

Study Guide #24: Is Hell Forever?

Introduction

We recommend that you read (a) Explorer II, Study Guide #4, Questions #9-11 for a review of the nature of God's wrath, and (b) Explorer II, Study Guide #23, Question #5 for a discussion of the Rich Man and Lazarus story before reading this Study Guide. Hell has a long history of turning off non-Christians from Christianity. Just what is the nature of hell? How hot is it? Is the Devil in charge of hell? Is hell forever? These are the chief issues discussed in this Study Guide.

Question #1: What are the major views of hell among Christians?

Answer: There are 3 major views held by various Christians regarding the subject of hell:

- **Traditional View**—that hell is a place of eternal torment for the wicked who have died, who are miraculously kept alive to feel the agony of the flames as punishment for their sins.
- **Metaphorical View**—that hell is a place of eternal darkness (without fire) where the wicked are punished with *mental* anguish in knowing that they are forever separated from God.
- **Annihilationist View**—that the whole earth will be burned up with fire along with the wicked at the end-time.

Both the traditional and the metaphorical views incorporate a belief in the immortal soul, so that the wicked dead are already suffering in hell right now. By contrast, the annihilationist view says that there is no hell presently, but that it will temporarily exist as the earth itself at the end-time, when God will annihilate the wicked and cleanse the earth by fire. This view rejects the immortality of the soul so that all who have died—both righteous and wicked—are currently sleeping in their graves. See Explorer II, Study Guides #22 and #23 for evidence concerning what happens when a person dies.



Hellfire

Question #2: What do the Biblical words for *hell* mean?

Answer: The English word “hell” occurs 54 times in the King James’ Version and is translated from 1 Hebrew (Old Testament) and 3 Greek (New Testament) words. The Hebrew word is “Sheol,” which is translated as “hell” 31 times, as “grave” 31 times, and as “pit” 3 times (in the King James’ Version). In every place that it’s translated as “hell,” the word “grave” would make perfect sense. “Sheol” isn’t a place of punishment at all because Ecclesiastes 9:2-10 says that both the wicked *and* the righteous go there at death.

The Greek word “Hades” occurs 11 times in the New Testament, where it’s translated as “hell” 10 times and “grave” once. The pagan Greeks used it to describe the underworld of the dead and sometimes the name of the god who ruled it. Scholars recognize “Hades” as the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Sheol.”



Hades in Pagan Mythology

The Greek word “Gehenna” occurs 12 times in the New Testament and is always translated as “hell” in the King James’ Version. It’s a transliteration of the Hebrew “ge Hinnom,” the Valley of Hinnom, which was a garbage dump outside Jerusalem. It became a symbol of the Valley of Slaughter of God’s wrath (Jeremiah 7:31-34). In Christ’s day, the worst criminals were refused burial and were thrown into that garbage dump. But it wasn’t a place of torment because the only people placed there were dead corpses. The fire never went out because garbage (fuel) was continually being thrown in.

Finally, the Greek word “Tartarus” (or “Tartaroo”) is translated as “hell,” and in pagan Greek thought was the deeper part of “Hades,” where the wicked are tormented. It occurs only once in the New Testament, in II Peter 2:4, where it’s used figuratively to represent the earth as the place of darkness (in contrast to the light of heaven) and the holding area where evil angels are **“reserved for judgment”** (NKJV). Since it’s used to describe a place where these angels are **“reserved”** for judgment, it’s not currently a place of punishment.

What’s fascinating about the Biblical evidence from the words for “hell” is that only 1 of them (“Gehenna”) is a place of fire or punishment, and it never went out *only* because new fuel was always being added.

Question #3: When are the wicked punished for their sins?

Answer: The Bible teaches that the wicked will be punished for their sins at the *end-time*. Matthew 16:27 and Revelation 22:12 teach that both the righteous and the wicked will receive their **“reward”** at Jesus’ 2nd Coming. According to Matthew 13:40-42, the wicked will be destroyed by fire **“at the end of this age”** (NKJV). John 12:48 says that the wicked will be judged **“in the last day”** (NKJV). Revelation 20:5-9 clarifies that this final punishment will take place after the millennium even though the living wicked will be killed at the 2nd Coming of Jesus (II Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 19:11-21). If both the righteous and the wicked receive their rewards **“at the end of the age,”** then how could the righteous dead already be in heaven and the wicked dead already be in hell? [NOTE: See Explorer II, Study Guide #25 for events that will occur at the 2nd Coming and Study Guide #26 for events that will occur after the millennium.]

Question #4: What does the Bible mean by “unquenchable fire?”

Answer: The Bible speaks of “unquenchable fire” at least 9 times, both in the Old and New Testaments. But the Biblical word “unquenchable” means what the English word means: It’s a fire that no one can *put out*, *not* that the fire will never *go* out when it runs out of fuel. For example, Jeremiah 17:27 prophesied that Jerusalem would one day burn, and it shall not be quenched; it will also **“devour the palaces of Jerusalem”** (NKJV). Indeed, Jerusalem was burned up by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., but the fire isn’t still burning. Isaiah 1:31 is another good example of unquenchable fire that will result in the **“destruction**

of transgressors...[who] **shall be consumed**" (v. 28, NKJV). Therefore, references to "unquenchable fire" don't mean the fire will continue forever—only that no one can *put* it out after it gets started.

