

THE CHURCH OF GOD



LESSON NO. 6

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CHURCH OF GOD
BIBLE
CORRESPONDENCE COURSE

LESSON NO. 6

WHAT IS "HELL"?

Even if you are a Christian, you may go to hell. Some of your loved ones are already in hell. But don't be alarmed. "Hell" is not what most people have imagined! The Bible reveals the reassuring TRUTH about this most-misunderstood subject.

Millions are utterly confused about "hell". What is it? Where is it? Who really goes there? And why?

Is "hell" a literal place—a geographical location? Is it somewhere in the interior of the earth, in the heart of the sun, in remote space?

Or does the word "hell" simply reflect a troubled mental state here on earth?

A recent survey showed that 71 percent of Americans believe in heaven, but only 53 percent are persuaded of the reality of hell.

Why the difference?

Probably because many of those who believe in a heaven simply cannot bring themselves to think that a merciful, loving God would consign anyone to a place of eternal torment!

COMMON IDEAS ABOUT HELL

A survey in New Zealand indicated that 60 percent of New Zealanders believe hell is simply a state of mind. Only 26 percent believe hell is a literal place.

In San Francisco, random passers-by were asked: "How do you picture hell?" Some of the answers reveal the utter confusion surrounding the subject in the minds of the public.

First person: "Honestly, I have doubts there is such a place. I feel hell is a means of scaring people so they will lead a better life If there is such a place, I suppose it is craggy and filled with people feeding furnaces or breaking rocks."

Second person: "The idea of hell is one of the greatest means in the world for teaching children good. Personally, however, I think it is just a biblical term."

Third person: "When I was young I had a clear picture of what hell is like—flames and a devil with horns and a pitchfork. But a person gets over this, just as he does with Santa Claus."

Fourth person: "I would rather not think about it."

Fifth person: "I have never thought of it except as I have seen it staged in operas or plays."

Sixth person: "I picture hell as a big, hot, uncomfortable desert. I think it does exist. Not down in the ground. But since someone put us here, then he could easily have a place for us afterward."

Seventh person: "Hell is a place of unhappy confinement, like a prison. Not necessarily

with flames. More a torment of the spirit. I believe it is an actual area, although not necessarily down any more than heaven must be up."

Here are vague ideas about hell, but almost no real knowledge. Probably the clear majority are those who would just "rather not think about it"!

WHAT CLERGYMEN THINK

Many theologians today do not believe in a literal "hell". Said one: "The essence of hell is separation from God—not really torture, but torment."

Another described hell as "a condition of human existence."

An Australian cleric declared that the 19th-century concept of an ever-burning hell fire makes God out to be worse than Hitler.

Then there are those theologians who view hell as "the loss of communication, insensitivity to spiritual values, the realization of how far short of our capacities we have fallen, the memory of some of the things we have done."

On the other hand, Pope Paul VI warned that "those who refuse the love of God are going to the fire that is not extinguished" (*Credo of the People of God*, issued June 30, 1968).

THE "FIERY INFERNO"

Almost everyone assumes one of two extremes concerning "hell". One group totally denies that hell exists. Hell is passed off as an ancient superstition that has no bearing whatever on modern life.

The other group, including most so-called Bible fundamentalists, pictures hell as a terrible place of never-ending torment where devil rules and his demons gleefully "roast" sinners like millions of wieners on a barbeque spit. There is bitter weeping and wailing, agonized cursing, shrieks and screams from those in eternal torment—according to this concept.

Here is a summation of this popular belief from the *Encyclopedia Americana*:

"As generally understood, hell is the abode of evil spirits; the infernal regions...whither lost and condemned souls go after death to suffer indescribable *torments* and *eternal* punishment....Some have thought of it as the place created by the Deity, where He punishes, with inconceivable severity, and through all eternity, the souls of those who through unbelief or through the worship of false gods have angered Him. It is the place of *divine revenge*, untempered, NEVER ENDING. This has been the idea most generally held by Christians, Catholics, and Protestants alike. It is also the idea embodied in the Mohammedans' conception....The main features of hell as conceived by Hindu, Persian, Egyptian, Grecian, and Christian theologians are *essentially the same*" (from the article on "Hell", emphasis ours throughout the lesson).

