

The Meaning of the Eighth Day Feast - Part 3 – Hell

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November 20, 2014



28th day of the 8th month 5850 years after the creation of Adam

The 8th Month in the Fifth year of the Third Sabbatical Cycle

The Third Sabbatical Cycle of the 119th Jubilee Cycle

The Sabbatical Cycle of Earthquakes, Famines and Pestilence

November 22, 2014,

Shabbat Shalom Family,

We are once again at the end of another month. This Sabbath is the 28th day of the month. Sunday will be the 29th day. Take your family out after sunset and practice sighting the moon. We have a diagram to assist you in finding it. Make it into a contest to see who can see it first. This is the time to practice.

Yehshua said no man can know the day or the hour of His coming. This is a Hebrewism and is speaking of the Feast of Trumpets which is determined by the sighting of the moon to start the first day of Yom Teruah. No one can know when that takes place until the moon is sighted.

Many Christians quote this verse in ignorance, showing they know nothing about the Holy Days. They quote this verse every time someone comes up to them with prophecy about the end times. It is their "I don't have to listen to you" card. Stop being ignorant of the times of Yehovah and get on His Clock schedule.

New Moon November 2014

I just want to remind you all of what we have covered thus far in our study of this Eighth Day Feast.

Firstly, that Yehshua kept it as we are told in John 10:22 and that this Eighth Day Feast was also known as the Feast of Dedication. Although dedication means chanukah in Hebrew, this day was in no way connected to the feast currently known as the Feast of Chanukah kept around Christmas.

Next you learned that in order to understand this Feast Day you had to ask for wisdom, knowledge and understanding to gain the righteousness you need to be in the Kingdom. All of this is given to you as you obey the commandment and this is how we show Yehovah we love Him, by keeping the commandments.

Yehovah desires to dwell with us but we must keep the rules of the Kingdom, which are the Ten Commandments.

We are to put sin out of our lives in order to be a part of that Kingdom, as shown to us in the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Yehshua was the first fruit to come back to life from the grave, defeating Satan who has the power of death and the grave until that time. The 24 elders are part of those first fruits who were once human beings on this earth and came out of the grave when Yehshua did, as we read in Matthew 27. This is

represented by the barley wave offering each year. The 7 days of Unleavened Bread are represented in the 7 millennial days leading up to the 8th Day Feast or Millennium.

The First Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread we likened to when Adam was killed for sinning on the first millennial day in the same way the firstborn of Egypt died on the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, otherwise known as Passover night.

The Seventh Day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread is represented by the time when the Egyptian armies were destroyed when the frozen walls of water came crashing back down on them after Israel had crossed over the Red Sea. This represents the time at the end of the 7th millennium when Satan will be cast into the lake of fire along with the grave and death.

The 7th Day weekly Sabbath is then compared to the 7th Millennial Rest. Again, in all of this we are learning about the 8th Day Feast.

Because so many of you have succumbed to the false teaching about Heaven and Hell and do not know it, you are not able to grasp the rich and deep meaning of the Eighth Day Feast. This week we are going to explain how and when this false teaching came into this Christian walk. Once you remove these false teachings from your mind, then the truth will be more readily visible and the Eighth Day Feast Day more plain to understand. <http://www.ucg.org/booklets/HL/index.htm>

Heaven or Hell Which one are you going to?

Introduction

Most religions and religious organizations, including most Christian denominations, teach that good people go to some sort of paradise, usually heaven, after they die. Heaven is typically characterized as a place of unsurpassable happiness—the ultimate paradise. It is commonly taught and believed that all who go there will live joyfully forever.

Yet despite what a wonderful place it's supposed to be, it seems no one is in a hurry to go there.

Widespread belief in death as the gateway to heaven does not change the fact that most people view death as something to be avoided at all costs. Through medical science we usually do everything we can to prevent death as long as possible.

If people could journey right away to eternal life in heaven by means of some heavenly express, wouldn't we find that almost no one would want to buy a ticket? Wouldn't we find that most people would prefer to continue their present life here on earth? The possibility of immediate residence in heaven doesn't seem to be that appealing.

Our actions indicate this is the way most of us think.

An eternity doing what?

Perhaps the reason for the reluctance to enter the hereafter through death is that no one has ever provided us with a truly compelling explanation as to what the righteous would do after arriving in heaven. If we are to spend all eternity there, you would think God would tell us in the Bible what we should expect once we arrive. Will we spend our time plucking harps? Will we sit and simply gaze upon God forever and ever? These are both popular conceptions of heaven, but most people can't imagine doing either for eternity. Eternity is, after all, a long time!

Maybe we should ask ourselves a straightforward question: Do these common concepts even come from the Bible?

Many people who expect to go to heaven admit they can find little in the Scriptures about what they have to look forward to once they get there. British historian and author Paul Johnson put it this way: “Heaven... lacks genuine incentive. Indeed, it lacks definition of any kind. It is the great hole in theology” (The Quest for God, 1996, p. 173).

If heaven is the goal God has set for His servants, why has He revealed so little about it in His Word?

There is a simple reason we encounter a vacuum when we look in the Bible for what the “saved”—those who are spared some sort of eternal punishment—will do in heaven. The Bible does not say the righteous will dwell in heaven as their reward. As we will see, the Bible reveals that God has something else in mind — something far different and far superior to most people’s concepts about heaven!

Heaven-And-Hell-Sign-660x330

Troubling questions about hell

But confusion about heaven isn’t the only problem we run into when we consider popular views of life after death.

