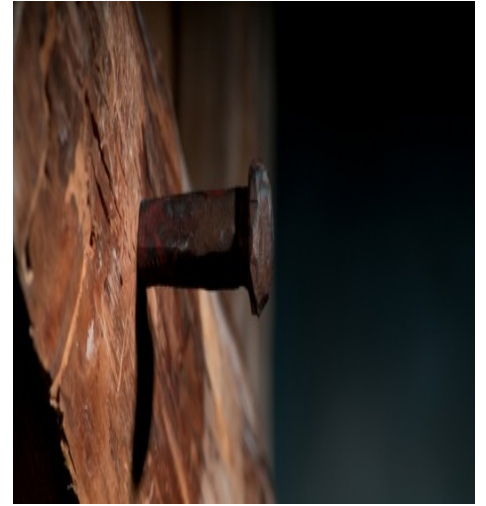


What is Hell?

FAQ: I live in the USA, and it seems that our language is riddled with references to “hell.” I constantly hear that extremely versatile word used in conversations of all kinds. People say: “What the hell?” or “The hell with it,” or “Hell, yes / no,” etc. On occasion, some people, though not travel agents, have encouraged me to “go to hell.” I don’t think I want to, because I’ve heard that the Devil lives there, but if I did want to just drive by, where exactly is it located? Based on what people are saying, I assume that “hell” is a word used in the Bible, and if so, what is “hell”?

Actually, at this time, there is no such place, other than the small town of Hell, Michigan, which, by the way, has, on occasion, frozen over. But it hardly meets the description of the “Hell” that is propounded by so many Christians who erroneously believe that it is a place of everlasting fire where the “living dead” (???) are tormented forever in flames.



Also, the word “hell” is not found anywhere in the original text of Scripture. In the King James Version, you will find it as the translation of the Greek words *hades* and *gehenna*, but most modern translations recognize that “hell” is an incorrect translation for *hades*, and more correctly render it as “grave.” Even modern translations, however, do sometimes mistakenly translate the Greek word *gehenna* as “hell.”

So how did the word “hell” so permeate our culture? In this relatively brief answer, we refer you to some other resources that will clearly show you, in detail, just what the Word of God says about this most significant issue. Our book, *Is There Death After Life?*, sets forth what the Word says about death and its aftermath, while *The Fire That Consumes*, by Edward Fudge (211 pp), is a very thorough exposition of “conditional immortality,” including the origin of the idea of “hell” as a place of everlasting torment for the wicked. We also have a free online seminar called *Death & Resurrection to Life*.

One of Satan’s ploys to make Christianity look foolish is to introduce ridiculous ideas (that is, ideas that can legitimately be ridiculed because they make no sense) into its theology. In regard to this overall subject, here are two such errors that came into Christianity from Hellenistic (Greek) thought:

- There is no such thing as actual “death” (defined in just about any dictionary as “the end, or absence, of life”).
- When one “dies,” he then lives on in some conscious, incorporeal form called the “soul” or “spirit.”

The lie that man is deathless (introduced by the Devil in Genesis 3:4 and later believed by the Greeks) spawned the corresponding notion that there must be an eternal residence for good people and another address for bad people. Thus arose the following falsehoods:

- A dead person goes either to “heaven” or “hell” and stays there forever.
- “Hell” is a place of everlasting torment in flames.
- Fire is a preservative (who else believes this?).

It is ironic that most Christians believe that Adolph Hitler will have everlasting life. You might be thinking: “What?! No they don’t.” But think again—if Hitler is being tormented forever in fire, does he or does he not have everlasting life? It’s a crummy life, but it is everlasting life, right? On the contrary, Romans 6:23 says: “For the

wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is everlasting life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” God never says that the wages of sin is eternal torment. No, He says that the penalty for sin is an end to one’s life.

It is important to realize that no verse in the Bible says that the “soul” or “spirit” lives on by itself. No verse says that “hell” is a place of everlasting torment in fire. These falsehoods originated with God’s archenemy, and infiltrated Christianity via mistranslation and the mixing of Greek culture and beliefs with the truths presented in the Word of God.

Thinking logically, does it seem fair to you that God, who the Bible says is love, would forever inflict upon wicked people the excruciating agony of constantly burning? Think about it—if “forever” were likened to a feast, 50 million years of torment is a small hors d’oeuvre (appetizer). Wouldn’t most rational thinkers conclude that, even for quintessential bad boys like Hitler or Bin Laden, that is simply not fair? Sure they would. Justice would not be served by such an egregious atrocity, and how sad it is that this erroneous belief has contributed to many people turning away from the God whom they were told would do such a thing.

