

WHICH WAY, AMERICA?

Night 10

Hell

1. The Bible says in Matthew 25:41 that the wicked will be punished with everlasting fire. How could an eternal fire ever go out?

Answer: An understanding of terms used in the Bible is indispensable to all who seek answers from the Scriptures. The Bible talks about everlasting fire, eternal fire, and unquenchable fire. The book of Jude has a reference to eternal fire: “Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

Two things to note from the passage are: (1) Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with everlasting or “eternal fire,” and (2) those two cities are “set forth for an example.”

Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning today, as those who have visited the site of those ancient cities will freely testify. Yet they were burned with “eternal fire.” The fire went out after everything was burned up. The fire was eternal in effect, not duration. Likewise, everlasting fire will go out after it has turned the wicked to ashes (Malachi 4:3). The effect of the fire is everlasting, but not the burning itself.

Unquenchable fire is a fire that cannot be put out, but which goes out when it has turned everything to ashes. Jeremiah 17:27 states that Jerusalem would be burned with a fire that would not be quenched: “But if ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.”

2 Chronicles 36:19–21 describes the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy at the time of the Babylonian invasion. The fire could not be quenched, nor was it put out until it had completed its work of destruction. Yet we know this fire went out, because Jerusalem is not burning today.

To “quench” a fire is to prevent or stop its work of destruction. The wicked are destroyed with unquenchable fire, because no one will be able to put out the fire until it has completed its work of destroying the lost. A fire either is “quenched” (put out to stop its work of destruction) or it simply goes out when it has accomplished its work (consumed everything). Hellfire will not be “quenched” (put out), but will go out after all traces of sin and sinners are consumed. Concerning the lost, Isaiah states: “Behold, they shall be as stubble; the fire shall burn them; they shall not deliver themselves from the power of the flame.” Yet he hastens to say in the same verse, “There shall not be a coal to warm at, nor fire to sit before it” (Isaiah 47:14). So the unquenchable fires of hell will go out after they have consumed the wicked as stubble.

We also noted from Jude 7 that Sodom and Gomorrah are “set forth for an example.” An example of what? We find the answer in 2 Peter.

“And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes condemned them with an overthrow, making them an example unto those that after should live ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6).

Sodom and Gomorrah then, are an example of the complete destruction of the wicked, who will be punished with “eternal fire” which, according to the example of Sodom and Gomorrah, will go out after it has completed its work.

2. When the Bible talks about everlasting punishment, does that not indicate a never-ending torment?

Answer: There are some everlasting things that last forever, and some that don't. The term “forever” is translated from the Greek word *aiōnios*. Fifty-one times in the New Testament, *aiōnios* applies to the eternal joy of the redeemed, where it is obvious that no limitation of time applies. At least 70 times in the Bible, this word qualifies objects of a temporary and limited nature, so that it signifies only an indeterminate duration. When God is said to be “eternal,” that is truly forever as we understand the term. When the mountains are said to be “everlasting,” that means that they last ever so long (until Jesus comes - see Revelation 16:20).

The Bible frequently uses *aiōn*, *aiōnios* and their Hebrew counterparts (*olam* in various forms) to speak of things which have come to an end. The sprinkling of blood at the Passover was an “everlasting ordinance” (Exodus 12:24). So were the Aaronic priesthood (Exodus 29:9, 40:15), Caleb's inheritance (Joshua 14:9), the period of a slave's life (Deuteronomy 15:17), and Gehazi's leprosy (2 Kings 5:27). These things did not last “forever” as we think of the term. They lasted beyond the vision of those who first heard them called “everlasting,” and no time limit was then set at all. *Aiōnios* speaks of unlimited time within the limits determined by the thing it modifies.

The Bible talks about “eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9), “eternal judgment” (Hebrews 6:2), “eternal redemption” (Hebrews 9:12), “everlasting destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9), and “everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46). Let's look at these expressions individually.

Eternal Salvation: (Hebrews 5:9) Jesus is not forever saving His people; He did that once and for all! This salvation is eternal because it is the everlasting result which issues from the once-and-for-all process or act of saving. The result remains even after the act has ended.

Eternal Judgment: (Hebrews 6:2) The act of judging will certainly not last throughout eternity. The action itself is one thing; its outcome, its issue, its result, is something else. “Eternal” here speaks of the result of the action, not the action itself. Once the judging is over, the judgment will remain—the eternal, everlasting issue of the once-and-for-all process of judgment.

Eternal Redemption: (Hebrews 9:12) It isn't the act or process of redeeming that continues without end—Christ has accomplished that once! “Eternal” speaks here again of the result of the action, not the act itself. Once the redeeming has taken place, the redemption remains. And that “eternal” result of the once-and-for-all action will never pass away.