What about the unrighteous, those who don’t measure up? What happens to them?

Many who profess Christianity believe the wicked will burn forever in hell. They sincerely believe this is what the Bible teaches.

But we need to ask a simple question: Would a merciful and loving God inflict excruciating torment on human beings for trillions upon trillions of years, throughout all eternity without end? Could the great Creator God of the universe be so unfeeling and uncaring?

The Bible indeed says that God “has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). At that time those who have repented and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior will be given eternal life. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12, New International Version).

But what will happen in that day to the hapless people who have never even heard or been exposed to that name?

Will they be cast shrieking into hellfire along with those who knowingly hate and despise God?

Only a minority of the earth’s population lays claim to being Christian. Those who profess Christianity total only about a third of the world’s population. Vast numbers of the other two thirds have never had the opportunity to genuinely repent and accept Christ simply because of where they live. Millions more through the centuries likewise never had the opportunity because of when they lived. Would it be just and right for God to subject them to the same punishment He will give to those who willfully reject Him and choose to make themselves His enemies?

These questions are neither trivial nor hypothetical. They affect the overwhelming majority of all people who have ever lived. When carried to their conclusions, the traditional answers have sobering implications about the character, nature and judgment of the God Christians claim to worship.

We need to face these questions squarely and honestly. Isn’t it time we examined the truth of what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell?

The Biblical Truth about the Immortal Soul

Traditional beliefs about heaven and hell are based on an underlying teaching – that everyone has an immortal soul that must go somewhere when physical life ends.

This belief isn't unique to traditional Christianity. "All religions affirm that there is an aspect of the human person that lives on after the physical life has ended" (World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts, Andrew Wilson, editor, 1995, p. 225). In other words, in general, all religions believe in some kind of immortal essence, a spirit that lives on separately after the physical body dies. Most professing Christians call this the immortal soul.

Failure to understand this subject correctly is a fundamental reason for the prevalent beliefs regarding heaven and hell. If an immortal quality exists in a human being, it must depart from the body when the body dies. The typical views of heaven and hell have as their foundation the belief in the immortal soul that leaves the body at death. What does the Bible say about the existence of an immortal soul? Does this belief have a foundation in Scripture?

soul-leaving-body1

Not from the Bible but from Greek philosophy

Many are surprised to learn that the words "immortal" and "soul" appear together nowhere in the Bible. "Theologians frankly admit that the expression 'immortal soul' is not in the Bible but confidently state that Scripture assumes the immortality of every soul" (Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1994, p. 22, emphasis added throughout).

Considering how confidently theologians hold to this doctrine, it's quite surprising that such an important assumption is not spelled out in the Bible. If it isn't found in the Bible, where did the idea originate?

The *New Bible Dictionary* offers this background on the non-biblical nature of the immortal-soul doctrine: "The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and they looked for the time when the soul would be free from its shackles. They conceived of life after death in terms of the immortality of the soul" (1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection").

According to this idea, the body goes to the grave at death and the soul continues to exist as a separate, conscious entity.

Belief in a separate soul and body was popular in ancient Greece and was taught by one of its most famous philosophers: "The immortality of the soul was a principal doctrine of the Greek philosopher, Plato ...In Plato's thinking, the soul ...was self-moving and indivisible ...It existed before the body which it inhabited, and which it would survive" (Fudge, p. 32).

quote-the-soul-of-man-is-immortal-and-imperishable-plato-285605

When and how did the concept of the immortality of the soul enter the world of Christianity? The *Old Testament* does not teach it. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains: "We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

The first-century Church did not hold to this belief either: "The doctrine is increasingly regarded as a post-apostolic innovation, not only unnecessary but positively harmful to proper biblical interpretation and understanding" (Fudge, p. 24).

If such an idea was not taught in the Church during the time of the apostles, how did it come to assume such an important place in Christian doctrine?

Several authorities recognize that the teachings of Plato and other Greek philosophers have profoundly influenced Christianity. History and religious studies professor Jeffrey Russell states, “The unbiblical idea of immortality did not die but even flourished, because theologians ...admired Greek philosophy [and] found support there for the notion of the immortal soul” (A History of Heaven, 1997, p. 79).

The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, in its article on death, states that “the ‘departure’ of the nephesh [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it... No biblical text authorizes the statement that the ‘soul’ is separated from the body at the moment of death” (1962, Vol. 1, p. 802, “Death”).

Should we then accept a teaching that is not found in the Bible? Many people take it for granted that their beliefs are based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and God’s Word. Yet Jesus said in a prayer to His Father, “Your word is truth” (John 17:17). Does God give men the liberty to draw from the world’s philosophers and incorporate their beliefs into biblical teaching as though they were fact?

God inspired the apostle Peter to write, “Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:20-21). We must look to the words of Christ, the prophets and the apostles in the Holy Scriptures if we are to understand the truth about the doctrine of the immortality of the soul or any other religious teaching.

Let’s dig further to see exactly what the Bible tells us about the soul.

Soul in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew word most often translated into English as “soul” in the Bible is nephesh. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible succinctly defines this word as meaning “a breathing creature.” When used in the Bible, nephesh does not mean a spirit entity or the spirit within a person. Rather, it usually means a physical, living, breathing creature. Occasionally it conveys a related meaning such as breath, life or person.