Question #5: What does the Bible mean by "everlasting" or "eternal" fire?

Answer: The Bible uses the words for "everlasting" or "eternal" to describe the fire that will punish the wicked at least 4 times. The Hebrew and Greek words for this English word each means "perpetual" or "lasting for an age." But the duration of that age is determined by what it's describing. For example, in Leviticus 25:46 and Deuteronomy 15:17, certain slaves are said to serve their masters "**forever.**" But none of those slaves in those ancient times are still serving their masters today. Isaiah 33:14 is instructive for our topic of hell lasting forever (NKJV):

Who among us shall dwell with the *devouring fire*?
Who among us shall dwell with *everlasting burnings*?

The above parallelism in the Hebrew poetry of Isaiah means that the "**devouring fire**" and "**everlasting burnings**" are synonymous expressions. Because a "**devouring fire**" is one which burns up what it destroys, the expression "**everlasting burnings**" must refer to the *effects* of the fire rather than to its *duration*. The same truth is taught in Jude 7, which refers to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with "**eternal fire**" (NKJV). But in the parallel passage in II Peter 2:6, Peter says that Sodom and Gomorrah were "**burned to ashes**" (NKJV). Literally, Sodom and Gomorrah aren't burning today. Again, it's the *effects* or *results* of the fire that are eternal or everlasting rather than its duration.

Question #6: How do you interpret Revelation 14:11 and 20:10, that speak of the smoke of the wicked people's torment ascending forever?

Answer: That language 1st appears in Isaiah 34, which is in the style of Hebrew poetry. Note that Hebrew poetry paints a word picture, and one should note that *not* all of its detailed language should be interpreted literally. In Isaiah 34, we know that the words describing the smoke of their torment ascending forever should not be understood as literal language because the same chapter also speaks of various animals and plants living in the same area afterwards, which would be impossible if the fire were still burning. Therefore, we should understand this language as an *idiom* referring to the complete destruction of the wicked. That this is also the meaning in Revelation is clear from the plain statement in Revelation 20:9 that "**fire came down from God out of heaven and devours them**" (NKJV).



Ascending Smoke

Question #7: What do Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:48 mean when they describe the punishment of the wicked as their worm never dying?

Answer: Those who believe in the immortal soul see the worm as a symbol for a human soul in hell. However, the word for "hell" in Mark 9:48 (Isaiah 66:24 doesn't use a word for "hell") is "Gehenna," which we have shown refers to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem into which the corpses of the vilest criminals

were thrown. Therefore, the worms are actually maggots who feed on those corpses. They never die for the same reason the fire never went out—because new fuel was constantly being added. By contrast, the final punishment of the wicked results in the destruction of the wicked, so that when the fuel has been consumed, the fire will go out. This language, then, is picturesque language depicting that the wicked will be completely and utterly destroyed.

Question #8: How did Jesus pay for our sins if He didn't remain in the tomb?

Answer: The question is quite perceptive. Since He *did* pay for our sins, then obviously the *duration* of the punishment isn't the issue, but rather the *quality* of the punishment is. Hebrews 2:9 says that Jesus



Jesus' Tomb

tasted **“death for everyone”** (NKJV) as He became **“propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world”** (I John 2:2, NKJV). If He paid for the sins of the whole world, then He suffered the **“second death”** of the wicked (Revelation 20:14, NKJV). Although His punishment was *infinite* in *quality*, it was *finite* in *duration*. Yet teachers of an eternally burning hell would have us believe that it takes an eternity to punish each wicked person for his own sins. How preposterous!

Question #9: But doesn't an infinite God require an infinite punishment in order for justice to be served?

Answer: Those who ask this question assume that an “infinite punishment” refers to punishment that's infinite in *duration*. See Question #8 for the truth that it doesn't require an infinite duration of punishment, or otherwise Jesus didn't fully pay for anyone's sins. It's true that God's justice requires that He punish the wicked, for He will **“by no means clearing the guilty”** (Exodus 34:7, NKJV). But a process of punishment that never ends is not an act of justice, but of torture. The reason for this is that the punishment should fit the crime, a principle almost universally recognized today (although not always implemented). The Scriptures also endorse this principle, which is sometimes called “retaliation in kind,” or Biblically **“an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”** (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21, NKJV). Clearly, the sentencing of a finite sinner to any kind of punishment for an infinite duration would violate this basic principle of justice. If God did this, He would be by far the worst tyrant in the history of the universe.

Question #10: Are there any plain statements in the Bible that directly teach the final annihilation of the wicked?

