

Hell: A Final Word
The Surprising Truths I Found in the Bible
by Edward William Fudge

Review by Barbara Buzzard

This is a very exciting book to review since the movie based on it has made a credible impact and the effects could be large with potential to ignite real Scriptural investigation. *Hell and Mr. Fudge, A little story about a big lie* is a full length movie predicated on this book and Mr. Fudge's previous ones. The aim of both author and producers is to enlarge the conversation; to cause people to stop and consider why we believe what we do and to alert them to the abysmal lack of support for commonly held beliefs. The movie will provide a most excellent talking point for speaking to neighbors and friends. ("Have you seen/read the new movie/book about hell?") What a gift that the subject is so boldly on the table now.¹

Mr. Fudge tells us that when he began his study, the subject of hell would have gone in his "things-we-know-for-sure" box. He embarked on a year-long study to "discover the origin of the doctrine of everlasting conscious torment. As it happened, I found that origin to be in Greek philosophy and not in Holy Scripture...I will tell you this — with no desire to exaggerate or to be controversial — that no one before or after could have been more *astounded* at the things I found throughout the Bible during the course of my study."² (Is this not something you would want to share with everyone you know?)

Astonishment at What He Found

We are reminded that this book and his previous ones³ challenge the orthodox view held by nearly all of the Christian world for at least 1600 years. In the secular world, this might be akin to challenging what orbit earth takes. But the religious world is not one that is very good at "fessing up." I never hear "we were wrong" coming from church officials. It is most interesting to note that three editions of *The Fire That Consumes* were published over a 29-year span, during which time seventeen scholars wrote twelve books in response to Fudge's challenges. "Hell is a subject that the sixteenth-century Reformers did not reach to restudy. It is a topic still crying out for serious Bible study."⁴ (I am thinking that there might just be several other subjects crying out for serious study and rethinking. Why would this be the only one they got wrong?)

"In all the teaching of Jesus, no element stands out more vividly than that final judgment will result in two destinations. Hell will involve separation from family and friends, if some are redeemed and some have rejected God's grace. But far more important, it will mean final separation from God...The world of Jesus' parables is a world full of separations: weeds must be separated from grain (Matt. 13:30). And in Jesus' most famous parable of this sort, he compares God's final separation of human beings to the separation of sheep and goats by a Palestinian herdsman (Matt. 25:31-46)."⁵

¹ I recently spoke to an atheist who had given a presentation against Christianity the previous evening. One of his severest criticisms of the Christian faith is its doctrine of everlasting torment. He was much relieved to hear that there are Christians who do not believe in that eternal torture.

² Edward William Fudge, *Hell, A Final Word*, pp. 16, 17

³ Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* and *Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue*.

⁴ *Hell, A Final Word*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24, 25

Where Did the Details of Hell Originate?

“The traditional majority view says that hell is eternal, that those who go to hell are eternal, and that they will live eternally in hell. In addition, this view says the torments of hell are eternal and will never end... Where did the details of that hell originate? Did they come from the Bible? If so, in which Scripture text can they be found?”⁶ Fudge points out amusingly that in Hebrews nearly everything in sight is considered “eternal.” Could it be that without some study of what “eternal” means we might have made some wrong assumptions? (And what does this say about those who *have* studied it; why so little deviation from orthodoxy in 1600 years?)

“Our supposedly Christian culture has accepted a view of hell that owes more to human imagination and pagan myth than to the Bible.”⁷ “What does the traditional doctrine tell your mind and heart about the character of God whom you love and worship, the same God you sometimes beg in prayer to relieve your own suffering and that of others? Is this picture of hell consistent with the Bible’s stories about Jesus — whom to see, is to see the Father? Must we believe that God, who made every human being in His own image, and who is sorry when even a sparrow dies, will torment men and women forever — although He could easily allow them to die instead?”⁸

“Astonishingly, many believers have become so accustomed to the idea that the lost will agonize in conscious torment forever that they scarcely give it a second thought. Indeed, the traditional doctrine of hell as everlasting conscious agony has gained such acceptance during the past sixteen centuries that millions of good-hearted people placidly accept it as necessary to believing the Bible. Yet these same individuals instinctively recoil in horror whenever they hear the news of some temporary human atrocity... Others, who have not become desensitized by long familiarity with the traditional doctrine of hell are appalled. Thousands, perhaps millions, of people created and loved by God have fled from Him in horror at the thought that he would torture anyone forever. Famous atheists have attributed their unbelief to this traditional Christian teaching... Scripture nowhere suggests that God is an eternal tormentor.”⁹

Slander?

Mr. Fudge challenges his readers by asking if God’s character is not slandered in attributing to Him these grotesque charges? If Scripture does not teach these things, then to say that it does appears to be slander against the Most High God. He asks us to consider this imaginary scenario: the babysitter you hired told your children that *you* said you would punish them for any naughtiness by putting staples in their fingers, cutting off their ears, and stuffing them into the microwave until they popped. Our emotional response to such lies would be nothing in comparison with the slander against God.