Surprising to many, this term nephesh is used to refer not just to human beings, but also to animals. For example, notice the account of the creation of sea life: “And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:21, King James Version). The Hebrew word translated “creature” in this verse is nephesh. In the biblical account, these particular “souls,” creatures of the sea, were made before the first human beings were formed and given life.

The term is also applied to birds (verse 30) and land animals, including cattle and “creeping” creatures such as reptiles and insects (verse 24). It follows, then, if we make an argument for man possessing an immortal soul, animals must also have an immortal soul, since the same Hebrew word is used of man and animal alike. Yet no biblical scholars would seriously make such claims for animals. The truth is, the term soul refers to any living creature, whether man or beast—not to some separate, living essence temporarily inhabiting the body.

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a “soul” (Hebrew nephesh) more than 130 times. The first place we find nephesh in reference to mankind is in the second chapter of Genesis: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (verse 7, KJV).

The word translated “soul” in this verse is again the Hebrew word nephesh. Other translations of the Bible state that man became a living “being” or “person.” This verse does not say that Adam had an immortal soul; rather it says that God breathed into Adam the “breath of life,” and Adam became a living soul. At the end of his days, when the breath of life left Adam, he died and returned to dust.

The Old Testament plainly teaches that the soul dies. God told Adam and Eve, two “living souls,” that they would “surely die” if they disobeyed Him (Genesis 2:17). God also told Adam that He had taken him from the dust of the earth and he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19).

Among the plainer statements in the Bible about what happens to the soul at death are Ezekiel 18:4 and 18:20. Both passages clearly state that “the soul who sins shall die.” Again, the word for “soul” here is nephesh. In fact, this same word was even used of corpses—dead bodies (see Leviticus 22:4; Numbers 5:2; 6:11; 9:6-10).

Not only do all these scriptures show that the soul indeed can and does die, but the soul is identified as a physical being—not a separate spirit entity with existence independent of its physical host.

The Scriptures tell us that the dead have no consciousness: “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They are not conscious in some other state or place (see “Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep”).

The New Testament teaching

The New Testament contains several statements confirming that the wicked who refuse to repent will die—permanently. In Matthew 7:13-14, in exhorting His disciples to choose the way that leads to life, Jesus states that the end of those who do not choose life is destruction. He contrasts that path with the way of righteousness, telling us, “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Jesus, moreover, made it quite clear that utter destruction includes both “soul and body” (Matthew 10:28), the Greek word for “soul” (psyche or psuche) referring to physical, conscious existence (see “Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?” beginning on page 8).

The apostle Paul also stated that the wicked will die. In Romans 6:20-21 he talks about those who were slaves of sin and says that for them “the end of those things is death.” So those who are slaves of sin, who habitually commit sin, can perish completely. Yet many attempt to redefine death here and in other scriptural passages to mean merely separation from God.

Romans 6:23 is one of the best-known verses of the Bible. It plainly states, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Again, people will argue that death here means an eternal life of separation from God. Note, however, that death here is directly contrasted with eternal life. How, then, can death involve eternal existence through an immortal soul?

This verse plainly tells us two crucial truths. First, the punishment of the wicked is death, utter cessation of life, not a life of eternal suffering in another place (see also Philippians 3:18-19; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Second, we do not already have eternal life through a supposed immortal soul. Eternal life is something God must give us through our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul also tells us that God alone has immortality.

Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 6:8: “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life” (NIV). This tells us what happens to unrepentant sinners. Eventually they will reap destruction, referring to wasting away and perishing, but those who repent and obey God will ultimately receive eternal life.

No conscious afterlife without a resurrection

So is man an immortal soul? No. Does he have an immortal soul? No. The Bible declares plainly that man is temporary, of the dust of the earth. There is no immortal quality about man at all—unless and until he receives

it from God through a resurrection, which means being brought back to life in a body, raised from the dead as Jesus was.

The Bible clearly states that man puts on immortality at the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), not at the end of his physical life. Until that time man has no more permanence than animals.

Nor does man have some spiritual soul with conscious awareness independent of the physical body. This has been proven time and time again when individuals have gone into comas for weeks, months and sometimes years at a time, only to emerge from that comatose state with no memory or recollection of the passage of time.

If one had a soul that existed independently of the human body, wouldn't that soul have some memory of remaining aware during the months or years the body was unconscious? That would be powerful and logical proof of the existence of an independent soul within the human body—yet no one has ever reported any such thing, in spite of thousands of such occurrences.

This fact likewise supports what the Bible teaches—that consciousness ceases at death. Only through a resurrection to life will consciousness return.

Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?

Some believe that various scriptures support belief in an immortal soul. Let's consider some of these passages and understand what they really say.

Matthew 10:28: Destroying soul and body in hell?

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Is Jesus teaching in this verse that the soul lives on after death and is immortal? Not at all. If you look at this scripture closely, you see that Jesus is actually saying that the soul can be destroyed. Jesus is here warning about the judgment of God. He says not to fear those who can destroy only the physical human body (soma in the Greek), but fear Him (God) who is also able to destroy the soul (psyche)—here denoting the person's physical being with its consciousness.

Simply stated, Christ was showing that when one man kills another the resulting death is only temporary; God can raise anyone to conscious life again either soon after death (see Matthew 9:23-25; 27:52; John 11:43-44; Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-11) or in the age to come after Christ returns to the earth. The person who has died is not ultimately gone forever. We must have a proper fear of God, who alone can remove one's physical life and all possibility of any later resurrection to life. When God destroys one in "hell," that person's destruction is permanent.

