

Booklet C
Biblical Expressions, Biblical
Explanations
(Supplement to lesson 12)

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Will Sinners Burn Forever?

The doctrine of endless burning of sinners is not taught anywhere in the Bible. Nowhere does it say that God will sustain the lives of those who transgress His law.

So what do you do when you find an occasional expression in the Bible that initially seems to contradict the clearest Biblical passages on a subject? There is only one safe course to follow: **Always let the Bible explain its own terms.** By examining the Bible's own use of a particular expression, you discover the perfect agreement that exists throughout the Bible on the subject.

Some people are misled by the expression "**unquenchable fire.**" This term is used in Matthew 3:12; Mark 9:43-48; and Luke 3:17. Does the fact that the fire is unquenchable mean that sinners will burn forever?

Let's ask the Bible to show us an actual example of this kind of fire. Through Jeremiah, God prophesied that if His people would not hallow the Sabbath, Jerusalem would be burned with fire which "shall not be quenched" (Jeremiah 17:27). That prophecy was fulfilled (2 Chronicles 36:19-21; Jeremiah 52:12, 13). But notice that although the fire could not be quenched *the fuel was consumed!*

In Isaiah we read that the wicked will "burn together, and none shall quench them" (Isaiah 1:31). Yet the same chapter explains that they "shall be *consumed*" (Isaiah 1:28)!

Did you know that the Bible has also recorded for us an example of a time when "**eternal fire**" was used? Jude 7 says that "Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them . . . are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire." The story is recorded in Genesis 19. According to this example, how thoroughly does eternal fire burn things? The answer is found in 2 Peter 2:6, "Turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrha *into ashes* . . . making them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly."

The Bible indicates that those involved in the final conflict against God will be tormented day and night "**for ever and ever**" (Revelation 14:11; 20:10). How long, in the Biblical sense of the word, is "for ever and ever"? Are there any Biblical examples of this measurement of time?

Here is one. In the Jewish economy, all Hebrew servants were released every seventh year. But if one should choose not to leave his

master, “his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him *for ever*” (Exodus 21:6). Obviously “for ever” only means “as long as he lives.”

Here is another example. Hannah dedicated her child Samuel to the Lord and took him to the house of the Lord that he might “there abide *for ever*” (1 Samuel 1:22). She clarified the meaning of her words in verse 28 by saying, “*as long as he liveth.*”

The term “**eternal punishing**” is not found in the Bible. However, Jesus did speak of “**everlasting punishment**” (Matthew 25:46). Do you know the difference? What is the punishment for sin? “The wages of sin is *death*” (Romans 6:23). Everlasting death. The Scriptures clearly foretell the fate of the wicked “whose end is *destruction*” (Philippians 3:19). “Everlasting destruction” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). “Thou hast destroyed the wicked, thou hast put out their name for ever and ever. O thou enemy, destructions are come to a perpetual end: and . . . their memorial is perished with them” (Psalm 9:5, 6). “This is the second death” (Revelation 20:14). The Bible is very clear on this subject. (See Job 8:22; 20:4-9; Psalm 1:6; 21:9; 37:38; Proverbs 2:22; Isaiah 65:17; Zephaniah 1:18.)

Everlasting Fire

Follow the Bible’s teaching on this important subject:

What kind of fire will be used to destroy the wicked?

“Unquenchable fire.” —Matthew 3:12.

“Fire that never shall be quenched.” —Mark 9:43-48.

“Fire unquenchable.” —Luke 3:17.

“Everlasting fire.” —Matthew 25:41.

What is the source of this never-ending fire?

“Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven.” —Genesis 19:24.

“From God out of heaven.” —Revelation 20:9.

What do we know about the nature of the eternal God?

“Our God is a consuming fire.” —Hebrews 12:29.

“His throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued and came forth before him.” —Daniel 7:9,10.

“And the sight of the glory of the Lord was like devouring fire.” —Exodus 24:17.

What ingredient accompanies the fire which is continually in the presence of God?

“And mount Sinai was altogether on a *smoke*, because the Lord descended upon it in fire: and the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace. . . .” —Exodus 19:18.

“There went up a *smoke* out of his nostrils, and fire out of his mouth devoured: coals were kindled by it.” —2 Samuel 22:9.

“I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple . . . and the house was filled with *smoke*.” —Isaiah 6:1-4.

“And the temple was filled with *smoke* from the glory of God, and from his power.” —Revelation 15:8.

What happens to the wicked in the divine presence?

“And he said, Thou canst not see my face: for there shall no man see me, and live.” —Exodus 33:20.

