



WHERE IS HELL?

QUEST LESSON E-12

The Problem: Christian literature for centuries has represented hell as a place of burning to which the wicked go 'immediately at death. They are supposed to burn in the unmerciful fires for eternity with no hope of ever being relieved from their terrible sufferings. Lurid scenes of hellfire have been depicted by preachers and painters. Many people have been frightened into obeying the dictates of the church, because they were told that if they did not, they would suffer the misery of eternal hellfire. Many others have rebelled against a God who is supposed to subject people to such untold suffering. They could not reconcile the Bible concept of God as infinitely loving with the popular view of God as a cruel tyrant who burns people for eternity.

What does the Bible really teach on this subject? Is there a hell in which lost people burn immediately after death, or is that idea a myth? Is "hell" ever referred to as a place of punishment? What is the nature of the punishment, and when is it meted out? Does it last for eternity, or does it come to an end?

These are good questions that we must answer from the Scriptures. But first we must emphasize that God is, indeed, a God of wonderful love for all the children of men. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). God's love for you is so great that He endured on Calvary's cross the very same punishment (and worse) that is to be given to lost sinners at the end of time. That was the suffering of hell of the most terrible kind.

But how could Jesus' suffering ever be regarded as the suffering of hell? He didn't burn for eternity. In fact, we have no evidence in the Bible that He was burned anywhere at anytime. Yet, he "bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (1 Peter 2:24). He suffered death for every human being. Our guilt was laid upon Him (Isaiah 53:6), and He endured far more torture of soul than any lost human being will ever know anything about.

So before you condemn God as unjust for punishing the wicked, you must consider what God has done to save them! The measure of the punishment is the measure of the sacrifice. God does punish, the Bible says. But we shall see that He does not make people burn for eternity. He puts them to death because they have rejected the infinite sufferings of Jesus on their behalf.

We noted in the lesson "Where are the Dead?" (Lesson E-10) that death is a state of unconsciousness. We must always keep that in mind as we consider the meaning of "hell" in the Scriptures. The Bible does not contradict itself. If it says that the lost are put to death, we know that they are not conscious for eternity. And if they are not conscious for eternity, they cannot be suffering in the fires of hell for eternity.

Let us turn now to the Bible and see what it says about hell.

Objectives

First, we shall note how the Bible identifies hell as the grave.

Second, we note that hell is also an experience of punishment. We must ask when, and where?

Third, what does the Bible mean by "everlasting destruction"?

Fourth, what does the Bible mean when it talks about people burning "forever"?

Fifth, how can we avoid going to hell?

I. Hell Often Means the Grave

In both the Old and New Testaments hell is very often simply a reference to the grave in which people are in a state of total unconsciousness.

The Bible

1. In what words did Job identify hell (the grave; Hebrew sheol) as a place of steep? Job 14:10-13.
2. How does the Psalmist identify hell (sheol) with the grave? Psalm 6:5.
3. In what sense do both good and bad people go to hell? Psalm 89:48.
4. Why is death always associated with hell? Isaiah 28:15.
5. What happens in "hell," when the word means the grave? Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-32; Isaiah 38:18-19.

Explanation: The Hebrew word for "hell" is sheol. In most of its uses in the Old Testament, it refers to the grave, a place of unconsciousness where both good and bad people sleep until the resurrection at the end of time. The bodies of both good and bad are reduced to corruption. The life-principle ("breath," or "spirit") of both good and bad has been taken back by God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

There is no passage in the Old Testament in which hell is a place of suffering immediately after death. We shall see that the suffering for the lost comes at the end of time. It does not take place between death and the resurrection of the wicked at the end of the millennium.

The word "grave" in the King James Version of the texts we have cited above is the Hebrew word sheol that means "hell." The corresponding Greek word, used in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), is hades. This is the word for the grave used also in the New Testament.

Job pointed out that those in "hell" (the grave) are sleeping (Job 14:12-13). The Psalmist emphasized that in hell (the grave) God is not remembered or thanked. The righteous people are not in heaven (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, 10), and the wicked people are not burning in the fires of an underworld. All are asleep, and all experience corruption of their bodies. Psalm 89:48 proves that at death all people, good and bad, go to hell, in the sense of the grave. The word for "grave" in that verse is sheol in the Hebrew Bible and hades in the Greek translation.

Death and hell are often associated throughout Scripture (e.g. Isaiah 28:15), simply because when all human beings die, they are placed in the grave. There is absolutely no evidence that they go to a place of burning temporarily or permanently. For a discussion of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) see Lesson £-10, where it is explained that the parable was a sermon illustration that was not intended to be taken literally.