What is the "hell" spoken of in this verse? The Greek word used here is gehenna, which comes from the combination of two Hebrew words, gai and hinnom, meaning "Valley of Hinnom." The term originally referred to a valley on the south side of Jerusalem in which pagan deities were worshipped.

Because of its reputation as an abominable place, it later became a garbage dump where refuse was burned. Gehenna became synonymous with "a place of burning"—a site used to dispose of useless things.

Only God can utterly destroy human existence and eliminate any hope of a resurrection. The Scriptures teach that God will in the future burn up the incorrigibly wicked in an all-consuming fire, turning them to ashes (Malachi 4:3)—annihilating them forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:23: Spirit, soul and body?

Many are confused by an expression the apostle Paul uses in one of his letters to the Thessalonians: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

What does Paul mean by the phrase “spirit, soul, and body”?

By “spirit” (pneuma), Paul means the non-material component that is joined to the physical human brain to form the human mind. This spirit is not conscious of itself. Rather, it gives the brain the ability to reason, create and analyze our existence (see also Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). By “soul” (psyche), Paul means the person’s physical being with its consciousness. By “body” (soma), Paul means a physical body of flesh. In short, Paul wished for the whole person, including the mind, vitality of conscious life and physical body, to be sanctified and blameless.

Revelation 6:9-10: Souls of slain crying out?

“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (Revelation 6:9-10).

To understand this scripture, we must remember the context. John was witnessing a vision while he was “in the Spirit” (Revelation 4:2). Under inspiration he was seeing future events depicted in symbolism. The fifth seal is figurative of the Great Tribulation, a time of world turmoil preceding Christ’s return. In this vision, John sees under the altar the martyred believers who sacrificed their lives for their faith in God. These souls figuratively cry out, “Avenge our blood!” This can be compared to Abel’s blood metaphorically crying out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Though neither dead souls nor blood can actually speak, these phrases figuratively demonstrate that a God of justice will not forget the evil deeds of mankind perpetrated against His righteous followers.

This verse does not describe living souls that have gone to heaven. The Bible confirms that “no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven [Jesus Christ]” (John 3:13). Even righteous King David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), was described by Peter as being “dead and buried” (Acts 2:29), not alive in heaven or some other state or location (verse 34).

The History of the Immortal-Soul Teaching

Despite widespread use of the phrase immortal soul, this terminology is found nowhere in the Bible. Where did the idea of an immortal soul originate?

The concept of the soul’s supposed immortality was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. “The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is...speculation...nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture...The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended” (Jewish Encyclopedia, 1941, Vol. 6, “Immortality of the Soul,” pp. 564, 566).

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the “immortal soul” separate at death. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia comments on ancient Israel’s view of the soul:

“We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament” (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, “Death”).

Early Christianity was influenced and corrupted by Greek philosophies as it spread through the Greek and Roman world. By A.D. 200 the doctrine of the immortality of the soul became a controversy among Christian believers.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology notes that Origen, an early and influential Catholic theologian, was influenced by Greek thinkers: "Speculation about the soul in the sub-apostolic church was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. This is seen in Origen's acceptance of Plato's doctrine of the preexistence of the soul as pure mind (nous) originally, which, by reason of its fall from God, cooled down to soul (psyche) when it lost its participation in the divine fire by looking earthward" (1992, "Soul," p. 1037).

Secular history reveals that the concept of the immortality of the soul is an ancient belief embraced by many pagan religions. But it's not a biblical teaching and is not found in either the Old or New Testaments.

Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep

What happens to a person when he dies? The Bible compares death to a state of sleep. It is not a normal "sleep," of course. It is a sleep in which there is no thought, brain activity or life whatsoever. Passages throughout the Bible show this to be the case.

For example, Ecclesiastes 9 states, "For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing . . . For there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verses 5, 10).

Daniel 12:2 describes the dead as "those who sleep in the dust of the earth," who later "shall awake" through being resurrected.

Job speaks of the state of the dead on more than one occasion. "Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb?...For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest...There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest" (Job 3:11, 13, 17).

Many centuries later the biblical account of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, illustrates death to be a sleeplike state. "Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany" (John 11:1). Jesus decided to go to him, but, so He could perform a miracle to strengthen His disciples' faith, He waited until Lazarus died.

Before going to Bethany, Jesus discussed the condition of Lazarus with His disciples. He told them Lazarus was asleep and that He was going to awaken him (John 11:11-14). The disciples responded that sleep was good because it would help him get well (verse 12). Jesus then plainly told them, "Lazarus is dead" (verse 14). Notice that Jesus stated emphatically that Lazarus was dead, but at the same time He described death as a condition like sleep.

When the time came for Jesus to act, "He cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come forth!' And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with grave clothes...Jesus said to them, 'Loose him, and let him go'" (verses 43-44).

Lazarus had not gone to heaven or hell. He had been entombed, where he "slept" in death until Jesus called him out of the grave by a miraculous resurrection.

Like Lazarus, everyone enters a figurative state of sleep at death. The dead are unconscious. The common belief is that at death the body goes to the grave and the soul remains conscious and goes either to heaven or hell. Yet as we have seen, this belief is not biblical.

In another reference that describes the state of the dead, Paul refers to the righteous dead who will be resurrected to meet Christ in the air as being "asleep":

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

So those who are in their graves will be resurrected, rising to meet the returning Messiah along with His followers who are then still alive. They all will be caught up in the air to meet Christ in the first resurrection. They will then return to the earth to reign with Him in the Kingdom of God.