“He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.” —Revelation 14:10.

What is the effect of the fire upon the wicked?

“And there went out fire from the Lord, and *devoured* them, and *they died* before the Lord.” —Leviticus 10:2.

“And there came out a fire from the Lord and *consumed* the two hundred and fifty men.” —Numbers 16:35.

Only what kind of people can survive in the midst of God’s everlasting fire?

“Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly; . . .” —Isaiah 33:14, 15.

Will the righteous be able to dwell in the actual presence of God?

“He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” —Revelation 21:3.

“Thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire.” —Ezekiel 28:14.

So the righteous will dwell and prosper in the very fire that consumes the wicked?

“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.” —Malachi 4:1-3.

How has this contrasting effect been illustrated in the Bible?

“The flame of the fire slew those men that took up Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.” “He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God.” —Daniel 3:22, 25.

When the Lord appears, from what will the wicked seek to hide?

“Hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb.” —Revelation 6:16.

What is the important question?

“For the great day of his wrath is come; and *who shall be able to stand?*” —Revelation 6:17.

What is the answer?

“These are they which . . . have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither shall the sun light on them, nor any *heat.*”
—Revelation 7:14-16.

Conclusion:

The everlasting fire of which the Bible speaks is the fire of the presence of God. In it sinners cannot exist. Only those who have been cleansed from all unrighteousness will dwell in the presence of the holy God forever.

The Word “Hell” in the Bible

Many people do not realize that there are actually four different original words which are translated “hell” in the Bible. The confusing part is that the four original words do not all have the same meaning. If one attempts to combine the meanings of all four words into one composite concept, he not only emerges with a very confusing picture of the fate of the wicked, but he also does injustice to the Bible’s intent.

The word “hell” is used 54 times in the Bible: 31 times in the Old Testament, and 23 times in the New Testament.

Every time you see the word “hell” in the Old Testament, you can know that the Hebrew word used there is *sheol*, which means “the grave” (See Jonah 2:2, margin). In half of the instances in which *sheol* is used, the translators rendered it “hell.” In half, they used the word “grave.” Nowhere in Scripture does *sheol* denote a place of torment in which bodiless beings suffer.

The Bible makes it clear that all people, both righteous and wicked, go to *sheol* when they die! The patriarch Jacob said he would go to *sheol* when he died, and his son Joseph would go to *sheol* also (Genesis 37:35)! Righteous Job used the word *sheol* when speaking of his own resting place (Job 17:13). There everyone unconsciously awaits the resurrection.

The New Testament contains three Greek words which are translated “hell.” And they each mean something different.

Ten of the 23 New Testament references are translated from the word *hades*, which is simply the Greek equivalent of *sheol*, and means “the grave.” (Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14.) *Hades* is not associated with conscious torment anywhere in the Bible except in a parable found in Luke 16:23 (See separate discussion of this parable.)

In 12 instances the greek word *gehenna* is translated “hell.” (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.) *Gehenna*, or “Valley of Hinnom,” is mentioned repeatedly in the Old Testament (Joshua 15:8; 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31). It is a gorge near Jerusalem in which idolatrous kings burned their children as a sacrifice to the heathen god Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:1, 6). Because of this abomination, the Lord declared that He would make it a “valley of slaughter” for His rebellious people where the fowls of heaven would eat the corpses which could not be buried for lack of room (Jeremiah 7:32, 33; 19:6, 7).

The same valley was later used as a refuse dump where animal carcasses and rubbish were continually burned. Such places are generally infested with maggots which help decompose the refuse (Mark 9:44). Thus *gehenna* became associated in Jewish thought with the place of final punishment. Therefore Jesus used it as an illustration of the fire which will burn the wicked in the final day of judgment. Nowhere does the Bible say that the sinner is cast into *gehenna* at the moment of death. The Bible clearly says that the fire that burns the wicked will not touch them until the final day of judgment.

The word “hell” is used in only one other place in Scripture—2 Peter 2:4. Here the Greek word *tartaros* is used, which means “the deepest abyss.” Peter used this term when speaking of the banishment of the rebellious angels from heaven.

To summarize: Of the four words translated “hell,” we have seen that the Bible distinguishes three separate concepts:

1. *Sheol* or *hades*: The grave where all people go at death to unconsciously await either the resurrection of life or the resurrection of damnation.
2. *Gehenna*: A place of burning, used as an illustration of the fire which will one day destroy the earth and totally consume the wicked.
3. *Tartaros*: Used only one time in Scripture, but never in reference to the destiny of man.