When Jesus died, He was placed in the grave (hell). But He did not see corruption there (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-32). If He had gone to a place of burning, He most certainly would have experienced corruption. David, who wrote Psalm 16, was reduced to corruption when he died, not because he went to a place of burning, but because his body, divested of the life principle, disintegrated in the grave. David was a forgiven, righteous man. Yet he saw corruption in the grave. When he died, he did not go to any place of burning, nor did he go to heaven (Acts 2:34). Peter interpreted David's Psalm to apply to the resurrection of Christ from the grave.

Relevance: The terrors of death have haunted many people throughout the centuries. They have feared that they would go immediately to a place of punishment. Such a fear is based on myth and false philosophy, not on the Word of God. Death is followed by the grave (hell) where all people rest peacefully, until the righteous are raised in the first resurrection at the second coming of Jesus, and the wicked are raised in the second resurrection at the end of the millennium.

II. Hell As Punishment

There are several instances in Scripture where hell is referred to as the final punishment of the wicked at the end of the millennium.

The Word

6. What did Jesus say would bring us in danger of hellfire? Mark 9:43-47; (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:9); Matthew 5:22.
7. What will God destroy in hell at the end of time? Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5.
8. When is hell as punishment the experience of the wicked? Revelation 20:9, 14.

Explanation: The Greek word used for "hell" in the New Testament, when the reference is to punishment of the wicked at the end of the millennium, is *geenna*. It referred to the Valley of Hinnom, a gorge near Jerusalem where in ancient times apostate Israelites sacrificed their children to the god Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:1, 6). The prophet Jeremiah predicted that because the Jews had sinned in this way the Lord would make the Valley of Hinnom a "valley of slaughter" (Jeremiah 7:32-33). The wicked Israelites would be buried there until there was no more room. Then the dead bodies would lie on the surface of the ground to be consumed by wild beasts and birds.

This is why the Valley of Hinnom (*geenna*) became a symbol of God's destruction of the wicked at the end of time. Hell (*geenna*) in this sense refers to the fires of the last great day, when at the end of the millennium the wicked who are besieging the holy city will be forever destroyed by fire.

Jesus explained that cherishing sin would result in hellfire. He urged that it is much better to deny oneself in this life than run the risk of being destroyed in the fires of the last great day (Mark 9:43-47). Some interpreters of the Bible take the position that, since the fire will not be quenched (verse 43), the wicked must burn on for eternity. There is another way to explain unquenchable fire that is quite consistent with the teaching of Scripture throughout. We will take further note of that in the next section. Unquenchable fire in the Bible is not eternally burning fire.

Those who believe in the immortality of the soul teach that Mark 9:44, 46, 48 refer to the soul suffering on interminably in hellfire. "Their worm" that does not die is supposed to be the immortal soul that does not die. The original Greek word (*skolex*) means "a maggot," or "a worm." It is a symbol of corruption and wretchedness. The corruption of the wicked will not pass away, and the fire will not be quenched until it has done its job of reducing them to nothingness (Malachi 4:1, 3). There is nothing in the passage to imply that the undying worm is the immortal soul. Worms that are devouring bodies do not last long in fire. The point is that there is no way for the spiritual impurity of the wicked to be removed, and no way that the fire can be put out until it has consumed them.

Jesus taught that the souls of the lost will not burn in hellfire for eternity. He urged that we "fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). If the soul will be destroyed, it is not immortal, and it will not go on suffering in hellfire for eternity. The word for "soul" used here is the Greek word *psuche*. It is the word that means "life." The body and the life-principle are removed from the wicked in hellfire. God is the one who destroys disobedient souls in hell. He is the one to be feared by evildoers and revered by believers. The devil certainly is not the one spoken of here, because he too is to be destroyed in the fires of the last day (Revelation 20:10). He and all his followers will be consumed away in the punishment of hellfire. Never again will they have the privilege of life, and never again will they be a threat to the righteous government of God.

Some interpreters have used 2 Peter 2:4 (compare Jude 6) as evidence that there is a place somewhere called "hell," to which the wicked angels were consigned, and to which wicked humans go at death. Peter wrote: "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment."

The word for "hell" used here occurs only this once in the New Testament. In fact, it is not a noun; it is a verb. It is the verb *tartaroo*, that means "to hold captive in Tartarus." The Greeks thought of Tartarus as a place lower than Hades

where divine punishment was given. Jewish apocalyptic writers, who were much influenced by Greek thought, presented the same idea. They believed in the immortality of the soul and so had the concept of perpetual burning. Peter uses a Greek word to express the fact of the fallen angels being cast out of heaven and kept in a particular part of the universe until the judgment day. Because he uses that Greek verb, it does not imply that he believed in the Greek idea of Tartarus. Peter does not say, nor do any other Bible writers, that Satan and his demons are in hellfire now. Their punishment, as Peter says, will come later. They are "reserved unto judgment," which comes at the end of the millennium (2 Peter 2:4; compare verses 7-10; Revelation 20:10).