That the dead are figuratively in a state of sleep, awaiting the resurrection, “was the prevalent opinion until as late as the 5th century” (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 35). The change away from the biblical teaching occurred several centuries after Christ. The plain teaching of the Bible is that the dead are unconscious, waiting in the grave. They are, as Jesus and Paul put it, sleeping. They will not awake until the resurrection.

Even Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, wrote at one point: “It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment . . . On what authority can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep . . . in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their downlying at night and their uprising in the morning?” (Letter to Nicholas Amsdorf, Jan.

13, 1522, quoted in Jules Michelet, *The Life of Luther*, translated by William Hazlitt, 1862, p. 133). Yet the Reformation did not embrace the truth that the dead sleep in total unawareness.

Eventually all will arise from this sleep. As Jesus said, the hour is coming “in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). This is the comforting and encouraging truth revealed in the Scriptures.

The Spirit in Man

Human beings do have a spiritual component to our makeup. As Job 32:8 says, “There is a spirit in man.” Zechariah 12:1 tells us that God “forms the spirit of man within him.” And the apostle Paul pointed out, “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

It is this human spirit that imparts human intellect to our physical brains, creating the human mind. This is what makes people vastly more intelligent than animals.

Yet this spiritual aspect of human existence is nothing like the immortal soul concept. It is something distinctly different. The spirit in man is not animate of itself. It is not a spirit entity that “lives on” after death. As Scripture shows, the human spirit has no consciousness apart from the body, for man is mortal. When we die, we will have no awareness of anything at all.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us that, at death, “the spirit returns to God who gave it”—where it is retained until the future time when God places those individual spirits within new bodies at the resurrection, thereby bringing individuals back to life with their personality and memories preserved and intact.

The human spirit is critical to our destiny, since God’s Holy Spirit joining with it is what makes us God’s children (Romans 8:16). And just as the human spirit gives us human understanding, so God’s Spirit gives us higher, godly understanding (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). We are not born with the Holy Spirit but receive it from God following repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38).

Will a Loving God Punish People Forever in Hell?

Take this simple test. Or perhaps it's better if you just imagined it, since the actual test would prove quite painful.

Light a match, then hold your finger in its tiny flame for five seconds. What happens? You'll likely scream involuntarily and suffer misery for several days from a painful burn.

Perhaps you've seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrible accident, his flesh gnarled and misshapen. Imagine being trapped in flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. What would that kind of agony feel like if it went on for a minute? For a year? For a lifetime? For ever and ever?

Most people would find the idea horrifying almost beyond imagination. They would understandably be aghast and sickened that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to accept the idea that the God they worship and hold in highest esteem would willingly inflict such punishment not on just a few, but on a great multitude of people who die every single day? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible's description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

tormented-soul

Just what is the truth about hell?

Hell through the centuries

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries. Perhaps one of the earliest to expound this view among Christians was the Catholic theologian Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage also wrote: "The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end" (quoted by Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This belief has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: "Whoever says or thinks that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal...let him be anathema" (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed its belief in eternal torture of the wicked in these words: "The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil" (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: "Christ will return...to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment" (Toon, p. 131).

Teachings on the subject of hell have by no means been consistent through the centuries. Beliefs about hell have varied widely, depending on which theologian's or church historian's ideas one reads. Generally speaking, the most common belief has been that hell is a place in which wicked people are tortured forever, but never consumed, by ever-burning flames.

boiling_oil

Hell's location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have believed it to be in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber.

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but rather in the 14th-century work *The Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In the first part of this work, called "The Inferno," Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (U.S. News and World Report, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II “declared that hell is ‘not a punishment imposed externally by God’ but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner’s choice to live apart from God” (ibid., p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved.

Why do we see so much diversity in beliefs about hell? Like belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are rife with the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible.

The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

An angry God

One of the most graphic descriptions of the torments of hell as conceived by men was given by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in a 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

He said: “The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrows made ready...[by] an angry God...It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction! The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire...”

“You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him...and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment...”

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God...You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.”

This human concept of hell was so terrible that the prospect of such a fate caused great anguish, fear and anxiety for many Puritans. “The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent” (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 284).

The Puritans were not the only ones tormented by fear of hell. Many people have been terrorized by the thought of hell ever since this non-biblical concept crept into religious teaching. Other ministers and teachers have, like Jonathan Edwards, used a similar approach to frighten people into belief and obedience.

One of the reasons this concept of hell survived is because theologians believed the teaching deterred people from evil. “It was thought that, if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever and that society would collapse into an anarchical orgy” (Walker, p. 4).

Could a compassionate God torture people forever?

Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people through the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

God is a God of love who does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (verse 45). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully torments evil people for all eternity— not a few decades or even centuries, but for an infinite length of time.

The idea that God sentences people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: “Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete...I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe...will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine” (quoted by Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this “damnable doctrine,” but that men have misunderstood what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will be able to witness the torments of the wicked. As one author explains the view some hold, “part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God’s justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss” (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa, relishing in it. Husbands and wives would feel joy in seeing unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic, cruel and merciless.

Those who insist that the Bible teaches eternal torment by fire should ask whether such a belief is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God. For example, how could God justly deal with those who have lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be saved? This would include the millions who died as babies as well as the billions of unbelievers or idolaters who lived and died never knowing God or His Son. Regrettably, the vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category.