Eternal Destruction: (2 Thessalonians 1:9) To destroy something means to obliterate it. How could anything ever be obliterated if it was being continually destroyed? The two terms are self-contradictory. That is why “everlasting destruction” can only refer to the result, as in the above cases.

Everlasting Punishment: (Matthew 25:46) The Bible never talks about eternal punishing. The punishment is as eternal as was the destruction of Sodom, but the act of punishing does not continue, thus perpetuating sin and suffering. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), not eternal punishing in hell! The punishment of the wicked is death, and this death is everlasting.

3. Doesn't the Bible speak of the wicked being tormented "forever"?

Answer: As we mentioned in the above question, the term "for ever" is relative to what it is applied to. In the Bible it simply refers to a period of time limited or unlimited. It is used at least 56 times in Scripture in connection with things that have already ended. In Jonah 2:6 for example, "for ever" means "three days and nights" (see Jonah 1:17; 2:5–6). In Deuteronomy 23:3, this means "ten generations." In the case of man, this means "as long as he lives" or "until death" (see 1 Samuel 1:22, 28; Exodus 21:6; Psalm 48:14).

Just so, the wicked will burn in the fires of hell as long as they can live, or until death. This fiery punishment for sin will vary according to the degree of sins for each individual, but after the punishment, the fire will go out.

The teaching of eternal torment has done more to drive people to atheism and insanity than any other invention of the devil. It is slander upon the loving character of God, and has led millions to look upon God with hatred.

4. If "forever" does not mean without end can we be sure that the righteous will live forever?

Answer: The key difference between the righteous and the wicked is immortality. Jesus said: "For 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).

The choice according to the words of this famous text is either to believe in Jesus and thus receive "everlasting life," or to reject His redemption and "perish." The choice then is life or death, not "everlasting life" in paradise or "everlasting life" in hell. The fact is that because the wicked have not accepted salvation, they do not have "everlasting life." They cannot "live" for all eternity, even in hell.

The righteous however, will be given immortality when Jesus comes (1 Corinthians 15:51–54). Immortal means not subject to death, or without possibility of dying. Truly then, the righteous will have a life-span that measures with the life of God, or in other words, throughout the endless cycles of eternity. Plainly speaking, the righteous experience a life without end while the wicked will experience a death without end (no hope of a resurrection after they have "perished" in the fires of hell).

5. What does the Bible mean when it says "their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched"?

Answer: We've already explained the meaning of "unquenchable fire", but what about the undying worm? The text in question reads as follows: "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched ... Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43–48). This passage uses the same language as that of Isaiah 66:24: "And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses

of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.”

Is this talking about eternal souls burning in hell? Evidently not. “Carcasses” are not disembodied souls. Nor do either of the passages state that the victims are not consumed in this fire that cannot be quenched.

What is the work of the worm? It is to hasten the disappearance of that which has ceased to live. It replaces the gravedigger; the cremation follows which burns up the bones gnawed by the worm.

The word “hell” in Mark 9:43 is from the Greek word *Gehenna*. Christ here uses the Valley of Gehenna, which was just outside the walls of Jerusalem, as an illustration of hellfire. The Valley of Gehenna was the city “dump” for Jerusalem, where the refuse and carcasses of animals were cast into an ever-smoldering fire to be consumed. Whatever might escape the flames was constantly being destroyed by maggots which fed on the dead bodies. The flames and worms of Gehenna represented the total annihilation and obliteration of sin and sinners. With the fires of Gehenna burning before their eyes, Jesus could not have given a more graphic picture to the Pharisees to describe the final, total destruction of sinners.

We notice too from the words of Jesus in Mark 9, that the fire and worms are working not upon disembodied souls, but upon *bodies*! According to Jesus, those who are cast into hellfire, will go there in bodily form, and this text confirms that truth. Mark 9:43–48 speaks of the hands, feet, and bodies of those who suffer the Gehenna fire. In Matthew 5:30, Christ said, “the whole body” would be cast into hell.

6. Will the righteous see the wicked suffer the punishment for their sins according to Isaiah 66:24?

Answer: This description of the final destruction of the wicked assures us that they finally are lifeless “carcasses” (dead bodies). Their bodies burn in the lake of fire.

Since the walls of the Holy City will be “clear as crystal” (Revelation 21:11, 18), the redeemed might easily go forth from their heavenly homes, look through the crystal clear walls, and “see the reward of the wicked” (Psalm 91:8). This certainly will not be a very pleasant spectacle. The prophet describes it in these words: “Their flesh shall consume away” (Zechariah 14:12).

But the wicked soon are burned up (Malachi 4:1, 3) and shall be as though they had not been (Obadiah 16). Then the earth is recreated as the eternal home of the righteous (see Matthew 5:5; Isaiah 65:17; Revelation 21:1), all tears are wiped away, and there shall be no more pain (Revelation 21:4).



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