“Jesus never mentions unending torment, and what he says about hell explains why he does not. Jesus uses the word ‘hell’ (Gehenna) eleven times and is the only person in the Bible who uses it at all to speak of final punishment. It is important to know *what* Jesus says about hell. Hell is the place, Jesus warns, where God is able to destroy both soul and body (Matt. 10:28). The same verse says that this destruction is total and includes the whole person, soul and body alike.”¹⁰

Mr. Fudge makes the radical point that those who “go to hell” are those who refuse to be saved and *not* for the following reasons: because of Adam’s sin, because one was born in the wrong place or wrong time, because one did not belong to the “true” church, for misunderstanding some Scripture while sincerely seeking truth.

⁶ Ibid., p. 26

⁷ Ibid., p. 29

⁸ Ibid., p. 32

⁹ Ibid., p. 33, 34

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 36

One of the four pillars of the traditional view of hell is the theory (stated as fact) that the Old Testament says nothing about hell. Fudge explains that the Old Testament is full of teaching about divine justice, about the fate of the wicked and indeed what they will be like — broken pots, vanishing smoke, stubble in the wind, chaff blown away, etc. and then asks his readers if these images are more consistent with a fire that torments *forever*, or a fire that *consumes*. This pillar of a tormenting hell Fudge effectively demolishes as well as the other three. They are either true or they are false.

Gem of Understanding

The following is a gem of understanding: we know that God rained fire and brimstone upon Sodom and Gomorrah and that everything was destroyed there. Jude states that Sodom and Gomorrah “are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7). “If we did not have the Bible’s own definition of ‘eternal fire,’ we might assume that it was fire that burned forever and never went out...However, we have Jude’s own statement that Sodom and Gomorrah are *examples* of ‘eternal fire.’ Sodom’s fire is not still burning, but what it burned will never be seen in this world again. That is what makes ‘eternal’ fire *eternal* — the fact that its *destruction is permanent* and that it will never be reversed.”¹¹

The powerful images of the wicked in Isaiah 66:24 simply do not fit what is taught in most churches. The wicked are dead, unburied; they are disgusting and they disappear. Fudge emphasizes that these are dead corpses rather than living people; that they are being destroyed rather than tormented, and that the worms and fire consume rather than torture. “Jesus was not yet born when someone began to change the picture — essentially reversing all its details — making it exactly opposite to the picture that Isaiah had given.”¹²

Little Story About a Big Lie

Fudge does battle with his opponents when it comes to meanings of words and shows how important it is to be simple and consistent. “‘Perish’ does not mean ‘perish’ here, they say, ‘destroy’ surely cannot mean destroy.’ In fact, when these words are used to describe what will become of the wicked in hell, they mean that the wicked will *never* perish as that word is commonly used, and they will *never* be ‘destroyed’ in the ordinary sense of that word. So instead of letting simple words have their usual simple meanings...the scholars who teach everlasting torment go looking for other texts of Scripture that use ‘perish’ and ‘destroy’ in a figurative sense.”¹³

“It is not uncommon for a traditionalist author to praise Scripture’s teaching as the written word of God, then, when Scripture seems to contradict the traditionalist view, to dismiss the argument as contrary to what most theologians have always believed...This inconsistent behavior is not new. It has been going on for about 1,600 years since St. Augustine. Earlier writers such as the unknown author of the Didache, Justin Martyr, Ignatius, and others taught the fire that *consumes*, the view throughout Scripture. Athenagoras and Tertullian urged the fire that *torments*. Clement of Alexandria, and especially his successor Origen, favored the fire that *purifies*.”¹⁴

This historic fact is both tragic and amusing: the question of what happens in hell is not an open question since it was settled long ago by a *church council*. It is both abhorrent and silly at the same time that a church council would decide such a thing! Anyone challenging the traditional view of hell by appealing to the Bible might well be sternly reminded of “what

¹¹ Ibid., p. 71

¹² Ibid., p.77

¹³ Ibid., p.91

¹⁴ Ibid., p.99

evangelicals have always taught,” and thus turning out the lights. This is not indicative of an intelligent approach.