But why do people believe what they believe? From where or from whom have these popular ideas come?

FROM THE PHILOSOPHERS

A few influential men since the time of Christ left writings and teachings that became so universally believed that they became the accepted doctrine of the Christian-professing world. One of the most important of these influential writers was Augustine (A.D. 354-430).

Augustine reasoned that there should be a temporary cleansing of imperfect souls in purgatorial fire. He, like other influential men of the Christian-professing church, was influenced by "pre-Christian doctrine"—the doctrine of the ancient pagan philosophers—and other early church fathers (see *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., article "Purgatory").

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) wrote a tremendously popular poem, *La divina Commedia*,

in three parts—Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. “Of all poets of modern times,” says a modern author, “Dante Alighieri was, perhaps, the greatest educator. He possibly had a greater influence on the course of civilization than any other one man since his day...[He] wrote, in incomprehensible verse, an imaginative and lurid account of a dismal journey through a lurid hell—a long poem containing certain phrases which have caught the attention of the world, such as, ‘All hope abandon, Ye, who enter here’ ” (*Dante and His Influence*).

Dante is reported to have been so fascinated and enraptured by the ideas and philosophies of the pagan philosophers Plato and Virgil that he believed they were divinely inspired.

But who were Plato and Virgil?

Says the *Encyclopedia Americana*: “Virgil, pagan Roman poet, 70-19 B.C., belonged to the national school of pagan Roman thought, influenced by the Greek writers. Christians of the Middle Ages, including Dante, believed he had received some measure of divine inspiration.”

Plato, a pagan Greek philosopher, born in Athens, 427 B.C., was a student of the renowned Socrates. Plato’s famous literary work *Phaedo* taught the immortality of the soul—the foundation for other writings on the doctrine of an eternal hell where wicked “souls” are supposedly punished forever.

So the world’s concept of “hell” is admittedly a product of *human thinking*—of pagan speculation—as men puzzled over the eventual fate of the wicked.

WHAT ABOUT THE BILLIONS OF MANKIND?

Before we examine the Bible to see whether the common ideas about hell could possibly be *true*, let us consider where this concept of hell, if true, would lead us.

On this earth there are more than four billion people. The most populous lands are China, India and other parts of Asia. But in spite of the efforts of Western missionaries, more than half of all the people who have ever lived on the earth have never so much as heard the only name by which men may be saved (Acts 4:12)—the name of “Jesus Christ”!

Literally *billions* of people on this earth have lived and died without having known anything about “salvation”—without ever so much as having seen a Bible.

Now think what that means! If all the “unsaved” go immediately to a fiery hell at death—the hell commonly believed in—then more than half the people who have ever lived on this earth have been consigned to this terrible punishment—and they are there, now, without ever having had a chance to escape it!

Can you really believe that is the method an all-wise, all-merciful *loving* God is using to work out His purpose here below?

What is the TRUTH?

We face these alternatives: Either the Creator *reveals* the TRUTH on this subject in His *inspired Word*, or else we must fling up our hands and confess we *just don’t know*. Either we believe what the Bible says, or we must—if we are rational and honest—admit ignorance.

What *does* God say about “hell” in the Bible? You may be surprised! So be sure to read and write out *all* of the scripture references given in answer to the questions in this lesson. PROVE the truth of God for yourself.

CHRIST SPOKE OF “HELL FIRE”

1 What punishment did Christ warn would ultimately befall those who refuse to quit sinning? Mark 9:43. (He obviously did NOT mean we should literally “cut off” parts of our bodies, but rather *stop using* them to *commit sin!*)

COMMENT: "Hell" is an English word. When Mark recorded Christ's words, he wrote them in the *Greek* language. The Greek word translated "hell," which Mark was inspired to write down, is *gehenna*. Since in this verse Christ says the sinner is "to go into hell, *into the fire*," it follows that those who go to *gehenna* will receive punishment by *fire*.

Keep in mind then that Christ associated the Greek word *gehenna* with fire.