Some theologians reason around this difficulty by assuming that those who never had the opportunity to know God or hear the name of Jesus Christ will be given a sort of free pass. The rationale is that since their state of ignorance is due to circumstances beyond their control, God will admit them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. If true, this raises a troubling possibility—that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings being lost!

Quandaries such as this have painted many theologians and other Christians into a corner. Accordingly, some have challenged the traditional concept of a hell of eternal torment through the centuries. “In every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment” (Four Views on Hell, William Crockett, editor, 1996, p. 140).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, church councils through the ages have upheld the doctrine. Firmly rooted in traditional Christian belief, it’s an idea that will not go away. A U.S. News and World Report poll from not too long ago shows that more Americans believe in hell today than in the 1950s or even the 1980s and early 1990s (Jan. 31, 2000, p. 46).

The prospect of hell will continue to haunt people. As U.S. News and World Report concluded, “Hell’s powerful images will no doubt continue to loom over humanity, as they have for more than 2,000 years, as a grim and ominous reminder of the reality of evil and its consequences.”

More than one hell in the Bible

So what is the truth about hell? What does the Bible really teach? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of three hells—but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us discover why there is so much confusion about hell.

From the original languages in which the Bible was written, one Hebrew word and three Greek words are translated “hell” in our English-language Bibles. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word sheol, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as hades, one of the three Greek words translated “hell” in the New Testament.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of both words: “The Greek word Hades...is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated ‘hell’ in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead...The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol...is usually translated as Hades, and the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek” (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, “Hades, Hell”).

Both sheol and hades refer simply to the grave. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this. Psalm 16:10 says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” In Acts 2:27, the apostle Peter quotes this verse and shows that it is a reference to Jesus Christ. Here the Greek word hades is substituted for the Hebrew sheol.

Where did Christ go when He died? His spirit returned to God (Luke 23:46; see “The Spirit in Man” on page 14). His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus’ flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him.

Many scriptures that use the term hell in the King James Version are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word sheol is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times and “pit”—a hole in the ground— three times.

The Greek word hades is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation, in all instances but one the term hades is translated “hell.” The one exception is 1 Corinthians 15:55, where it is translated “grave.” In the New King James Version, the translators avoided misconceptions by simply using the original Greek word hades in all 11 instances.

One word is for demon imprisonment

A second Greek word, tartaroo, is also translated “hell” in the New Testament. This word is used only once in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4), where it refers to the current restraint or imprisonment of the fallen angels, otherwise known as demons.

The Expository Dictionary of Bible Words explains that tartaroo means “to confine in Tartaros” and that “Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined” (Lawrence Richards, 1985, “Heaven and Hell,” p. 337).

Peter uses this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were “delivered...into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” These fallen angels are now restrained while awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity.

The place where they are imprisoned is not some dark or fiery netherworld. Rather, their confinement is on the earth, where they wield influence over the nations and over individuals. The Gospels record that Jesus Christ and

His apostles had very real encounters with Satan and His demons (Matthew 4:1-11; 8:16, 28-33; 9:32-33; John 13:26-27). Jesus even referred to Satan as the ruler of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The term tartaroo applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which human beings are punished after death.

Another word for burning—burning up, that is

Only with the remaining word translated “hell,” the Greek word gehenna, do we see some elements people commonly associate with the traditional view of hell—but not in the manner portrayed in the hell of men’s imagination.

Gehenna refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem. The word is derived from the Hebrew Gai-Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom (Joshua 18:16). “Religiously it was a place of idolatrous and human sacrifices . . . In order to put an end to these abominations, [Judah’s King] Josiah polluted it with human bones and other corruptions (2 Kgs. 23:10, 13, 14)” (Spiros Zodhiates, The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament, 1992, p. 360).

Gehenna Valley

Gehenna Valley Looking East

This is a picture of the Gehenna Valley looking East towards the Mount of Offence. This is also the City of Silwan which goes up that Mount of Offence in the valley of the Gihon spring also called the Kidron and Valley of Jehosaphat.

At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump—the place where trash was thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The carcasses of dead animals—and the bodies of despised criminals—were also cast into Gehenna to be burned.

gehenna

Jesus thus uses this particular location and what took place there to help His listeners clearly understand the fate the unrepentant will suffer in the future. They would have easily grasped what He meant.

Immortal worms in hell?

In Mark 9:47-48, for example, Jesus specifically refers to Gehenna and what took place there. But without a proper historical background, many people draw erroneous conclusions as to what He said.

Notice His words: “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell [gehenna] fire—where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnom—was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly end up with several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the “worm” is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell: “The worm that

dieth not' was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret" (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase "the fire is not quenched" is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" appears in quotation marks. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 66:24. A proper understanding of His statement begins there.

The context in Isaiah 66 refers to a time when, God says, "all flesh shall come to worship before Me" (verse 23). It is a time when the wicked will be no more. What will have happened to them? In verse 24 we read that people "will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus notes that the bodies affected by the worms are dead. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns, He will fight those who resist Him (Revelation 19:11-15). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (1980), the original Hebrew word translated "worm" in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 means "worm, maggot, [or] larvae."

Neither Isaiah nor Christ is talking about immortal worms. The vermin of which they speak, maggots, would not die while maggots because, sustained with flesh to eat, they would live to turn into flies. The flies would then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle until there is nothing left for them to consume.

This background information helps us better understand Jesus Christ's words. In His day, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were constantly burning there or by a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed.