Relevance: The final punishment of the wicked is spoken of 'in Scripture as hellfire. It will occur on this earth at the end of the millennium. There is no such thing as hellfire for the wicked immediately after death. And the fire that consumes them at the end of time does not burn eternally. In the next section we will give greater emphasis to that point.

Relevance: The final punishment of the wicked is spoken of in Scripture as hellfire. It will occur on this earth at the end of the millennium. There is no such thing as hellfire for the wicked immediately after death. And the fire that consumes them at the end of time does not burn eternally. In the next section we will give greater emphasis to that point.

III. What Is Meant By "Everlasting Destruction"?

Several times in the New Testament the destruction of the wicked is said to be "everlasting" or "eternal." For that reason, some interpreters of the Bible have assumed that the wicked will burn in hellfire for eternity. We will examine the passages and see for ourselves what they mean.

The Word

9. How did Jesus describe the fire that would destroy the wicked? Matthew 3:12; 18:8; 25:41, 46.
10. According to Paul, what kind of destruction will be meted out upon the lost? 2 Thessalonians 1:9.
11. What kind of fire destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah? Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:6.
12. What kind of fire did Jeremiah predict would destroy the old city of Jerusalem? Jeremiah 17:27.
13. Was Jerusalem destroyed as Jeremiah predicted? Did the fire burn out? 2 Chronicles 36:19, 21.
14. Will the fire that destroys the wicked burn out? What will be their state then? Malachi 4:1-3.

Explanation: Jesus spoke of the fire that would destroy the wicked as "unquenchable," "everlasting," or "eternal." The Apostle Paul referred to the "everlasting destruction" that the wicked would suffer. Do these statements of Jesus and Paul imply that the wicked will burn eternally? The answer is no. The fire is unquenchable because, like the fire that burned old Jerusalem, nothing can put it out until it has done its job of consuming the lost (Jeremiah 17:27). The fire is everlasting or eternal in its results. Sodom and Gomorrah suffered "the vengeance of eternal fire," but the wicked people of those cities are not still burning. The cities and their inhabitants were reduced to ashes (2 Peter 2:6). Malachi predicted that the lost would be reduced to ashes. Where would the ashes come from if the wicked went on suffering in the flames for eternity?

Another point on this question is of major importance. In speaking of the punishment of the wicked, both Jesus and Paul used the adjective "eternal," or "everlasting." The Greek adjective used in the New Testament is *aionios*. This adjective and its corresponding noun *aion* (eternity), do not necessarily mean "never ending." Often they refer to a period of limited duration. For example, this present "world," or "age," which is coming to an end, is spoken of as this *aion*. (e.g. Matthew 13:39; Ephesians 1:21; 2 Timothy 4:10; 1 Corinthians 2:7).

Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says that "the meaning of *aion* merges into that of a long but limited stretch of time, *aion* in this sense signifies the time or duration of the world, i.e., time as limited by creation and conclusion. At this point we are confronted by the remarkable fact that in the Bible the same word *aion* is used to indicate two things which are profoundly antithetical, namely, the eternity of God and the duration of the world. This twofold sense, which *aion* shares with the Heb. 'olam, points back to a concept of eternity in which eternity is identified with the duration of the world." (Volume I, p. 202).

In the same way the adjective "eternal" may mean a period of limited duration. Paul wrote to Philemon concerning Onesimus: "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou receive him forever" (Philemon 15). The phrase "forever" translates the Greek adjective *aionios*. It does not mean that Philemon would have the Services of Onesimus for eternity. It means that Onesimus would serve Philemon until he died. The New International Version paraphrases it correctly: "Perhaps the reason he separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good" (Philemon 15, NIV).

Liddell and Scott's Greek English Lexicon comments on *aion* (eternity) and *aionios* (eternal), that the noun may mean a "period of existence... lifetime, life... space of time clearly defined and marked out, epoch, age. this present world." The adjective *aionios* (eternal) may refer to "holding an office or title for life, perpetual..."

H. C. G. Moule in The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges sums up the Bible use of the adjective "eternal" by commenting on Philemon 15: "The adjective tends to mark duration as long as the nature of the subject allows."

What is the nature of those who are taken to heaven at the second coming of Jesus? They are given immortality when Jesus appears (1 Corinthians 15:51-54). Therefore, they live eternally, because beings who are immortal can never die. (John 3:16, 36; Matthew 25:46).