The late Sidney Hatch well expressed how twisted is the idea of a just God forever tormenting by fire those who refused to believe in Him:

“A civilized society looks with horror upon the abuse and torture of children or adults. Even where capital punishment is practiced, the aim is to implement it as mercifully as possible. Are we to believe then that a holy God—our heavenly Father—is less just than the courts of men? Of course not.”

And the late Swedish Lutheran Bishop John Persone wrote:

“For me it is inexplicable how a person who holds the orthodox view [of eternal torment] can at any time have a glad moment in this life. He is constantly mingling with people whose final destiny will be to be tormented eternally without end...To me it is even more inexplicable that such an ‘orthodox’ person can expect even a happy moment in eternity, when he knows that contemporaneously with his blessed estate continues the endless torment and agony of innumerable millions of the accursed. Can he, if he loves his neighbors as himself, yes, even if he has just a little bit of human love and is not solely a selfish wretch, have even a single happy moment?”

Well said, wouldn’t you agree?

Think for a moment about fire. What does it do to things it touches? What do you do if you come home and discover that your house is on fire? Do you feel any sense of urgency? Or do you say, “Hey, let’s go to a movie, and when we get back, we’ll call the Fire Department. There’s no hurry, because we know that our home will burn forever.” Nothing burns forever, and a simple word study of “fire” in Scripture shows that its primary purpose is to destroy useless things, like chaff, and evil things, like wicked people, evil spirits, and Satan (Malachi 4:1 is a classic example).

This article about “hell” is not the place to exposit the biblical truth that death is the end of life, and that one who dies no longer exists anywhere in any form. That by itself renders fallacious the notion that “hell” is a place where “dead” people are alive and conscious. In His Word, God artfully chose the metaphor of “sleep” to figuratively describe death. Why? Because sleep is a temporary condition of unconsciousness that ends with an awakening. Ditto for death, for one who believes in Jesus Christ.

Where there is no consciousness, there is no awareness of time passing. Therefore, the Apostle Paul's next conscious thought will be when he sees the face of the Lord Jesus at his appearing. Until that glorious moment, Paul, like all who have died and "returned to dust," no longer exists. Nor will he ever exist again unless Jesus Christ actually died, rose from the dead, ascended to heaven, and comes again to raise Christians who have died. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says that this truth is the only basis for genuine comfort for the bereaved. How important is this subject? It's a matter of life and death.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *sheol* means "the state, or place, of the dead," and is usually translated as "grave" (see Ps. 6:5, 16:10, 49:15, 89:48, et al). Because there is not literally any such place, it could also be translated as "gravedom." The Hebrews recognized that man is an integrated being who is either alive or dead (to us, this is obvious). They understood that man does not have a soul, but rather that, as per Genesis 2:7, man is a living "soul" (*nephesh*), that is, a living person. When he dies, he is then a dead soul (e.g., Lev. 19:28, 21:1; Num. 5:2, 6:6, 11), that is, a dead person.

In contrast to the teaching of the Old Testament, most Greeks believed that man has "an immortal soul," which they saw as the non-corporeal essence of his being that was trapped in the temporal, fleshly prison of his body until the wonderful moment when his body "died" and his "soul" could freely wing its way to Mt. Olympus, the land of Shades, or somewhere else.

Because of this belief, the Greeks had no word that corresponded with the idea expressed by the Hebrew word *sheol*. The closest thing they could find was *hades*, and that is what those who produced the Septuagint (a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek) chose as the counterpart to *sheol*. As they do with *sheol* in the Old Testament, some English versions of the Bible erroneously translate the Greek word *hades* as "hell" in the New Testament [For a thorough examination of the meaning of *sheol* and *hades*, see the word "hell" in E.W. Bullinger's *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* (Zondervan Pub. Co., Grand Rapids MI)].

The impact of translating *sheol* as *hades* cannot be overstated. In *sheol*, everyone is dead, but in the Greek language and culture, everyone in *Hades* is alive. Thus, by the stroke of the pen of the Septuagint's translators, all the dead (in *sheol*) were granted life after death in *hades*. The Greek-speaking Hebrews, reading their Greek Bible, would naturally come to believe that "the dead are alive" (it was, after all, in their Bible). This explains why, at the time of Jesus, many Jews believed that the souls of the dead lived on after the person died, and why Jesus would speak a parable springboarding off that belief (Lazarus in "Abraham's bosom" – Luke 16. For a full explanation of this, see "Difficult Scriptures Explained.")

We should note that the English word "hell" comes from an Old English word meaning "to conceal." The first definition in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* is "a place or state of the dead or of the damned; usually under the ground" (hence, the idea of "concealed"). The second definition is "a place or state of misery, torment, or wickedness."

