergoing the punishment of eternal fire.” Accordingly, the lack of rest “night and day” also has its background in Isa. 34:9, where, like the smoke, it refers to the enduring effects of the extinction of Edom. In particular, “day and night” (ἡμέρας καὶ νυκτός) in 14:11 can be taken as a qualitative genitive construction indicating not duration of time (like the accusative construction of the same phrase) but kind of time, that is, time of ceaseless activity (e.g., Mark 5:5; Luke 18:7; Acts 9:24; 1 Thess. 2:9; 3:10; 2 Thess. 3:8; 1 Tim. 5:5; 2 Tim. 1:3; so also the LXX of Pss. 21[22]:3[2]; 31[32]:4; 41[42]:4[3]; 54[55]:11[10]; Isa. 34:9; 60:11; Jer. 8:22[9:1]; 14:17; Lam. 2:18).<sup>448</sup> The lack of rest will continue uninterrupted as long as the period of suffering lasts, though there will be an end to the period. Therefore, the imagery of Rev. 14:10–11 could indicate a great judgment that will be remembered forever, not one that leads to eternal suffering.”

- G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary.