

# Hell, You Say?

**It's a four-letter word. It's uttered tens of thousands of times each day. It's used to describe extreme temperatures and harsh, intolerable conditions. It's said to be a place, or condition, of absolute hopelessness, of indescribable misery. What is the word? You guessed it—HELL! Some say it's a mythical realm contrived in the minds of superstitious men, but others say it's as real as life itself. Who is right? Is there a real hellfire? If so, where is it? What is it?**

Perhaps you have heard the old joke about the three men who awakened one day to find themselves in the infernal abyss known as “hell.” As the story goes, one was a Jew, one was a Baptist, and one was a Christian Scientist. When asked, “Why are you here?” the Jew said, “Well, I, uh, have been known to nibble on a little bacon for breakfast—I guess that's why I'm here.” The Baptist, when asked the same question, said, “Err, uh, I did like to slip a little drink every now and then—I guess that's why I'm here.” But when the question was put to the Christian Scientist, he replied, “Who, me? Why, I'm not here!”

We laugh at such jokes about hell, but to many, hell is no laughing matter. Horrifying descriptions of the infernal region and its miserable occupants have brought more than a few frightened, teary-eyed parishioners to the altar. Jonathan Edwards' famous sermon, “Sinner in the Hands of an Angry God,” is said to have brought vociferous howling and cries for mercy from those who heard it.

Yet, others, even in mainline denominations, deny the existence of hell, claiming that belief in hell is incompatible with the biblical concept of a loving God.

The subject of hell, it seems, is so unpleasant that it drives men to either reject it or to come weeping to the altar. This is understandable, for the idea of immeasurable suffering even for a year is unthinkable—let alone suffering for all eternity!

But does the Bible teach that unrepentant sinners will endure the flames of hell for eternity? Do biblical descriptions of “everlasting punishment,” a “furnace of fire,” and “outer darkness” imply unending torture? Does the torment of hell have no limits?

## **Common Beliefs About Hell**

Most people never explore the theological concepts about hell as presented by mainline theologians. They are taught that the “souls” of the saved go to heaven upon death, while the “souls” of the unsaved go to hell. It's either heaven or hell—no in-between state (except for Catholics, who believe in an intermediate state called “purgatory”).

However, many, if not most, mainstream Protestant theologians do not hold the popular idea of “either heaven or hell upon death”—at least, not without some qualification. You may be surprised to learn that many evangelicals teach that no one is in hell at the present time. In fact, they claim that the fires of hell have yet to be ignited.

Based upon several obscure scriptures, they claim that the unsaved are suffering in a place (or condition) called “hades,” and that in the general resurrection, the souls in hades will leave their abode and be reunited with their resurrected bodies. They will then be judged and sentenced to eternity in hell—a fate far worse than hades.

The sinner, both body and soul, will be cast into hell, where he will suffer endless torment. In hell, his “worm dieth not,” and his fire is never quenched. Even after ten thousand years, he has nothing to look forward to but another ten thousand years of suffering, followed by another ten thousand years, then another, and another....

Further, it is claimed that hell is hotter for some than for others. The degree of suffering will parallel the degree of one’s sinfulness. For example, Hitler’s suffering will exceed the suffering of the ordinary sinner. But for all, hell is forever.

Other theologians hold to a slightly different concept. They teach that the souls of sinners are now in hell, but the present hell is not the same hell they will face once they are reunited with their bodies. The latter will be far worse.

As someone said, when the Day of Judgment comes, the suffering souls of sinners will emerge from the ethereal abyss, be reunited with their new, immortal bodies, and, as they face the torturous flames of eternal hell, will say of God, “No more Mr. Nice Guy!”

A few teach that all souls, sinner and saint alike, go to hades when they pass from this life. Saved souls reside in a blissful area called “paradise,” while unsaved souls are confined to an area called “torments.” When Christ returns, it is claimed, all souls will leave hades and unite with their resurrected bodies. The saved will then be taken to heaven, and the unsaved will be cast into hell.

Most traditionalists, however, believe that hades served as the abode of the righteous only until Christ’s death, at which time He entered hades, gathered the righteous, and took them to heaven, while leaving the unrighteous to suffer until the Day of Judgment.

These concepts are not new. Many of the Jews of Jesus’ day, and before, apparently held similar beliefs. For this reason, evangelicals claim that when Jesus spoke of “Gehenna fire,” of “hades,” of “unquenchable fire,” of the “worm that dieth not,” and of “outer darkness”—expressions the ancient rabbis used in describing the fate of the wicked—He was confirming rabbinic beliefs in the conscious (and miserable) existence of the wicked in the “afterlife” and in eternity.

But did Jesus’ use of common rabbinic terms in describing the fate of the wicked mean that He agreed with the rabbis? What did the rabbis believe? And where did they get their beliefs?

## **Rabbinic Beliefs**

Numerous sources, including the works of Flavius Josephus and the Talmudic literature, tell us that many of the Jews of the first century, and before, believed in the eternal, conscious existence of both the just and the unjust. While beliefs about the nature and intensity of punishment for the wicked varied, it was generally believed that everlasting torment awaited the unrighteous.

Morey writes: “After an extensive research of intertestamental literature, the greatest Christian Talmudic scholar, Alfred Edersheim, a noted Hebrew Christian, concluded that Gehenna [translated “hell” in the New Testament] was understood in Christ’s time to refer to the place of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked after the resurrection” (Dr. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*, p. 89).

According to Edersheim, the School of Shammai—one of two principal schools of rabbinic thought that existed in the time of Christ—taught that mankind is made up of three distinct categories: the perfectly righteous, the perfectly wicked, and an intermediate class. The first group is resurrected to eternal life; the second is resurrected and cast into Gehenna and tormented for eternity; the third is sent to Gehenna but suffers for a limited period before coming up again (apparently to eternal life).

The other principal school of rabbinic thought was the School of Hillel. According to Edersheim, this school taught that sinners are tormented in Gehenna for twelve months and are then burned to ashes and scattered. A comparative few—apparently the most wicked of all—are tormented in Gehenna forever.

Apparently, both schools taught that the souls of all the dead consciously await the final judgment in a place called “hades” (Hebrew: *sheol*), which is divided into two compartments: one for the righteous, the other for sinners. When the Day of Judgment arrives, they will leave hades, enter their resurrected bodies, and receive their rewards and punishments.

Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, wrote, concerning the Jewish sect known as the Essenes: “For their doctrine is this:—‘That bodies are corruptible, and that the matter they are made of is not permanent; but that the souls are immortal, and continue for ever....’” (*Wars of the Jews* 2:8:11).

Of the Pharisees, Josephus wrote: “They say that all souls are incorruptible; but that the souls of good men are only removed into other bodies,—but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment” (*Wars* 2:8:14).

The Sadducees, however, held to different beliefs: “They also take away the belief of the immortal duration of the soul, and the punishments and rewards in Hades” (*Wars* 2:8:14).

It is true, then, that many of the Jews of Jesus’ day (with the exception of the Sadducees) believed in both the conscious existence of the souls of the dead and the eternal, conscious suffering of the wicked. It is also true that they used such terms as “fire,” “darkness,” “weeping,” and “judgment” in their descriptions of punishment in Gehenna.

But the question is: Did Jesus mean the same thing when He used these terms in describing the fate of the wicked?

The Scriptures show that many of the ancient Israelites believed in life after death. This is seen in their adoption of such pagan practices as necromancy—the attempt to communicate with the dead. Of course, their use of necromancy doesn't mean that belief in the “immortality of the soul” is a right belief, for God strictly condemned such practices (Deuteronomy 18:10–11).

Undoubtedly, the influence of the Egyptians during Israel's long stay in Egypt, as well as the influence of pagan nations during Israel's forty years in the wilderness, contributed to the people's belief in the afterlife. Exposure to pagan beliefs during the Babylonian captivity and the later influence of the Greeks must have further contributed to Jewish beliefs about death and the afterlife.

By the time of Jesus, these beliefs were thoroughly entrenched in Jewish religious thought. The rabbis believed and taught the Scriptures, but their interpretations of Scripture were clearly influenced by the Jews' long history of exposure to pagan religion and philosophy.

Of course, evangelical scholars such as Morey deny the pagan connection, claiming rather that the development of certain Jewish ideas, such as “departments in hades,” must be attributed to “progressive revelation.” This is interesting, especially in view of New Testament admonitions regarding “Jewish fables” and the errors of Judaism, not to mention the fact that many *Jewish* scholars admit that their religious forebears were influenced by Hellenic philosophical thought. Even Josephus, who wrote during the period immediately following the A.D. 70 siege of Jerusalem and destruction of the Temple, noted the similarities between Greek and Essene beliefs about the afterlife (see *Wars* 2:8:11).

Therefore, we should not assume that Jesus' use of common rabbinic expressions indicated agreement with rabbinic beliefs. The rabbis borrowed terms and phrases from the Scriptures and applied their own “Babylonianized” and “Hellenized” beliefs to them. But to understand what Jesus meant when He used the same terms and phrases, we should not go to rabbinic interpretations; rather, we should go to the original source—the Old Testament Scriptures.

### **Jesus and the Old Testament**

Jesus had much to say about the fate of the wicked. He said that those who hatefully hurl condemning charges at their brother “shall be in danger of hell [Greek: *Gehenna*]” (Matthew 5:22); that it is better to lose “one of thy members” than that “thy whole body be cast into hell [Gehenna]” (verses 29–30).

He warned the scribes and Pharisees of the “judgment of Gehenna” (Matthew 23:33), and said that the unrighteous will “go away into everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46).

He said the wicked would be “cast into outer darkness,” were there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:12), and described this place as a “furnace of fire” (13:42), as “everlasting fire” (18:8), as the “fire that never shall be quenched” (Mark 9:43), and as Gehenna fire, where “their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (9:46, 48).

Notice the descriptions Jesus used: “judgment of Gehenna,” “fire that never shall be quenched,” “weeping and gnashing of teeth,” “worm [that] dieth not,” “outer darkness.” These and similar terms were used by the rabbis of Jesus’ day in their descriptions of the fate of the wicked. As Morey argues, such terms and phrases “are all carried over by the teaching of Christ and the apostles into the New Testament itself” (*Death and the Afterlife*, p. 88).

Morey’s conclusion is that since the rabbis used these expressions in their descriptions of the fate of the wicked, Jesus must have been speaking of the same thing when He used the same, and similar, expressions.

However, the terms and expressions used by both Jesus and the rabbis are rooted in Old Testament descriptions of God’s dealing with the wicked. Thus, Morey’s argument begins with his acceptance of rabbinic interpretations of Old Testament descriptions (though he admits that not all rabbinic teachings were correct). He seems to minimize the fact that the Jewish people, from time immemorial, had been swayed by the influence of pagan religions. He also minimizes, or overlooks, Jesus’ sharp disagreements with the Jewish religious leaders of His day.

To understand what Jesus meant, then, we should go directly to the original source. Let’s begin with Old Testament references to the place Jesus called “Gehenna.”

## **Gehenna**

This word is found twelve times in the New Testament. It is the Greek term for the “Valley of Hinnom,” which was located just outside the west-southwest border of Jerusalem. In the time of Jesus, the Valley of Hinnom served as a waste-disposal area. Garbage from the city and the bodies of dead animals and criminals were dumped into the valley and burned. Because of the large amount of refuse, the fires of the Valley of Hinnom burned continually, and worms and maggots never stopped feeding.

The ugliness of the ever-smoldering Valley of Hinnom was a fitting reminder of God’s view of idolatry and of the fate of those who worship false gods—for it was there that idolatrous Israelites offered human sacrifices and worshiped pagan gods.

Ahaz constructed “molten images for Baalim” and “burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and *burnt his children in the fire*, after the abominations of the heathen...” (2 Chronicles 28:2–3). Manasseh, too, turned to the abominations of the heathen, and “caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom...” (2 Chronicles 33:6).

Because of the abominations that went on there, God promised He would turn the Valley of Hinnom into “the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet [another name for the Valley of Hinnom], till there be no place” (Jeremiah 7:32). Thus, the Valley of Hinnom came to be a symbol of God’s wrath against those who had turned to the abominations of the heathen (see Jeremiah 19).

But nowhere is the Valley of Hinnom presented as an ethereal region or condition where the wicked experience everlasting torment. Rather, it is presented as a symbol of God’s wrath against the ungodliness of *mortal, flesh-and-blood human beings!* It is presented as a place of slaughter, where *dead bodies* are heaped and strewn—not as an invisible realm where disembodied spirits reside, and not as a place where reembodyed spirits suffer endlessly.

The Valley of Hinnom, then, came to symbolize God’s wrath upon the ungodly. Originally, it had no connection with beliefs about the afterlife or of eternal suffering.

Considering the Jews’ long exposure to pagan influences, it is easy to see how they began reading pagan concepts into passages such as those cited above. This is not “progressive revelation”; it is more like “progressive *corruption.*”

### **Other Descriptions**

Now, let’s compare some of Christ’s other descriptions of the fate of the wicked with the descriptions found in the Old Testament.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God says: “Zion shall be redeemed with judgment, and her converts with righteousness. And the *destruction* of the transgressors and of the sinners shall be together, and they that forsake the LORD shall be *consumed*....And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both *burn* together, and *none shall quench them*”(Isaiah 1:27–28, 31).

He further warns: “And the LORD shall cause His glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of His arm, with the indignation of His anger, and with the flame of a *devouring fire*, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones.... For Tophet [another name for Gehenna] is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; He hath made it deep and large: the pile thereof is *fire* and much wood; the breath of the LORD, like a stream of *brimstone*, doth kindle it” (Isaiah 30:30, 33).

These scriptures speak of the literal *destruction* of the wicked *right here on this earth*, not in some ethereal realm or place where immortal bodies and souls will writhe in pain for all eternity. Jesus obviously drew from these and other scriptural descriptions of the fate of the wicked, as did the rabbis. But do the similarities between Jesus’ and the rabbis’ descriptions mean that Jesus accepted rabbinic interpretations of such passages? Obviously not.

In Isaiah 34, God tells of how He will destroy His enemies. “Their slain also shall be cast out, and their stink shall come up out of their carcasses, and the mountains shall be melted with their blood” (verse 3). In the day of His wrath, “the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It *shall not be quenched night nor day*; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever...” (verses 9–10).

Recall that Jesus spoke of “unquenchable fire,” as does the above scripture. It’s not a fire that burns and burns but consumes nothing. On the contrary, it is “unquenchable” because it burns until there is nothing else it can consume! Such phrases speak of *utter destruction*, not of everlasting pain.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) serve as an example of this kind of all-consuming fire. They “are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of *eternal fire*” (Jude 7). Are Sodom and Gomorrah still burning? Of course not! “Eternal [or unquenchable] fire,” then, is a fire that cannot be put out, or quenched—it burns until there is nothing else to burn.

God, speaking through Isaiah, continues His description of the utter destruction of the wicked:

“For, behold, the LORD will come with *fire*, and with His chariots like a whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with *flames of fire*. For by *fire* and by His sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many....

“And it shall come to pass, that from one new moon to another, and from one Sabbath to another, shall all flesh come to worship before me, saith the LORD. And they [meaning “all flesh” who “come to worship before” Him—clearly a prophecy about the Millennium] shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses [the *dead bodies*] 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” (Isaiah 66:15–16, 23–24).

This passage is about the future Day of the Lord, which is the day God will pour out His wrath on the wicked. Their moldering, maggot-infested bodies will be heaped and strewn, perhaps bulldozed into pits (such as the Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna), and set ablaze. As Gehenna of old, the fires will keep burning and the worms will keep feeding until there is nothing left for the fires or the worms.

When the rabbis read this passage, they attached all sorts of mythical beliefs to it, but anyone reading the book of Isaiah without such preconceived notions would naturally understand that the horrifying descriptions of fire and worms and decaying bodies have nothing to do with any so-called “afterlife” or place of eternal suffering. Rather, this text speaks of the *utter destruction* God’s wrath will bring upon the wicked.

When Jesus spoke of fire that is not quenched and worms that do not die, He was speaking of the very same thing the above passage speaks of. He did not rely on the “Babylonianized” and “Hellenized” interpretations of the rabbis!

Notice several other passages from the original source:

Jeremiah 7:20: “Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, mine anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the ground; and it shall *burn*, and *shall not be quenched*.”

Jeremiah 17:27: “But if ye will not harken 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*.”

Joel 2:1–3: “Blow ye the trumpet in Zion, and sound an alarm in my holy mountain; let all the inhabitants of the land tremble: for the day of the LORD cometh, for it is nigh at hand; A day of *darkness* and of gloominess, a day of clouds and *thick darkness*, as the morning spread upon the mountains: a great people and a strong; there hath not been ever the like, neither shall be any more after it, even to the years of many generations. A *fire* devoureth before them; and behind them a *flame* burneth: the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness; yea, and nothing shall escape them.”

Amos 5:18, 20: “Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! to what end is it for you? the day of the LORD is *darkness*, and not light.... Shall not the day of the LORD be *darkness*, and not light? even *very dark*, and no brightness in it?”

Malachi 4:1–3: “For, behold, the day cometh, that shall *burn* as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall *burn them up*, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be *ashes under the soles of your feet* in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts.”

Read the above passages again, and notice the italicized words. Are they not the same, or similar, terms Jesus used when He spoke of the fate of the wicked? Did He not speak of “fire,” of “unquenchable fire,” and of “outer darkness”? Were His descriptions nothing more than a “carryover” from rabbinic teachings?

The truth is, Jesus did *not* rely on rabbinic interpretations of the Scriptures and clearly said so on more than one occasion! Why, then, should we assume that He did? *Jesus used the language of the prophets when He spoke of the fate of the wicked!* Therefore, we should look to the original source, not Jewish fables, for an accurate understanding of the terms and descriptions Jesus used.



With this understanding, let's turn our attention to the words *shades* and *sheol*. According to traditionalists, the rabbis were correct in teaching that these terms refer to the place where disembodied souls consciously dwell. Let's test this claim in the light of Scripture.

## **Hades and Sheol**

The second Greek word translated "hell" in the King James Version is *hades*. Most modern English translations leave this word untranslated.

To the Greeks, and to the Jews influenced by Greek philosophy, the word referred to the "unseen state" where souls departed from their bodies reside. Hades was also the name of the pagan "lord of the underworld."

In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the word *hades* is used in place of the Hebrew *sheol*. The two words are similar in meaning, but are not exact equivalents. Thus, considering the Hellenization of the Jews, one can easily see how the pagan ideas associated with the Greek term (*hades*) came to be associated with the original term (*sheol*).

But, again, in order to understand what Christ and the New Testament writers meant when they spoke of *hades*, we must go to the original source and see how "sheol" was used.

In Numbers 16, Korah and his companions met their fate when "the earth opened her mouth" and they "went down alive into the pit [*sheol*]" (verses 32–33). Here, the word obviously refers to a pit, grave, or area below the surface of the ground.

Morey, speaking of the Septuagint, argues: "Not once is Hades the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for grave (*kever*)" (*Death and the Afterlife*, p. 82). This is true, but misleading. The fact that *kever* means "grave" does not negate the fact that *sheol* (translated *hades* in the Septuagint) carries a similar meaning, as the above passage clearly shows. After all, Korah and his companions did fall into a pit, and when the earth closed upon them, that pit became their "grave." While scholars differ in opinion on the origin of the word *hades*, it seems most probable that it was derived from *hado*, which signifies "all-receiving." Therefore, both *hades* and *sheol* refer to the "universal grave," or all-receiving "abode" of the dead, but neither term necessarily connotes a place of conscious existence.