The idea that "hell" is a place of eternal torment came about because the word *hades* carried with it all the connotation of Greek mythology, in which Hades was the god of the underworld, a place where the souls of dead people went to be tormented. As Bullinger writes in Appendix 131 of *The Companion Bible*:

"The Old Testament is the fountainhead of the Hebrew language. It has no literature behind it. But the case is entirely different with the Greek language. The Hebrew sheol is divine in its origin and usage. The Greek hades is human in its origin and comes down to us laden with centuries of development, in which it has acquired new senses, meanings, and usages."

Scripture most certainly does speak of a place of fire where wicked people will be "punished with everlasting

destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Thess. 1:9). This is *gehenna*, a Greek word that the Gospel writers used in reference to what is elsewhere called “the lake of fire.” It is significant that not only wicked people will be destroyed there, but also “death and the grave” will be forever exterminated (see Rev. 20:12-15).

Gehenna is the Greek word for the Hebrew “valley of Hinnom,” which was the city dump outside of Jerusalem. When Jesus used this word to refer to the place of the future destruction of the wicked (e.g., Matt. 10:28—still erroneously translated as “hell” even in modern Bible versions), all who heard him knew exactly what he meant. As the note on Matthew 5:22 in the NIV Study Bible says:

“The Greek word is gehenna, which derives its name from a deep ravine south of Jerusalem, the ‘valley of Hinnom.’ During the reigns of the wicked Ahaz and Manasseh, human sacrifices to the Ammonite god Molech were offered there. Josiah desecrated the valley because of the pagan worship there (2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31, 32; 19:6). It became a sort of perpetually burning city dump and later a figure for the place of final punishment.”

As Edward Fudge points out in *The Fire That Consumes*:

“New Testament writers chose the word gehenna to describe the fate of the lost only in the Gospels, speaking only to Jews, and only when addressing people familiar with the geography of Jerusalem.”

The lake of fire is also called “the second death” (Rev. 21:8). What does that mean? God’s Word clearly states that the Lord Jesus Christ will raise from the dead everyone who has ever lived, and that “those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned” (John 5:29). Pending that Adolph Hitler or Saddam Hussein had no “deathbed conversion,” they will one day face the Lord Jesus to account for their evil ways, and after that be cast into the lake of fire to be annihilated. They died once physically, and they will “die” again—forever out of existence.

Do you think that those listening to Jesus speak of the wicked burning in *gehenna* thought he meant they would burn forever? Of course not, because they knew that the garbage they took to the city dump did not continue to exist in the fire without being consumed. Rather, it burned up, and was gone. Jesus used the word *gehenna* to illustrate that the wicked were like the garbage, refuse worthy only of destruction. The only reason the fire continued to burn was because the whole city kept throwing their garbage there. Likewise, when it has done its job, the lake of fire will be no more.

If Revelation 20:10 is coming to your mind as an apparent contradiction to what you have read thus far, that’s great—it should. It speaks of the Devil and a couple of his henchman being thrown in the lake of fire and being “tormented day and night forever and ever.” However, the Bible was not written in English, and when we dig a bit deeper, we see that “forever and ever” in the Greek is more accurately “for ages unto ages.” In keeping with God’s decree in Genesis 3:15 that Jesus would eventually “crush the head” of the Devil (that is, destroy him), Ezekiel 28:18 declares that the Devil will be “brought to ashes.” Apparently, as a fitting recompense for his monstrous evil, this will take a long time.

Some Christians argue that annihilation is not a sufficient threat to stop people, and that the threat of burning forever is a more effective deterrent to sin. However, this is looking at Scripture the wrong way. God says that it is His “kindness” that leads people to repentance (Rom. 2:4), not His threats of death, although that might work, because it is programmed within mankind to do whatever it takes to stay alive. Apparently, the thought of

not existing is more terrifying to most people than the thought of living even under horrible conditions. What God does do is set forth His great love in giving His Son, and encourage people to believe in him and have everlasting life.

If God were trying to use the threat of eternal torment as a deterrent to sin, John 3:16 might read: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not burn forever, but have everlasting life." And God could have made that plain in many other verses as well. The fact that the Bible simply says "perish" indicates that the unsaved will die, and thus exist no more. What faces those who refuse God's gift of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is annihilation. They will be terminated, gone—history. And the rest of us, because of the grace of God and the work of Jesus Christ, will live happily ever after.

For those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, he has paid the price for their sin, and he will give them the gift of life in the age to come. Those who refuse to believe in him will pay the penalty for sin themselves. How? By dying forever in the lake of fire. Everlasting life is just that—life without end, and everlasting death is destruction without hope of recall—permanent extermination. This is God's perfect justice, and it is definitely a matter of life and death.