Killing the Body, But Not the Soul

Question: According to the Genesis 2:7 equation, the body is a component of the soul. How then do you explain Matthew 10:28? “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Does not this teach that the body is one thing and the soul another, and therefore the soul is a separate entity from the body?

Answer: We must be careful not to read into this verse any more than it actually says. The text does not say that the soul continues to live when the body dies. It does not say that the dead retain consciousness.

The word “soul” refers to the person as an individual life, and Jesus here assures the Christian of eternal life, even though they may experience temporary death in this world, and their present bodies decay. Job said, “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.” Job 19:26. At the resurrection, clothed in new flesh—new bodies which will never die—we shall see God.

The context of Matthew 10:28 is Christ’s forewarning that persecution will come to His followers. His point is that although in this life we may be killed, no one can steal our eternal inheritance. When God declares that you shall have eternal life, no man can take that privilege from you no matter what he does to you. Whether you live or die, you still have the assurance of receiving immortality when Jesus comes.

Now notice what the rest of the verse says. “Fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Clearly, this text teaches that no sinner has an immortal soul. Sinners’ souls are destroyed in hell. The verse also clearly states that the bodies of sinners are included in what burns in hell. So the fact that dead bodies can still be dug up today indicates that the wicked have not yet gone to hell. Certainly, if I was trying to find Biblical evidence for the natural immortality of the soul, or for a present burning hell, I would have to avoid this verse.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

In all the Bible there is only one passage which suggests conscious suffering in death—Luke 16:19-31. The inspired testimony of the rest of Scripture teaches that death is a sleep, and punishment is future. The purpose of this allegory was not to describe the state of the dead. But the parable does teach several important points.

It definitely teaches that every person will reap what he sows. God will not bend the rules in order to spare those who have consistently spurned His grace. The parable teaches that in this life men decide their eternal destiny. God’s grace is offered to all people only while they are alive. But if they selfishly waste their lives, and fail to take eternity into consideration now, they have lost their opportunity for eternal life. There will be no chance to repent after they die.

The parable also is a warning to those who trust in their riches rather than

in God. And it shows that the time is coming when those who are poor in this world's goods but have trusted in God, will be exalted.

When the parable is closely examined, it is doubtful that anyone would claim its details as the basis for a doctrinal position on the subject of life after death. The details certainly do not present the beliefs of those who teach the immediate torment of a bodiless "soul" at death.

For example:

1. In the parable, there is no mention of a bodiless soul at all. The rich man was in hell with a body. He had eyes, a tongue, etc. No one believes that the *bodies* of the wicked go into the flames as soon as they die.

2. Nobody believes that Abrahams's literal bosom is the abode of the righteous dead. In keeping with the nature of the allegory, this is obviously a figure of speech. Incidentally, the angels will gather the saints (verse 22), but according to Matthew 24:31, that takes place at the coming of Jesus—not at death.

3. Another point is that paradise and hades are here pictured to be so situated that their inhabitants may hold normal conversation with each other across the gulf. But the Bible says that for the redeemed, the former earth will "not be remembered, *nor come into mind*" (Isaiah 65:17).

4. The rich man's request in verse 24 is hardly characteristic of someone in his condition. His whole body on fire, and all he asks for is that Lazarus dip the tip of his finger in water and then come and touch his tongue! How much relief could he expect to get from that? Especially after Lazarus has to traverse the gulf and make his way through the flames to get to him. How much moisture did he think would be left on his finger after such a journey? No one believes that this type of thing takes place between the righteous and the wicked after death.

5. In speaking of the request for Lazarus to go and warn the rich man's living brothers, the Bible says that Lazarus would have had to have "rose from the dead." (Verse 31). Far from supporting the idea of conscious communication or mobility in death, this gives support to the fact that in order for Lazarus to do anything at all he would have to be *resurrected!*

6. In the parable, Jesus points us to the source of divine instruction: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" (verse 29). That is where we must look to learn the fate of the wicked.

Jesus made the details of His story so obviously unreal that no one would take them literally. He wanted His hearers instead to focus on the lessons brought out in the parable.

Apart from the intended point or moral of the story, we cannot base doctrinal beliefs on the incidentals of an allegory. For instance, a thistle cannot ask for the daughter of a cedar for the wife of its son (2 Kings 14:9). Neither can trees go forth to anoint a king over themselves (Judges 9:8-15). When dealing with parables, ask yourself, "What is the speaker trying to illustrate by this parable?" Then if you want to know about the nature of trees or the nature of dead people, go to a passage where that is the topic of discussion.