The Hebrew word *kever* generally refers to an individual sepulcher, tomb, or grave. *Sheol* is "the grave" in the sense that it is the "dust of the earth" unto which all past civilizations have returned. It may be said that when one is lowered into his *kever* (grave), he joins his predecessors in *sheol* (the "universal grave," where the dead "sleep").

David said: "For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave [*sheol*] who shall give thee thanks?" (Psalm 6:5). Jacob, lamenting for his son (presumed to be dead), said: "For I will go down into the grave [*sheol*] unto my son mourning" (Genesis 37:35). Later,

he said: “If mischief shall befall him [Benjamin] by the way in the which ye go, then shall ye bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave [*sheol*]” (Genesis 42:38).

In each of the above passages the word (*sheol*) is correctly rendered “the grave.” It is the place of the dead, where there is no remembrance of God and no giving of thanks to Him. Jacob clearly spoke of burial when he said that his sons would “bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave.”

David was speaking of burial when he said, concerning Shimei: “But his hoar head bring thou down to the grave [*sheol*] with blood” (1 Kings 2:9). How could the living bring someone “down to sheol” if sheol were a spiritual realm where spirits go immediately upon death of the body?

In Ezekiel 31, the word is translated “the grave,” “the pit,” and “hell,” and is described as “the nether parts of the earth” where Pharaoh will “lie in the midst of the uncircumcised with them that be slain by the sword” (verses 14–18).

The word (*sheol*) occurs sixty-five times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Except when it is used in a poetic sense (as in Isaiah 14:9–10), it never refers to a state of conscious existence after death. However, preconceived ideas about reward and retribution in the “afterlife” may well lead one to read such ideas into biblical references to sheol.

For instance, Jacob’s statement, “For I will go down into the grave [*sheol*] unto my son mourning,” could be interpreted to mean that Jacob expected, upon death, to meet his son in the “afterlife.” Of course, if that were true, one might wonder why Jacob expected to go to his son mourning rather than rejoicing. Obviously, Jacob meant that he would mourn his son’s death throughout the remainder of his life.

Clearly, sheol is the grave, or “universal grave,” and was not originally connected with concepts about the “afterlife.” It is described as a world of darkness, of silence, where all the dead rest quietly, as if in a dreamless sleep. This is the understanding we should have when we read of hades in the New Testament.

Jesus said that “the gates of hell [*hades*] shall not prevail against” His church (Matthew 16:18), meaning that His church would continue to exist in spite of efforts to destroy it. He said that Capernaum, though “exalted unto heaven,” would “be brought down to hell [*hades*]” (Matthew 11:23), meaning that the proud town would be brought to complete ruin.

Peter, citing Psalm 16:10 (a Psalm of David), said that Christ’s “soul was not left in hell [*hades*; Hebrew: *sheol*], neither His flesh did see corruption” (Acts 2:27, 31). Obviously, hades meant to Peter the same thing sheol meant to David—a world of silence and darkness, where there are no thoughts, no memories of days gone by. Christ, Peter said, was not consigned to the dust of the earth, but was raised from the state of death.

Paul, writing of the future resurrection, said: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave [*hades*], where is thy victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:55). A few verses earlier, he described the dead as those who “sleep” (verse 51). To Paul, then, *hades* was not a place of conscious existence, but of *sleep*. (Most scholars argue that the word *hades* does not appear in this verse in the best manuscripts; nevertheless, Paul was quoting loosely from the Septuagint version of Hosea 13:14, where “*hades*” *does* appear.)

Both Old and New Testaments clearly teach that the dead are really dead. With this understanding, let’s examine several New Testament descriptions of the ultimate fate of the incorrigibly wicked.

### **New Testament Descriptions**

Jesus said that “whosoever believeth in Him should not *perish*, but have eternal life” (John 3:16). This is one of the best known verses in the Bible; yet, few seem to consider the meaning of the word “perish.” Some point out that the word carries the meaning of “to mar” or “to lose,” and conclude that Jesus meant that those who reject Him would be eternally “marred” or “lost” due to the inescapable flames of eternal hell.

In Greek, the word is *apollumi*, which literally means “to destroy,” or perish. Jesus used the term when He said “it is profitable [better] for thee that one of thy members should perish [*apollumi*], and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell [*Gehenna*]” (Matthew 5:29). A severed member is no longer functional. It decomposes, or perishes. Jesus meant, then, that it is better that a member (such as an eye, or hand) perish than that the whole body perish in *Gehenna* fire.

Paul said: “For the wages of sin is *death*; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). The Greek word translated “death” is *than’atos*. While the word is sometimes used of spiritual lifelessness, it is here contrasted with “eternal life,” and is the *end result* of sinful living (verse 21). The word means death—the opposite of life.

