

How Long is Forever?

Let's look at that idea of "forever" a little more. As we said above: "Forever" in the Bible must be measured against the nature of object it is modifying. We must be responsible and logical in how we understand and apply the term "forever." The word "forever" is used in the Bible to refer to things that most certainly had an ending. In these cases, "forever" means, without interruption as long as the thing lasts. Notice these examples: Exodus 21:6; 1 Samuel 1:22, 28; Jonah 1:17; 2:6. So plainly the object under consideration should determine how we understand and interpret the word "forever". When it comes to hell, we must understand "forever" (as in Revelation 14:11 and 20:10) in light of every thing else the Bible has to say about the matter. According to the Bible, the destiny of the wicked is:

- › They will die ~ Rom. 6:23; Mt. 10:28
- › They will be devoured by the flames ~ Rev. 20:9
- › They will perish ~ Lk. 13:3; John 3:16
- › They will be utterly consumed ~ Ps. 37:20; Is. 47:14
- › They will be burnt up ~ Mal. 4:1
- › They will suffer destruction ~ 2 Th. 1:9; Phil. 3:19
- › They will be turned to ashes ~ Mal. 4:3
- › They will be as though they had not been ~ Ob. 16
- › They will die the second death
- › Satan too will be totally destroyed
- ~ Rev. 20:6,14; 21:8; Mt. 15:4
- ~ Ez. 28:17; Heb. 2:14

The Bible so clear: the fate of the wicked is the opposite of the fate of the righteous. If the righteous receive eternal life; the wicked receive eternal death. The wicked do not possess eternal life. See, for example, 1John 3:15. Eternal life is a gift from God; humankind does not possess it naturally. It's both logical and biblical to conclude that the wicked do not burn in hell through eternal ages! (See Romans 6:23; John 3:16)

The Good News About Hell

It was never in God's plan for human beings to experience hell. Jesus said that hell is "*prepared for the devil and his angels*" (Matthew 25:41). Those who end up in hell will be there against God's will. It will be completely their choice; and God will simply, sadly honor their choice. The tragic reality is that sinners would really be miserable in heaven anyway. It would be a place of torture for them. To live in a world were there is no sin, wickedness, or selfishness would be a disappointment and torment to them. Hell is for those who would be more miserable in heaven than they would be in hell! Infinite love is what brings the fires of hell. It is God giving the wicked what they've asked for—namely, life apart from God—though it grieves Him greatly! But of course there is no life apart from God, since He is the life-giver and life-sustainer. Asking God to finally and fully leave you alone is asking for death. CS Lewis, the great Oxford scholar and author, put it near-perfectly when he wrote: In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does. *The Problem of Pain*, p. 130, 131

It will pain the heart of God deeply and incommunicably when the lost miss out on eternity and die the second, and final, death. Jesus went to the Cross and was tortured! He Himself is no torturer! No way! Never! He died that terrible, tortuous death so that people like you and me could be brought to repentance and saved for eternity! "God is love", the Bible says (1John 4:8, 16), and Jesus certainly showed it! It cannot be said better than this: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Presentation guide 8:

Heaven and hell - fact or fiction?

An Age Old Question

Is death the end? What really happens at death? Is there life after the grave? These are questions that have been on the collective mind of all peoples since the very dawn of time. Various religions and philosophies seek to provide answers to this ever-important, ever-relevant question. As we have discovered in our previous lessons, the Bible provides clear answers to life's toughest questions. The subject of death is no different. In this lesson we will address the question of life after death from a biblical perspective. The answers we'll discover are thrilling and, for some, shocking!

What Exactly Is Death?

It is difficult to arrive at the right answers when the wrong questions are asked. One of the reasons for the prevalent confusion on the subject of death is a misunderstanding of what death actually is. Here's a simple, working definition:

- › the cessation of life; the end of life

Now, before trying to answer the question of whether there is there life after death, we must first lay a good foundation by asking a related and very important question: What is life? As we'll see, in order to understand what death is, we must first understand what life is.

What Exactly Is Life?

The Bible gives us an accurate record of the origins of life on earth. It reveals foundationally important details regarding the first humans—Adam and Eve. Notice Genesis 2:7:

"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 being."

Note carefully the elements employed in the creation of human life. The text says that there were two such elements: 1) the dust of the ground and 2) the breath of life. When these two "ingredients" were joined, man "*became a living being.*" The King James Version (KJV) Bible says that man "*became a living soul.*" This is simple formula crucial in correctly understanding death. Man was not given a soul, rather he became a soul. This one point alone will save us from much confusion regarding death. It is commonly believed today that people have souls. But it is more accurate to say that people are souls. By way of analogy, consider a light bulb. In order for a bulb to produce light there needs to be two elements: 1) the physical bulb and 2) electricity. If all you had was the bulb, but no electricity, you have no light. And vice versa.

So it is with humankind. Both the body ("the housing") and the breath of God ("the electricity") are necessary for life. Here it is:

- › Body + Breath = a living being, or "soul"

The breath of God is not some separate, conscious entity. Many people incorrectly think of it as a "soul" or a "spirit" that consciously lives on after we physically die. But this is not Biblical. The breath of God is not a separate conscious entity that exists and acts as man's "soul", it is simply the life giving spark and vitality that come from God alone. See Job 27:3; 33:4. Also, this point becomes clearer still when the Bible records that the animals are also a union of the same two ingredients. See Genesis 7:15, 22.