2. What did Christ say in Mark 9:45 to emphasize what He said in verse 43?

COMMENT: Mark wrote down the same Greek word *gehenna* here in verse 45 that he used in verse 43. The translators of the *Authorized* or *King James Version* of the Bible of A.D. 1611 selected the English word "hell" to translate this Greek word *gehenna*. We will learn more about the real meaning of this word later.

3. How did Christ reemphasize what He said about "hell fire"? Verse 47.

COMMENT: Again, the Greek word that Mark used in this verse is *gehenna*. *Gehenna* clearly refers to *fire*! But there are other original Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible that are also translated "hell."

ENGLISH WORD "HELL" MISAPPLIED

Let's read what *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings, says about the use of the word "hell" in the Old and New Testaments. Keep in mind as you read this that the Old Testament was originally written in the *Hebrew* language, and that the New Testament was originally written in the *Greek* language.

Hastings says: "In our Authorized Version the word hell is unfortunately used as the rendering of *three distinct words*, with DIFFERENT IDEAS [or meanings]. It represents, 1) the '*sheol*' of the Hebrew Old Testament, and the '*hades*' in the New Testament....It is now an entirely misleading rendering, especially in the New Testament passages. The English revisers, therefore, have substituted '*hades*' [going back to the original Greek word] for "hell" in the New Testament....In the American revision the word 'hell' is entirely discarded in this connection..."

"The word 'hell' is used 2) as equivalent to [the Greek word] '*tartaros*' II Peter 2:4...and, 3)...as the equivalent of [the Greek word] '*gehenna*'..."

So we see that the real meaning of *three different* Greek words—*hades* (equivalent to the Hebrew *sheol* of the Old Testament), *tartaros* and *gehenna*—have been *confused* with each other because translators have attempted to make the *one* English word "hell" cover the definitions of all *three* words! No wonder millions have been confused about this subject.

What do these words really mean?

The Old Testament Hebrew word *sheol* and the New Testament Greek word *hades* mean the same thing—simply the *grave*. These words have been correctly translated as "grave" in many places in the Bible. However, these words have also been translated "hell."

"Hell" is an old English word. More than 350 years ago, when the *Authorized Version* was translated, the people of England commonly talked of "putting their potatoes in *hell* for the winter"—a good way of preserving potatoes—for the word then meant merely A HOLE IN THE GROUND that was covered up—a dark and silent place—a *grave*! But pagan teachings caused people to misapply the old English word "hell" to the lurid imaginations of Dante.

The second Greek word, *tartaros*, which has also been translated into the English word "hell," occurs only once in the New Testament (II Pet. 2:4). It does not refer to humans, but to the *restrained condition* of fallen angels (or demons). Its meaning, translated into English, is "darkness of the material universe," "dark abyss," or "prison."

But what about *gehenna*? This Greek word is derived from the name of the narrow, rocky Valley of Hinnom, which lies just outside Jerusalem. It was the place where refuse was

burned up, trash, filth, and the dead bodies of animals and despised criminals were thrown into the fires of *gehenna*, or the Valley of Hinnom. Ordinarily, everything thrown into this valley was *destroyed by fire*—COMPLETELY BURNED UP. Therefore, Christ used *gehenna* to picture the fate of *unrepentant sinners!*

TWO DIFFERENT "HELLS"

In many of the passages of the New Testament where we see the word "hell," the Greek word is not *gehenna*. Often it is *hades*—which does *not* refer to *fire* at all, but to a grave—a hole in the ground. Yet the translators have confused and obscured the two entirely different meanings of these words by indiscriminately rendering them both by the same English word "hell."

Let's study the proof.

1. What did Jesus say about "hell" in Luke 12:5?

COMMENT: If you were to look up the Greek word that is here translated into the English word "hell," you would find it is *gehenna*. *Gehenna*, remember, is the place where dead bodies were thrown and *destroyed by fire!*

2. How is the same English word "hell" used in Acts 2:31?

COMMENT: The Greek word that is translated into the English word "hell" in this verse is *hades*. *Hades* means the grave, as its usage in this verse clearly shows! We can plainly see that the English word "hell" can have *different* meanings! So when we come to the word "hell" in the New Testament (except for II Peter 2:4), we must *keep in mind these two vastly different meanings* and carefully determine by the context whether it refers to destruction by fire, or the grave where the dead lie buried.