Paul further said that at the Second Coming those who “obey not the gospel” will “be punished with everlasting *destruction* from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7–8). He spoke of the “man of sin” whom “the Lord shall *consume* with the spirit of His mouth, and shall *destroy* with the brightness of His coming” (2:3, 8).

Notice the words *destruction*, *destroy*, and *consume*. These words indicate *utter* destruction, and are in perfect agreement with Old Testament descriptions of the fate of the wicked.

Peter wrote, concerning the false prophets who speak evil of God’s truth: “But these, as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed, speak evil of the things that they understand not; and shall *utterly perish* in their own corruption” (2 Peter 2:12). Peter said that such persons “bring upon themselves swift *destruction*” (verse 1). Like Christ, Peter

spoke the language of the prophets, warning of utter destruction for those who work iniquity.

In order to conclude that the Bible teaches eternal, conscious existence in hellfire, one must claim that “death” does not mean death, that “perish” does not mean perish, and that “destruction” does not mean destruction. These terms can be used metaphorically, or in a spiritual sense, in reference to a state of being, such as spiritual death, ruin, or loss; however, when understood in the light of previous revelation (i.e., the Hebrew Scriptures), it becomes clear that they refer to literal destruction.

Those who insist that Jesus’ use of familiar rabbinic terms and phrases proves He accepted Jewish beliefs in the eternal, conscious existence of the wicked in Gehenna should carefully consider two important facts:

First, Jesus clearly did not agree with Jewish religious leaders on many points. Virtually all theologians acknowledge the fact that the Jews of Jesus’ day held many erroneous beliefs about the Kingdom of God and the Messiah’s role in establishing the Kingdom. Throughout Jesus’ earthly ministry, even the disciples themselves were swayed by these erroneous beliefs. Why, then, should anyone assume that Jesus agreed with the Jewish religious leaders on other eschatological matters?

Second, the apostle Paul warned of acceptance of “Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth” (Titus 1:14). In addition to misconceptions about circumcision and the Law of Moses, there must have been numerous other erroneous Jewish ideas that adversely affected the Christian church. Paul’s rejection of “Jewish fables” shows that reading rabbinic interpretations into scriptural terms and phrases is theologically unsound.

Further, Jewish beliefs about death, the afterlife, and the fate of the wicked varied significantly. Some believed that the most despicable of the wicked remain in Gehenna for eternity, while ordinary sinners spend only a certain number of months there, after which they emerge “purged” of their imperfections. Others admitted their uncertainty as to the nature of divine retribution. And still others rejected the idea of eternal suffering, believing rather in the complete annihilation of the wicked.

Another important consideration is the probability that many of the rabbis didn’t truly believe in the imaginative descriptions found in the Talmudic literature and apocalyptic writings of the intertestamental period. Many conservative, mainstream biblical scholars acknowledge that at least some of the rabbinic stories of the righteous dead conversing with the unrighteous dead were mere *parables* that were used as teaching aids but were not taken as literally true.

In view of the wide variation of opinion about eschatological matters, then, one should be able to see the folly of reading rabbinic interpretations into scriptural descriptions of the fate of the wicked. Again, a correct understanding can be obtained only by stripping away

the preconceived ideas, and by simply reading and believing what God reveals through the Scriptures.

Having seen that the Scriptures speak of the utter destruction of the wicked, let's now consider some of the most common objections to this teaching.

## **Common Objections**

### ***Perpetual Punishment***

One of the places that Scripture supposedly teaches the continuous suffering of the wicked is in 2 Peter 2:9. Notice how this verse appears in the KJV:

“The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished.”

Taken as the King James Version states it, this verse does not support the traditional concept of hell. On the contrary, it says that the unjust will be punished in the Day of Judgment. If their punishment takes place in the Day of Judgment, then it logically follows that they have yet to be punished, for the Day of Judgment has yet to arrive.

However, traditionalists point out that a better translation of this verse is as follows:

“[T]he Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment” (New American Standard Bible).

The New Revised Standard Version and other modern English versions of Scripture translate this verse similarly, thus supporting the traditionalists' claim.

Assuming the modern translations to be correct, the question still remains: Did Peter mean that the “souls” of the unrighteous dead are consciously suffering in a place of punishment?

The answer is clearly *no!* Those who focus on the Greek construction of this verse and claim it supports their belief in a conscious afterlife fail to carefully consider the context wherein the verse appears.

In context, Peter relates examples of how God, in times past, delivered the righteous from temptations (or trials), and of how He punished the unrighteous. Peter speaks of how Noah was delivered while the rest of the world perished in the Flood; of how “righteous Lot” was delivered while Sodom and Gomorrah were reduced to ashes (verses 5–8). Thus, as Peter says, “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation [just as He rescued Noah and Lot], and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment.”

This verse simply means that the unrighteous are always subject to divine judgment, and that scriptural examples (such as the Flood and the destruction of Sodom) show how God has, throughout history, kept the unrighteous under punishment for the Day of Judgment. Peter speaks of divine retribution *in history*, not in the “afterlife.”