Scripture or Tradition – You Choose

“Those three words — die, perish, and be destroyed — are the very words that New Testament writers use most often to describe the final end of the wicked. Isn’t it interesting that most modern believers think they are sure that those who go to hell will *not* die, will *never* perish, and certainly will *never* be destroyed.”¹⁵

If only we believed 1 Timothy 6:16 which makes it clear that only God has immortality, we would have been spared a lot of grief. “The doctrine of everlasting torment was the direct descendant of the doctrine of immortal souls. *Once the idea of everlasting torment was accepted and established, the church explained every Scripture to match the accepted doctrine, even when that meant creating an explanation that seemed to say the opposite of what the Scripture itself seemed to say.*”¹⁶

Mr. Fudge reveals that Martin Luther was one who expressed his belief that souls were asleep at death and that there was no conscious intermediate state, thus questioning/denying the immortality of the soul, as did the Anabaptists. Religious history is nothing if not murky and that is to be kind. “Calvin wrote his first religious book against the Anabaptists on these issues...the volume accused the Anabaptists of getting their doctrines from hell, stated that their name alone is enough to damn anything they say, and many other intemperate and inflammatory statements...When Luther recognized Calvin’s vehemence on these points, he became quiet, leaving the Anabaptists standing alone in the world, and everyone else — Catholic, Reformed, and perhaps also Lutheran — hating and persecuting the Anabaptists.”

*Author Fudge finds the doctrine of the immortality of the soul an astonishing one. Think about it: as frail and finite as we are — we would be as long lived as the eternal God. Though we refer to God as the ‘ancient of days’, we would be that too. We could not cease to exist. And yet Scripture states: ‘It is the person who sins, himself, who must die.’*¹⁷ “*Today, teachers of the Bible and theology in almost any accredited college or seminary know that the idea of immortal souls imprisoned in mortal bodies does not come from the Bible. Yet many fine people — professors, preachers, and pastors included — have not realized the pivotal role of that truth in the present rethinking of hell.*”¹⁸

Life or Death – Not Heaven or Hell

I appreciated Mr. Fudge’s warm personal style; his own story is effectively woven throughout the chapters. I certainly respect the fact that he gave himself to this study of hell for 40 hours a week for a year (and in doing that, apologizes to his wife for his driven-ness.) He pursued Truth even when it cost him dearly. He consistently points out that Christians are given *two choices: life or death, not heaven or hell*. The truth, he says, hit him like a tornado when he read Oscar Cullman¹⁹ who “*convincingly shows that the concept of immortal souls is unbiblical and that it sprung from Greek philosophy and not from divine revelation.*”²⁰

The title of this book, says Mr. Fudge, is to remind us “that when hell finally has completed its job, there will be nothing left to say. Everyone who goes there will be gone, entirely and eternally.”²¹

¹⁵ Ibid., p.135

¹⁶ Ibid., p.157, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Ezek. 18:4

¹⁸ *Hell, A Final Word*,, p. 159, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Oscar Cullman, *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead? The Witness of the New Testament*, 1958

²⁰ *Hell: A Final Word*, p. 160

²¹ Ibid., p. 17

Mr. Fudge chose the courageous route in publishing this book. When one bucks the system, the system is usually neither kind nor forgiving. I am thankful that Fudge followed his conscience rather than the safety of staying with the herd. The famous biblical writer John Stott who wrote an article called “Stott on Hell” received such flack from colleagues that he chose not to allow a wider publication of his article. (I think he felt he had received enough “hell” already.) Thankfully, Mr. Fudge speaks of an evangelical climate change and *The Fire That Consumes* is considered “the standard reference on annihilationism” by *Christianity Today*. F. F. Bruce, one of the 20th century’s most respected scholars, wrote the foreword to *The Fire That Consumes*. Scholars such as John W. Wenham, Dale Moody, E. Earle Ellis, Homer Hailey, Philip E. Hughes, Stephen Travis, Michael Green, I. Howard Marshall and the previously mentioned F. F. Bruce have all rejected the concept of unending conscious torment in hell. But my concern is this: *when does this truth and recognition of wrong teaching ever filter down from the pulpit to the lay person?*

Doesn’t This Idea Make God a Monster?

“In short, the doctrine of everlasting conscious torment strikes countless numbers of people, ranging from devout believers to militant atheists, as intuitively and irreconcilably **inconsistent with fundamental justice and morality.**”²² Amen from me! Even the numbers of times I have had to type the phrase everlasting conscious torment has affected me adversely. What a hash our theologians have made of this! And how dare we hallow such men, their councils, or their unbiblical ideas? They have kept us from the Truth too long. We well know the phrase “the sanctity of life.” We must consider the sanctity of God’s name and His intentions. Is it not a scandal to attribute everlasting torture to the God who, being the Judge of the whole earth, shall do right? “Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?”²³

I heartily recommend this book; the need to know for our spiritual and mental health is great. If indeed it is “a little story about a big lie,” again - we need to know. My hope is that the very sobering and urgent matter of examining these things would continue. Were a very similar study to be done on the nature of heaven — would we not come to find that this concept, too, has been corrupted? We need honest hearts, we need serious study, careful thought, reflection, consideration and perhaps most of all — courage.

²² Ibid., p. 47, Emphasis mine.

²³ Gen. 18:25b