Whenever you're in doubt about the intended meaning of the word "hell" in the New Testament, look it up in an exhaustive concordance, such as *Strong's* or *Young's*, to see which Greek word it was translated from, and hence its true meaning.

WHERE TO AFTER DEATH?

In the preceding lesson we learned that when a person dies and is buried in his grave, he knows absolutely *nothing* (Ecc. 9:5). He merely lies quietly and silently there as in a "sleep," totally oblivious to everything.

Let's briefly review this important truth.

1. What one thing befalls both men and beasts? Ecc. 3:19. Do they all go to one place—the *same place*—when they die? Verse 20 and Genesis 3:19.

COMMENT: Have you ever heard of beasts going to "hell" to be *tortured*?

2. What place does God say man goes to when he dies? Ecc. 9:10. Did Job realize he would go to the *grave* after death? Job 17:13.

3. Was the One who became Jesus Christ "made flesh"? John 1:14. Did Christ take upon Himself the *same* mortal flesh of which we are composed? Heb. 2:14. And didn't He also have to go to the *grave* as other mortal men do? Acts 2:31.

COMMENT: The Greek word in Acts 2:31 is *hades* which, as you now know, means the "grave." Jesus' "soul" (body) did not see *corruption* (did not decompose in the grave) because He was resurrected after three days!

Some theologians, however, maintain the tradition that Christ was preaching to departed human "spirits in prison" (I Pet. 3:19) while He was in "hell." That idea is absolutely false. Verse 20 of I Peter 3 makes it plain that those to whom Christ preached were *demon* spirits, and that He preached to them *during the days of Noah!* This verse could not at all be referring to the three days and three nights Jesus was dead in the grave!

RESURRECTED TO JUDGMENT

You may have heard ministers preach that the “unsaved” go *directly* to the “fiery tortures of hell” when they die. If people have immortal souls and if there is a place of eternal torment, this teaching would mean they are condemned to a fiery inferno *before* they are formally judged and sentenced! Let’s notice *when* and *how* the dead will be judged by God.

1. Is there to be a future resurrection to judgment of the unsaved dead? John 5:28-29. (The word “damnation” in the *Authorized Version*—verse 29—is correctly rendered as “judgment” in most modern translations.)

COMMENT: Here is further proof that the unsaved dead are not being tormented in a “fiery hell.” They are now *dead!* But there is coming a time (“the hour is coming,” said Jesus) when they will be resurrected for *judgment!*

2. Does the first sentence of Revelation 20:5 and verses 11-12 also prove there is to be a future resurrection to judgment? (Note that the first sentence in verse 5 is a parenthetical statement inserted within verses 4-6, which describe the *first* resurrection.)

COMMENT: Some of the dead—the “dead in Christ”—will be resurrected to *eternal* life in the *first* resurrection at Christ’s Second Coming (I Thess. 4:16-17). But the “rest of the dead” will not live again for a thousand years. They will then be resurrected to *mortal* life. These are the unsaved dead who will rise in the *second* resurrection to be “judged”.

The Great White Throne Judgment described in Revelation 20:11-12 is the period when the vast majority of mankind (the dead, and most who are now alive) will be resurrected and given their opportunity to learn about God’s plan of salvation. These billions are those who never heard or understood God’s truth (including those who *thought* they knew God, but had not been called of God—John 6:44. They will be judged daily by how well they live by the Word of God (the “books” in verse 12 are the books of the Bible), just as true Christians are being judged daily today (I Pet. 4:17).

At the end of this period of judgment, God will render a sentence—a verdict—for each individual. The vast majority will inherit eternal life. Those few who reject God’s truth and stubbornly refuse to repent will be sentenced to *eternal death*, not eternal punishing.