What does Jesus mean in Mark 9:48 when He quotes Isaiah in saying, "the fire is not quenched"? With the preceding background we can understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes entirely (Ezekiel 20:47). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. Rather, it burns itself out when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

Hinnom-Valley-with-snow-tb012800203

This is a picture of the beginning of the Hinnom Valley also known as the Gehenna Valley as it goes down towards the Kidron. This is just south of the Jaffa Gate today. It is proof that Hell has frozen over and that a snowflake does stand a good chance of surviving in Hell. Yes I am poking fun at a couple of popular quotes people like to use to show you the great misunderstanding that they have of Gehenna.

When are the wicked punished?

But, we might ask, when does this punishment take place?

As we saw earlier, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time after the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity "come and bow down" before Him (Isaiah 66:23, NIV). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus uses a common site of trash disposal in His day—the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem's walls—to illustrate the ultimate fate of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire.

Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up—consumed—by a future Gehenna-like fire at the end of the seventh millennium (Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15).

Peter explains that at this time “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away” (Revelation 21:1). The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable abode for the righteous who, by that time, will have inherited eternal life.

The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus speaks of gehenna fire is Matthew 10:28: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna].”

We should notice that Jesus does not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He says that God can destroy—annihilate—both the body and soul in Gehenna fire. (To learn more, see “Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?”)

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But when God destroys one in hell (gehenna), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls “the second death.”

The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or gehenna, at the end of the age. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

This verse and others like it show that the doctrine of universal salvation is false. Not everyone will be saved. Some will, in the end, refuse to repent—and they will suffer punishment. But that punishment is not to burn in fire without ending. Rather, it is to die a death from which there is no resurrection.

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is found in Malachi 4:1: “For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘that will leave them neither root nor branch.’”

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says: “‘You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this,’ says the LORD of hosts” (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes.

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire—but not the mythical hell of men’s imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully choose to reject His way of life, characterized by obedience to His law of love (Romans 13:10), will die, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity.

Remember that eternal life is something that God must grant, and He will grant it to only those who repent and follow Him—not those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Realize that the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act not only of justice, but of mercy on God’s part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause themselves and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not put them through that, much less torture them for all eternity in excruciating torment without end.

The encouraging truth of the Bible is that God is indeed a God of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. As

Psalm 19:9 assures us, “The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.”

Lazarus and the Rich Man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Many interpret one of Jesus’ parables to mean that people have immortal souls that go to heaven or hell immediately at death. But does this parable really say that? Let’s examine the matter, paying close attention to the historical context.

Lazarus and Abraham

Jesus presents the following story: “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’

“But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’

“And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

“But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead’” (Luke 16:19-31).

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the time that Jesus uses to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally.

Bible language expert Dr. Lawrence Richards, in discussing this passage in *The Victor Bible Background*

Commentary, New Testament, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology) to point out a spiritual lesson about how we view and treat others.

In this view of the afterlife, Hades, the abode of the dead, was “thought to be divided into two compartments” and “conversations could be held between persons” in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous. “Jewish writings also picture the first as a verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs,” separated from the second, which was described as a parched and dry land. These elements show up in Christ’s allegory.

“In Christ’s story God was the beggar’s only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him!.... It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ has said, ‘You cannot serve God and Money’ (16:13). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, ‘What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight’ (16:15).

“There’s no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced.... And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said...

“During this life the wealthy man would surely have been featured on the 1980s TV program, ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.’ The cameras would have focused on his marble mansion with its decorative wrought iron gates.... and the fabulous feasts he held for his important friends.

“As the TV equipment was taken into the rich man’s home, a cameraman might have stumbled over the dying beggar, destitute and abandoned just outside the rich man’s house.... Surely he was beneath the notice of the homeowner, who never gave a thought to the starving man just outside, though all Lazarus yearned for was just a crumb from the overladen tables.

“If we look only at this life, the rich man seems to be both blessed and fortunate, and the poor man, rejected and cursed. There is no question which state people would highly value, and which they would find detestable.

“But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by ‘Abraham’s side,’ a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from the place of blessing by a ‘great chasm’ (16:26). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible—or appropriate!

...

“The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone. Despite frequent injunctions in the O[ld] T[estament] for the rich to share their good things with the poor, this rich man’s indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God’s ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself. Ah, how well the rich man depicts those Pharisees who ‘loved money’ and who even then were sneering at Jesus!

“And so Jesus’ first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which are hateful to Him. A love of money may serve you well in this life. But in the world to come, you will surely pay.

“But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have ‘Moses and the Prophets’ (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead....

“In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus’ words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor....

“This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed” (1994, pp. 193-195). This is the point of the allegory Jesus uses, Dr. Richards explains, not to teach the popular (but erroneous) idea of heaven and hell.

Who Was the Rich Man?

The Rich Man was an actual son of Abraham. Christ had him calling Abraham his “father” (Luke 16:24) and Abraham acknowledged him as “son” (verse 25). Such sonship made the Rich Man a legal possessor of Abraham’s inheritance. Indeed, the Rich Man had all the physical blessings promised to Abraham’s seed. He wore purple, the symbol of kingship, a sign that the Davidic or Messianic Kingdom was his. He wore linen, the symbol of priesthood, showing that God’s ordained priests and the Temple were his. Who was this Rich Man who possessed these blessings while living on the earth?

The Israelite tribe that finally assumed possession of both the kingdom and priesthood, and the tribe which became the representative one of all the promises given to Abraham, was Judah. There cannot be the slightest doubt of this when the whole parable is analyzed. Remember that Judah had “five brothers.” The Rich Man also had the same (verse 28).