We could outline many more instances that show how God has kept the unrighteous under punishment—the plagues that befell Egypt, the plagues that befell the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness and in the land of promise, the fate of Korah and his cohorts, the fate of the disobedient sons of Aaron when they offered “strange fire” upon the altar, and so on.

Peter’s purpose is to show that divine retribution in history points to the *punishment that awaits* the wicked in the Day of Judgment. If God did not spare the ungodly in ages past, then He will not spare the false teachers who “bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them,” who speak evil of the “way of truth,” and who “walk after the flesh in the lust of uncleanness” (2 Peter 2:1–2, 10).

Once the final Day of Judgment has come and gone, the citizens of God’s Kingdom will be able to look back through the annals of human history and see how God “kept the unrighteous under punishment for the Day of Judgment.”

### ***Everlasting Torment***

Another scripture that is often used in support of the traditional hellfire is Revelation 20:10:

“And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

In the KJV, the word *are* (after “false prophet”) is in italics, indicating it was added by the translators. We could just as well insert “had been cast” instead of “are,” for Revelation 19:20 shows that the beast and false prophet *had been cast* into the lake of fire a thousand years earlier. Therefore, we may conclude that the devil, not the beast and false prophet, “shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever,” not because he feels the intense heat of the flames, but because he sees all he has worked to accomplish for thousands of years being utterly destroyed.

This way of understanding the verse seems logical; however, traditionalists are quick to point out that the original Greek indicates that all three—the devil, the beast, and the false prophet—will experience everlasting torment.

The NASB reads: “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they [notice, “they”—all three] will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

Again, assuming the modern English translators to be most accurate, does this verse support the belief that the wicked experience conscious suffering for eternity?

The answer lies in understanding that many of the descriptions found in the book of Revelation are highly symbolic and should not to be taken in a wooden literal sense. If we ignore the symbolic nature of the prophecies of Revelation, then we find conflicts with other scriptures. This is seen in a comparison of Revelation 19:20 with Daniel 7:11.

The former states: “And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast *alive* into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.”

Daniel 7:11, speaking of the same end-time “beast” (with the “little horn,” representing the “false prophet”), says: “I beheld even till the beast was *slain*, and his body destroyed, and given to the *burning flame*.”

Notice that in Revelation both are cast *alive* into the lake of fire, but in Daniel’s prophecy, the beast is *slain* and his dead body is “given to the burning flame.” How can we harmonize these *two seemingly* conflicting accounts?

The answer is that both accounts describe the *complete overthrow* of the religio-political system that will wreak havoc in the time of the end. While the “beast” and “false prophet” (or “little horn”) do represent two individuals, they also represent the political and religious forces that will dominate world affairs in the end-time. Jesus Christ will bring *utter ruin* to both at His coming.

John’s description of the fate of the beast and the false prophet should be understood the same way we understand Isaiah’s description of the destruction of Edom: “And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. *It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever*: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever” (Isaiah 34:9–10).

Obviously, this prophetic description of the judgment of Edom cannot be taken to mean that streams of water literally turned into pitch, or that dust literally turned into brimstone, or that literal smoke from burning pitch literally goes up forever. This is powerful imagery of complete destruction in the wake of divine judgment. The same is true of Revelation 20:10 and of Revelation 14:10–11, which (with 19:3) draws from the imagery of Isaiah 34:9–10.

We should also take into account the fact that the ungodly system symbolized by the sea and land beasts (or “beast and false prophet”) involves human as well as *non-human* agents. The devil and his demonic cohorts—the spiritual principalities and powers at work behind the scenes—will be “tormented” as they witness the destruction of the ungodly empire they had created. It may well be, then, that when John speaks of the beast

and false prophet being tormented, he is not speaking of the *human* leaders of the ungodly system, but of the *spiritual* rulers who have influenced kings and their kingdoms since time immemorial (see Daniel 11).

In any case, it is a mistake to limit the symbolic “beast” and “false prophet” to two flesh-and-blood human beings. They are the two primary components of an ungodly system that incorporates both human and demonic agents.

### ***Everlasting Fire***

Matthew 25:41 states: “Then shall He [Christ] say also unto them [the wicked] on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.”

While the Greek term translated “everlasting” can mean “everlasting” in the English sense, it does not necessarily mean “unending.” It is often used of things or conditions that have both a beginning and an end, and of periods of undefined duration. The word, in Greek, is *aionios* and is the same word rendered “eternal” in Jude 7, which speaks of the “eternal fire” that consumed Sodom and Gomorrah.

As Vine points out, *aionios* “describes duration, either undefined but not endless...or undefined because endless” (W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 373).

Thus, “everlasting fire” is a fire that burns until all its fuel is consumed. Apparently, the expression is rooted in Old Testament descriptions of unquenchable fire, for it is used (in the New Testament) interchangeably with the “fire that shall not be quenched.” (See discussion on “unquenchable fire” earlier in this booklet.)