3. Is there then to be a resurrection of all the *incorrigible* dead? Rev. 20:13-15.

COMMENT: After the Great White Throne Judgment period, the incorrigible dead of past ages, who may have perished at sea, or on land (the Greek word for “hell” in verse 13 is *hades*), will be resurrected to physical life. They will then be formally judged by God and sentenced to eternal death!

The subject of “judgment” is thoroughly covered in an upcoming lesson. Suffice it to say that the Bible clearly shows that the dead are *dead*, and that the time when the “unsaved” dead will be judged is **STILL IN THE FUTURE!**

DEATH BY FIRE

What is the ultimate *penalty*—the “wages,” or reward—of sin? Is it eternal life in torment? or is it eternal oblivion? What **IS** the ultimate fate of incorrigible sinners? The Bible makes the truth very clear.

1. What is the “wages of sin”? Rom. 6:23.

COMMENT: The “wages of sin is **DEATH.**” Death is the *opposite* of life! The final wages the incorrigible will receive is the complete cessation of life!

2. What does Paul warn will be the judgment or sentence of those who, knowing God’s commands and having tasted of His way of life, *sin willfully*? Heb. 10:26-27. Will they live on in torment in fire—or will they be “devoured” by it? Verse 27.

3. Does Jesus compare false ministers who don’t bring forth *good works* to trees that

don't bring forth good fruit? Matt. 7:15-19. What did He indicate would happen to them? Verse 19. Is combustible material that is put into a fire only *tormented*—or is it *burned up*? Did Christ indicate that all who do not bring forth "good fruit" will likewise be *cast into fire*? Verses 17-19.

4. What did Christ say to the unrepentant scribes and Pharisees of His day? Matt. 23:33.

COMMENT: The Greek word translated here as "hell" is *gehenna*—meaning the Valley of Hinnom. Christ used the fire that burned up refuse in the Valley of Hinnom as a type of the final fate—complete destruction—of the wicked by fire. Those rebellious and stubborn religious leaders could well understand Christ's analogy. They knew they were being threatened with *complete destruction in fire!*

5. What did Christ warn would happen to those who will not repent of their sinful ways? Luke 13:3.

COMMENT: "*Perish*" means to *cease existing*. It does not mean to *continue* living. *Life* in eternal torment is *not* what God has decreed for incorrigible sinners!

The punishment revealed in the Bible is *death*—cessation of life forever. *Eternal life* is something we were NOT born with. It is a *gift* of God that He will bestow upon those who obey Him. *Eternal life* and *death* are contrasted throughout the Bible!

6. Did Christ show by His parable of the *tares* that there is to be a future harvest? Matt. 13:30. Did He say the evil people—the "tares"—will afterward by BURNED? Same verse.

COMMENT: In this parable Christ likened the earth to a "field" (verse 24), the obedient people to "wheat" (verses 25, 29), and the disobedient to "tares" (verses 25, 29, 30).

7. Does Psalm 37:20 also show that the ultimate fate of the wicked will be *destruction by fire*? Will this fire be so hot it will *burn up*—CONSUME—the wicked? Same verse and Malachi 4:1. What will be left of the wicked? Verse 3. *Who* will burn up the wicked—Satan and his demons, or the Eternal God? Same verse.

COMMENT: The "hell fire" that the Bible speaks of will be *thousands of degrees HOTTER* than the imaginary "hell fire" of most preachers—which is only hot enough to *torment*. The biblical "hell fire" *will totally consume the disobedient!* Never will they exist again.

The Bible plainly shows that those who have *known* God's truth and *willfully* disobey and refuse to repent, will reap the wages of sin—*eternal death!* (Rom. 6:23). This scripture means what it says. The attempts of many theologians to explain away death and to interpret it as mere "separation from God" cannot be reconciled with Scripture. Death clearly does NOT mean eternal life in the horrifying torments of an eternal "hell."

The author of this pagan deception is none other than the father of lies—Satan the devil! (John 8:44). If you have believed his false doctrine and have suffered mental torment because of it, thank God that He has now opened your mind to understand the TRUTH!

WHAT IS THE "LAKE OF FIRE"?

And now comes a most interesting revelation! Exactly what is the *gehenna* fire that will consume the wicked? When and where will it occur?