Death: The Rewind Effect

Now that we understand what constitutes human life, it's easier to understand what happens at death. Notice Genesis 3:19:

"In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

There it is. Death is simply rewind. The two elements go back where they came from! See also Ecclesiastes 12:7 and Psalm 146:4. There is no soul that continues to live on after death! (Note: the word "Spirit" in Psalm 146:4 is the Hebrew word ruach, which means, you guessed it, breath!) Also, when the animals die, the same process of rewind occurs. Notice Psalm 104:25, 29 and Ecclesiastes 3:18-21. Both man and animal go to the same place after death—the body simply returns to the earth (you know, "ashes to ashes, dust to dust") and the breath returns back to God. There is no eternal or immortal soul that continues to live on after death.

'Rest' in Peace

Interestingly and profoundly, the Bible actually refers to death as a sleep more than 70 times! See, for example, John 11:11-14, 20-26; 1Cor. 15:51; 1Thes. 4:15; Acts 7:60.

"So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep." Job 14:12 "... lest I sleep the sleep of death." Psalm 13:3

The Bible is unmistakably clear: death is like a sleep. It is not a continued life in some "spirit form".

A Loving God

Many have a difficult time reconciling the idea of a loving God and the punishment of eternal hell for those who are lost. Does the Bible really teach an eternal place of torment? What is hell actually? Is it necessary? No doubt these are important questions as our understanding of hell is directly linked to our understanding of God. Remember, it all comes back to the character of God. So let's look at what the Bible teaches...

Three Good Questions

In addressing the subject of hell, it is very helpful to answer three simple questions: 1) When will hell burn? 2) Where is hell located? 3) How long will hell burn? Remember, we are not interested in opinions or speculations; we want to know what the Bible actually teaches. Let's address our three questions:

1. When?

Jesus gave profound insights about hell in a parable found in Matthew 13:24-30, 37-40. The parable is explained by Jesus, and is easily grasped. The wheat are the followers of God and the tares are the followers of Satan (vss. 38, 39). Jesus went on to explain that those who are on Satan's side are destroyed "in the fire" (v. 40). This is hell! But when does it happen? The answer is crystal clear: "at the end of the age" (v. 40). This means that hell is NOT burning now! Notice how the New Testament agrees with the Old Testament about God "reserving" the wicked for the end: "The Lord knows how to... reserve the ungodly under punishment for the day of judgment" (2 Peter 2:9); "For the wicked are reserved for the day of doom..." (Job 21:30). So we've answered the first question. The fires of hell are not burning right now. Hell is an event more than a place; this event takes place at the end of time. The wicked who have already died are not suffering in hell, but rather are being "reserved" for the day of judgment. The Bible is clear.

2. Where?

In a future lesson we will learn that at the end of the millennium fire comes down on the wicked on earth. This is a critical point. How many of us grew up believing that hell was some lava pool somewhere in the inner-center of the earth? Too many of us! But this teaching (or anything like it) is simply not biblical! According to Revelation 20:9, when the destroying fire rains down on the wicked, they are here on the earth. Also, it's interesting to note that in 2 Peter 3:10, it says that in the end the "elements will melt with fervent heat" and the "earth... will be burned up." Again, the fire burns on earth. Furthermore, in our previous point about the "when" of hell, we looked at the parable of the wheat and the tares. Jesus explained that the fire will destroy the wicked in the end; He then said clearly that "the field is the world" (Matthew 13:38). So we've answered two of our three questions. Onto the third...

3. How Long?

Throughout the ages many have wrongly and terribly taught that hell burns and torments the sinner throughout all eternity. They usually cite passages like Revelation 20:10: "...cast into the lake of fire... They will be tormented day and night forever and ever." This is similar to what it says in chapter 14:11: "And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and forever." However, we must understand these statements in light of what the rest of the Bible teaches about the duration of hell. For example, speaking about the destruction of the land of Edom, the Old Testament says: "Its smoke shall ascend forever. From generation to generation it shall lie waste" (Isaiah 34:8-10). Now connect these points. Revelation said that the smoke of the wicked ascends "forever and forever," just like it was in Edom. But is Edom still burning today? No! It simply means that "From generation to generation it shall lie waste"—it's referring to the lasting results, not a never-ending duration. "Forever" in the Bible must be measured against the nature of object it is modifying. More on this in a moment.

"It Shall Not be Quenched"

Jesus said something both firm and troubling in Mark 9:44-48. Speaking of hell, He said that "the fire shall not be quenched." So what does that mean? Will He torture sinners continually? No! In Jeremiah 17:27, it prophesied that Jerusalem would be destroyed with a fire that "shall not be quenched." Same phrase! Is Jerusalem burning right now? No! It simply means that the fire will not be stopped or interrupted until it has accomplished its job.

What About "Everlasting Fire"

The Bible does speak of "eternal fire" in Jude 7, but this is fire that has everlasting consequences. It does not burn for eternity. In fact, Jude tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah are "examples" of this eternal fire. Again we ask: Are Sodom and Gomorrah burning right now? Of course not! The results are everlasting, not the duration. (See also 2Peter 2:6)

Everlasting Punishment?

The Bible also speaks of "everlasting punishment" in Matthew 25:46. This simply means punishment that has eternal consequences. Notice that the phrase is "eternal punishment" (a noun) not "punishing" (a verb). This is a crucial distinction! By way of comparison, the Bible speaks of "eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). Does it mean that the process of redemption is eternal? No, it obviously means that the consequences or results of redemption are eternal!