Answer: Yes. Here are a few representative samples of such texts in both the Old and New Testaments:

- **“fire shall devour them”** (Psalm 21:9)
- **“the wicked shall be no more”** (Psalm 37:10)
- **“the wicked shall perish...into smoke they shall vanish away”** (Psalm 37:20)
- **“may sinners be consumed from the earth, and the wicked be no more”** (Psalm 104:35)
- **“all who do wickedly will be stubble...the day which is coming shall burn them up”** (Malachi 4:1)

- “they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet” (Malachi 4:3)
- “the enemies of the cross of Christ...whose end is destruction” (Philippians 3:18-19)
- “the day of the Lord...then sudden destruction comes upon them” (I Thessalonians 5:2-3)
- “will utterly perish in their own corruption” (II Peter 2:12)
- “fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them” (Revelation 20:9)

Any attempt to interpret these and many other similar passages as figurative denies the plain meaning of words in a literal context.

Question #11: What will happen to the Devil? Is he in charge of hell?

Answer: *First*, a righteous God would never assign Satan to be in charge of punishing the wicked, especially since Satan himself is the chief instigator of all sin and evil. This idea developed in the Middle Ages as a way to scare Christians into blind obedience to the Medieval Church. The concept came from the same folks who gave us the picture of the Devil in a red suit with horns, a tail, and a pitchfork. *Second*, Ezekiel 28:12-19 uses the king of Tyre as a type of Satan and clearly teaches that he will be completely destroyed. [See Explorer II, Study Guide #2 for evidence that Ezekiel 28 is ultimately talking about Satan.] In 4 different ways, that chapter describes Satan’s complete destruction, as follows:



Is the Devil in charge of Hell?

- “destroyed” (v. 16, NKJV)
- “devoured” (v. 18, NKJV)
- turned to “ashes” (v. 18, NKJV)
- “shall be no more forever” (v. 19, NKJV)

[NOTE: The past tense associated with the 1st 3 clauses (vv. 16, 18) is an example of the *prophetic past*, in which a future event is so certain that it’s referred to as already having occurred.] Surely, if anyone deserves to burn for an eternity, it would be Satan. The fact that *he* will not burn endlessly is strong evidence that neither will any of the human wicked.

Question #12: How does John 3:16 fit into the picture of hell?

Answer: This most famous verse in all the Bible reads as follows:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16, NKJV).

This text perfectly illustrates the truth that the choice mankind must make is either *life* or *death*, *not life* in *heaven* or *life* in *hell*. The same truth is illustrated in Romans 6:23: “...**the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**” (NKJV). Both the Traditional and Metaphorical Views of hell (see Question #1) violate this plain teaching by falsely claiming that the eternal destiny is between life in heaven versus life in hell. In either place, it’s still *life*. Therefore, those teachings are both false.

Question #13: Is it just for someone who had *little* knowledge in contrast to one who had *greater* knowledge to suffer the same punishment?

Answer: No, it wouldn't seem to be just. After all, even in our human criminal justice systems, a person guilty of killing someone unlawfully but without premeditation is not penalized as heavily as one who intentionally murdered someone. But Jesus predicted that some would burn longer in hellfire than others when He told the Parable of the Faithful and Evil Servant in Luke 12:42-48. Interestingly, this parable was given in the context of His reference to His 2nd Coming (see vv. 35-40). In verses 47-48, He declares that the servant who had greater knowledge would be beaten with *many* stripes, while the servant who didn't have that great level of knowledge would be beaten only by *few* stripes. The implication is that some will burn longer than others in hellfire because those who had greater knowledge are held more accountable.

Question #14: If God is sovereign, who are we to question the justice of God if He has decided to punish the wicked in an eternally burning hell?

Answer: We readily acknowledge that God is indeed sovereign, and He can do whatever He decides to do. But the fact is that God's Word tells us what God's character is like, so we have every right to ask if such a character of justice and love would really torture people for an eternity for the sins of only one relatively short human lifetime. In order to *avoid* allowing our own fallible reason to supersede the Scriptures, we ought to restudy the Scriptures on this subject. When we have done that, we find that the Bible does *not* indeed teach an eternally burning hell.

In recent decades, some prominent Protestant Christian scholars have restudied this issue and concluded that God will utterly destroy and make an end to the wicked, including the Devil himself, at the end-time, and that an eternally burning hell is not taught in Scripture. They have been vilified by most Christian leaders for coming to that conclusion. Yet still others have bemoaned this popular doctrine. C. S. Lewis, the late famous 20th-century atheist-turned-Christian writer, publicly admitted his great discomfort concerning this doctrine of an eternally burning hell and wished aloud that this was the one doctrine that didn't exist. Unfortunately, his consternation never led him to understand that the Scriptures actually didn't teach that popular doctrine.



C. S. Lewis

No popular doctrine among Christians has prevented more people from accepting Jesus and Christianity than the doctrine of an eternally burning hell. It's certainly true that individuals are responsible for their own choices concerning their eternal destiny. But how tragic that so many of us Christians have also been responsible for painting such a torturous picture of God that has driven so many people away from eternal salvation!