1. Are all who stubbornly refuse to repent and who persist in breaking God's commandments ultimately to find themselves in a lake of "fire and brimstone"? Rev. 21:8.

COMMENT: We've already seen that the fate of the wicked is *gehenna* and the lake of fire are the same. A very large fire would have the appearance of a fiery lake, hence its description.

2. Will it cause the *death* of the wicked? Notice Revelation 21:8 once again. *Which* death will it cause? Same verse.

COMMENT: Mortals naturally die *once*, because we just "wear out" (Heb. 9:27). But if

anyone dies the *second* death, that individual will have been judged by God to be guilty of persistent disobedience and incorrigible rebellion. The *second* death will be for *all eternity!*

3. Does Revelation 20:13-15 verify that the incorrigible will be cast into this future lake of fire?

4. Does a forerunner of this lake of fire *begin* at Christ's Second Coming? Rev. 19:20. Will the two chief human enemies of Christ be cast into it at that time? Same verse.

5. How long will this fire last? Matt. 25:41.

COMMENT: The word "everlasting" is *aionion* in the Greek. *Aionion* comes from the root *aion* which often means "age." In this case, the correct translation into the English language should be AGE-LASTING fire". This "lake of fire" is going to be burning *all during the Millennium*—the "age" of Christ's rule.

During the millennial reign of Christ and His saints, the fires in the Valley of Hinnom will again be kept burning as a stern witness to all the rest of the world! (Isa. 66:23-24).

6. Much later—after the Millennium and after God's plan for mankind is complete—will the flames of the "lake of fire" purify the *earth's surface*, burning in one vast *worldwide* inferno? II Pet. 3:10. Will all the things man has created be *burned up*, as well as the rest of those people who will not have received salvation and eternal life because of willful rebellion against God? Same verse and Revelation 20:15 once again.

COMMENT: Here is God's—not man's—description of the final "hell fire"! It is yet in the future. It has not yet occurred. Nothing is said anywhere in the Bible about "souls" descending into the earth into "hell fire," or of torture for all eternity! Rather, the Bible shows that all incorrigible human beings and their works will suffer destruction *once* for all eternity. All other teachings to the contrary have come to us from paganism!

7. Are the wicked to be reduced to *ashes* by the fire that will consume the earth's surface? Turn to Malachi 4:3 once again.

COMMENT: Can *ashes* be tormented forever and ever? Of course not! The death the incorrigible wicked will have suffered will be an eternal, everlasting punishment, not an everlasting punishing. There is a big difference between *punishment* and *punishing!* "The wages of sin is *death*" (Rom. 6:23), not eternal life in hell fire!

8. Will Satan be cast into the same fire that will have consumed the "beast" and the "false prophet"? Rev. 20:10.

COMMENT: Notice that Satan himself will be in "hell fire." But since he is a spirit being, he will not be destroyed by the flames (see Luke 20:36). Neither will he play the role of torturing people as he is often represented by the doctrines of this world. Revelation 20:10 shows that Satan is to be **TORMENTED** unto the *ages of the ages*—"FOREVER AND EVER"! His torment will last forever. But not this fire. It will last only as long as combustible material remains to be consumed.

Satan's eternal torment will be mental anguish resulting from seeing all that he has striven toward, worked for and plotted for *burned up as the earth is purified by fire!* No wonder Satan has deceived humans into believing that the fate of sinners is condemnation to eternal torments!

9. Will the beast and the false prophet still be in this fire? Rev. 20:10.

COMMENT: Some Bibles use italics to show that the word "are" in this verse was *supplied* by the translators. It is not found in the Greek manuscripts. The phrase should read, "where the beast and the false prophet *were*"—the unwritten verb in the Greek should be understood to be in the same tense as the verb in the first half of the sentence. The *Amplified Bible* has it correct. These two mortal individuals will have been destroyed 1,000 years *before* the time Satan is cast into these flames.

HELL FIRE "NEVER QUENCHED"?