What is the nature of the wicked upon whom the fire is reigned at the end of the millennium? They are still mortal beings! Paul taught that "the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23). The eternal punishment of the lost is eternal death, the opposite of eternal life. Because the lost are mortal, they can die and will die in the fires of the last great day. If they lived on in the fire for eternity, they would have eternal life, not eternal death. In the phrase "eternal fire" the word "eternal" refers to the limited period of intense suffering which comes to an end when the wicked die. The fire is eternal because it brings the world (*aion*) to an end. And the fire is eternal in its results. The death of the wicked is an eternal (never-ending) death. That is what Jesus meant when He said of the lost: "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25:46).

Relevance: Neither Jesus nor Paul taught that the lost will burn for eternity. The Bible is clear. God mercifully puts the wicked to death for eternity. They are punished for having rejected Christ's salvation, but they do not suffer through unending ages. Their *aion* (age, life) ends when their lives are consumed in the Fires of the last great day.

IV. What Is Meant By "Forever and Ever"?

The same Greek and Hebrew words that are sometimes translated "eternal," in other contexts are translated by "forever." In the light of what we have already said about the Biblical meanings of "eternity" and "eternal," it should be clear that "forever" may also apply to a period of limited duration.

The Word

15. How long are Satan and his followers said to suffer in the fire at the end of the millennium? Revelation 14:11; 20:10.
16. How long was Jonah in the belly of the whale? Jonah 2:6; 1:17; compare Matthew 12:40.
17. How long were Gehazi and his seed to be lepers? 2 Kings 5:27.
18. How long was the Passover to be kept? Is it still kept by Christians today? Exodus 12:24; 1 Corinthians.
19. What is to be the fate of the wicked forever? Jude 13; 2 Peter 2:17.

Explanation: "Forever" does not always mean unendingly throughout eternity. It is an English translation of *aion* or *aionios* (Greek), or *'olam* (Hebrew), which we have seen to mean sometimes a period of limited duration. Jonah was not in the belly of the whale eternally, Gehazi and his seed had leprosy only until death, and the Passover ceased to have meaning when Jesus died on the cross. In each case, "forever" meant a period of limited duration.

The wicked burn "forever and ever" in the sense that nothing can interrupt their severe suffering in the fire until they are burnt up. But their period of burning is limited; it is not eternal. In fact, Jude 13 and 2 Peter 2:17 indicate that the lost will suffer blackest darkness "forever." What better way could there be to describe the darkness of eternal death?

The Psalmist pointed out that no one will be able to discover where the wicked are after they have been destroyed, because they will have been entirely consumed (Psalm 37:10, 20; 68:1-2).

Relevance: Once again we observe that God is merciful in bringing the sufferings of the wicked to an end. Certainly the period that Jonah was in the whale's belly must have seemed to him like forever. And the sufferings of the lost will seem to them like forever. But the Lord is too loving and merciful to make them suffer unendingly for eternity!

V. How Do We Avoid Going to Hell?

The good news is that a person who knows Christ is free from guilt and condemnation and need have no fear of hellfire.

The Word

20. What did Jesus say was the means by which we are freed from condemnation? John 3:18, 36.

21. In what words did Paul emphasize the point? Romans 8:1.

Explanation: The guilt of forgiven sinners has been cast into the depths of the sea (Micah 7:19). They are free from condemnation. As long as they retain their victorious relationship with Christ they will be vindicated by the pre-advent judgment (Daniel 7:9-14), declared eternally righteous at the close of human probation (Revelation 22:11), and taken to be with Jesus when He returns (John 14:1-3). Why should the Christian with such promises and such a hope have any fear for the future? Praise the Lord, He knows "how to rescue the godly from trial," even though in the interests of divine justice, it is necessary for Him to punish the wicked for a limited period in the fires of hell at the end of time.

Relevance: God loves you with an infinite love! He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Have you repented of your sin by accepting Christ as your personal Savior? He longs to take away all your guilt and give you release from your terrible inner struggles. Jesus is your Friend forever. And that means for eternity, if you want it to be so! Receive Him now and be entirely free from guilt and condemnation.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. True or False
 - a. Hell often simply means the grave, a place of unconsciousness.
 - b. Hell as punishment refers to the punishment of the wicked at the end of the millennium.
 - c. The wicked will burn for eternity.
 - d. When Jesus died, He descended to a place of burning.
2. Discuss: Would heaven really be a joyous experience for the saved if they knew that their loved ones and friends, who were lost, were writhing in ceaseless anguish in hellfire? How could they love God in those circumstances?