“The sons of Leah; [1] Reuben; Jacob’s firstborn, and [2] Simeon, and [3] Levi, and Judah, and [4] Issachar, and [5] Zebulun.”

Genesis 35:23

“And Leah said ... ‘now will my husband be pleased to dwell with me; for I have born him six sons.’”

Genesis 30:20

Judah and the Rich Man each had “five brethren.” Not only that, the five brothers of the parable had in their midst “Moses and the prophets” (verse 29). The people of Judah possessed the “oracles of God” (Romans 3:1–2). Though the Rich Man (Judah) had been given the actual inheritance of Abraham’s blessings (both spiritual and physical), Christ was showing that he had been unfaithful with his responsibilities. When the true inheritance was to be given, Judah was in “hades” and “in torment” while Lazarus (Eleazar, the faithful steward) was now in Abraham’s bosom. He was finally received into the “everlasting habitations” (verse 9).

Are Some Tortured Forever in a Lake of Fire?

“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are [or were cast, as many acknowledge this should be rendered]. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Does this verse say that these two end-time individuals, the Beast and False Prophet, will be tormented for eternity?

The Beast and False Prophet are human beings. While still alive, they will be cast into the lake of fire. “Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:20).

We see from Malachi 4:1-3 and Mark 9:47-48 that any human being thrown into the lake of fire will be destroyed.

He will perish. His punishment will be eternal. But he will not be tormented for eternity.

Revelation 20:10 is speaking of Satan the devil being cast into the lake of fire at the end of the 7th Millennium. Reference to the Beast and False Prophet being cast in is only parenthetical here—as they will have died when that happened 1,000 years earlier. They will not still be burning there. Thus being tormented “forever and ever” applies principally to Satan—and presumably to his demonic cohorts as well (compare Matthew 25:41).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” here, *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, literally means “unto the ages of the ages.” While this might mean for eternity, it could also mean until the culmination of the ages, which would allow for an ending point soon after the casting into the fire.

Will the Torment of the Wicked Last Forever?

“He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

At first glance this passage may seem to confirm the traditional idea of a seething, sulfurous hellfire, mercilessly and eternally tormenting helpless immortal souls. But if we don’t already hold to a preconceived mental picture of hell, we can quickly grasp that this passage describes a considerably different circumstance.

First, notice the setting for this passage. From the context we see that the events it describes occur on earth amid earth-shaking events and disasters occurring immediately before or at Christ’s return, not in hell or the afterlife at all. This warning describes the punishment that will befall all the earth’s inhabitants “who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Chapter 13 describes this “beast”—an end-time dictatorial superpower opposed to God—and its mark. Those who accept this mark show that their allegiance is to this powerful system rather than God, and in chapter 14 God reveals the consequences of that choice—warning of the terrifying punishments that will precede Christ’s return (see verses 14-20 and the following two chapters).

Notice also in this passage that the smoke from these terrifying events ascends forever—it does not say that the people’s actual torment continues forever. David wrote in Psalm 37:20 that “the wicked shall perish [not be tortured forever in hell]...Into smoke they shall vanish away.”

The smoke is also no doubt associated with God’s wrath poured out on earth as described in Revelation 16—which includes widespread destruction, great heat, warfare and a massive earthquake. All these events will generate massive fires and a huge amount of smoke.

The properties of smoke are such that it “ascends forever and ever” (14:11)—meaning that nothing will prevent or stop it. Being a column of heated gas containing tiny, suspended particles, it rises, expands and eventually dissipates. Moreover, the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” does not have to mean for all eternity. It could just refer to this happening in the culmination of the ages.

The reference in verse 11 to the wicked receiving “no rest day or night” speaks of those who continue to worship the beast and his image during this time. They will be in constant terror and fear for their lives, and thus aren’t able to find a moment’s rest during this terrifying time of God’s anger.

Rather than describing eternal torment of people in hell, from the context we see that this passage is actually describing specific events to take place on earth at the end of this age.

Does the Bible Speak of Hellfire That Lasts Forever?

Two verses that many assume prove the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire are Matthew 25:41 and 25:46. But do they? Let's take a closer look.

First, notice the setting to which they refer—when Jesus “comes in His glory” (verses 31-32). We are told that He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (verses 34-40). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners. They are appointed to assemble on Jesus' left hand. He then consigns the goats to “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

The word everlasting is translated from the Greek word *aionios*. The key to understanding this verse is knowing what will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (*aionios*) punishment and of life eternal (*aionios*). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishing of the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire perish—they are killed. As explained elsewhere, they suffer death—the second death (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

A plain and simple meaning of Matthew 25:46 that fits with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them—renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the *aionios* fire is a one-time event. It is a permanent punishment, the results of which will remain forever—that is, eternal death. It is not ongoing punishing that continues forever without end. This is the only explanation that agrees with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point needs to be made regarding the meaning of *aionios*. Genesis 19 describes God's destruction of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, for their wickedness: “Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 19:24). They were utterly destroyed—consumed by fire.

In the New Testament, the book of Jude describes these cities as “suffering the vengeance of eternal [*aionios*] fire” (verse 7). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to *aionios* fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting effect, not how long it actually burns.

Sphinx and Templ Sodom

Here is a picture of the Sphinx and a Temple that I took at the ruins of Gomorrah. As you can see they are still not burning.