But some claim that since this fire is “prepared for the devil and his angels,” it must be a “spiritual fire,” or condition of eternal misery, since the devil and his demonic cohorts are spiritual beings. This argument assumes that the devil and his angels will suffer the same fate as the wicked humans who are thrown into the fire. However, the argument fails once we understand that “everlasting fire” is “prepared for the devil and his angels” in that this is the fire that will destroy the human agencies through whom the devil and his angels work.

In the New Testament, idolatry is associated with demon worship (1 Corinthians 10:20–21). In the Old Testament, the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), where idolatry of the worst sort took place, is set forth as a fitting symbol of the fate of idolaters. Thus, by connecting idolatry (ungodliness) with demonic activity, we can see how the smoldering, worm-infested refuse of the Valley of Hinnom may well be described as “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels”—for the Valley of Hinnom symbolizes the ultimate destruction of all who engage in the ungodliness that is associated with demonic activity.

### ***Everlasting Punishment***



Speaking of the wicked, Jesus said, “And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Matthew 25:46). Traditionalists argue that since “everlasting punishment” is contrasted with “life eternal,” and that since the words *everlasting* and *eternal* are translated from the same Greek word, then the punishment of the wicked must be as everlasting as the life of the righteous.

True, the punishment of the wicked is everlasting, as is the reward of the righteous. However, what is generally overlooked is the fact that everlasting *punishment* does not necessarily entail everlasting *consciousness*. The punishment of the wicked will include both the horrifying experience of facing the lake of fire and their death as a result of being thrown into the lake of fire. The latter—death—will be everlasting. And, clearly, everlasting death—a death from which there is no resurrection—is part of their punishment.

No doubt, the Day of Judgment will be an exceedingly painful experience for the wicked. But why should we assume that their punishment ceases as their consciousness fades into oblivion? Their *pain* ends, but their *punishment* continues.

Paul writes, “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23)—*eternal* death, from which there is no awakening, no chance of experiencing the joy of salvation, no happiness, no fellowship, no hopes and dreams, no sharing of life’s experiences. If that’s not “everlasting punishment,” what is?

### **When Will the Wicked Meet Their Fate?**

Indeed, the Bible does speak of hell. But when will the fires of Gehenna begin to burn? At the end of the Millennium, when the unsaved will be raised to life and stand before the Judgment Seat? Or at the Second Coming of Christ?

Jesus stated that “in the end of this world [or “age,” referring to the time of the Second Coming]” the wicked will be “cast into a furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:40–42). Paul said the “man of sin” will be destroyed “with the brightness of His [Christ’s] coming” (2 Thessalonians 2:3, 8).

Further, as we have seen, the terms and phrases Jesus used in describing the fate of the wicked are rooted in Old Testament descriptions of the Day of the Lord, which will begin just before the Millennium. This concurs with the Revelation 19 description of the Day of the Lord, when the returning Christ “treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God” (verse 15); when the birds of prey are called to “the supper of the great God,” that they might “eat the flesh of kings, and the flesh of captains, and the flesh of mighty men...” (verses 15, 17); and when the beast and false prophet are “cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone” (verse 20).

All this takes place just before the Millennium begins. Later, at the end of the Millennium, the devil is cast into the same “lake of fire” the beast and false prophet had been cast into a thousand years earlier. Then, after the Millennium, the “rest of the dead”

are resurrected and judged (verse 12). At some point during this final judgment period, “Death and hades” (symbolizing the incorrigibly wicked—those who had refused to turn to God in repentance) are “cast into the lake of fire. This is the *second death*” (verse 14).

Clearly, then, all the terms Jesus and the writers of the New Testament used—Gehenna fire, lake of fire, furnace of fire, outer darkness, unquenchable fire, and so on—apply to God’s judgment against the wicked during both the Day of the Lord and the final judgment period following the Millennium. With the final judgment will come the ultimate fulfillment of all the Old Testament descriptions of God’s wrath against the ungodly.

None of the scriptural references to the fate of the wicked have anything to do with some “otherworldly” inferno where eternally conscious human beings agonize for billions upon billions of years in pain comparable to the pain of burning. Jesus Christ *did not* uphold the Jewish fables that came from mingling scriptural descriptions with Hellenistic and Babylonian ideas. Rather, He spoke the language of the prophets!

He tells us that He is coming with *vengeance*, that He is coming with a sword to *smite* the nations, that He is going to call the birds of prey together to feed on the flesh of captains, and kings, and mighty men, and that He is going to tread the winepress of the *fierceness* and *wrath* of Almighty God!

In that day—in the day of the *vengeance* of our God—blood will flow as high as horses’ bridles! The slain of the Lord will be many! Bodies will be strewn and heaped and burned, when He whose eyes glow as blazing fires unleashes His *fury*! For the wicked, it will be a day of darkness, a day of gloominess, a day of terror!

In that day, the fires of hell will begin to burn!

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