1. Did John the Baptist ever speak of "unquenchable fire"? Matt. 3:12; Luke 3:17.
2. Did Jesus say that hell fire will never be "quenched"? Mark 9:43-48. (Recall the Greek word for "hell" in verses 43, 45, and 47 is *gehenna*.)

COMMENT: Jesus repeated this statement five times for emphasis. Thus, people have *carelessly assumed* the "fire that never shall be quenched" (verse 43) is a fire of torture that has been in existence for centuries, and will continue to exist for eternity. But we have proved that this idea is absolutely *false!* Notice the biblical truth about *unquenchable* hell fire.

3. Did God (more than 2,500 years ago) warn the inhabitants of Jerusalem that He would kindle a fire in Jerusalem's gates that would *not be quenched*? Jer. 17:27. But what would that fire do to the city's palaces? Same verse.

COMMENT: This fire occurred a few years later, and it destroyed all the houses of Jerusalem (Jer. 52:13). Since God said this fire "shall not be quenched" and since it is *not burning today*, it obviously went out by *itself* after devouring all combustible material!

4. What punishment befell the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah? Gen. 19:24. Was it literal fire that destroyed human beings? Luke 17:29. What do we read in Jude 7 about this event? Is there still a fire burning in those cities that God destroyed long ago? Prov. 26:20.

COMMENT: Of course not! The expression "eternal fire" in Jude 7 means a fire whose *results* are permanent or everlasting—obviously *not* a fire that *burns forever!* Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly destroyed centuries ago—they are not burning today.

The fires that burned these wicked cities simply died out after consuming all combustible material. These scriptures prove the "fire that never shall be quenched" will **NOT** torment people forever!

The fires were *never quenched* or put out prematurely by anyone! The flames merely died out when they had nothing more to consume. Even so it will be with the **FINAL** *gehenna* fire that will consume the wicked. It will be unquenched—but it will finally burn itself out!

"WORM THAT DIETH NOT"

A startling statement is found in Mark 9:44, 46 and 48. In these verses, Christ spoke of a *worm* that "dieth not." Are these *immortal* worms?

Some people think Jesus referred to *people* as worms, and that He was trying to say that these "people" never die but live on forever in agonizing torment. However, those who believe this fail to notice that what Jesus spoke of was "*their worm*". So the wicked themselves are not the "worm."

What is this mysterious "worm" that does not die? Notice what Jesus really meant.

Jesus clearly had reference, as the marginal notes of many Bibles show, to Isaiah 66:24, where a similar statement is made about "their worm"—the *worm of "carcasses."* (Be sure to read this verse in your Bible.)

Now what is the "worm" of a decaying carcass? If you have ever seen a putrifying carcass, the answer should be obvious. To put the matter beyond all doubt, we find that the lexicons define as *grub* or *maggot* both the Greek and the Hebrew words translated as "worm" in Mark 9:44 and Isaiah 66:24.

When a dead body occasionally lodged on one of the rocky ledges above the garbage fires of the Valley of Hinnom, it was soon infested by many *worms* or *maggots*, which hatched out of eggs laid by flies. It was simply these worms to which Christ referred when He said, "their worm dieth not."

But Jesus didn't mean that each individual worm continued to live forever! Actually, the larvae—*maggots*—would hatch from eggs, eat the flesh, continue in the larval form only a few days, then go through *pupation* or metamorphosis and finally emerge as flies! The worms didn't die—they *became flies*! Later, the flies *died*.

These are facts known by any student of biology! And Christ was not ignorant of them.

By contrast, the misunderstanding of Christ's simple statement by some people should be an object lesson to always be careful to use wisdom and common sense in studying God's Word. The Holy Spirit is the spirit of a *sound mind* (II Tim. 1:7). The Bible is one book that makes good sense! Let's always study these perplexing scriptures carefully and not jump to hasty, erroneous, weird conclusions.

THE PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31) is perhaps one of the texts most frequently used by those who attempt to prove there is an eternal hell fire.

What lesson did Jesus intend to illustrate by this oft-misunderstood parable? Let's carefully study this entire parable, comparing it with other crystal-clear scriptures.

1. Did Lazarus—a poor but *righteous* beggar—die? Luke 16:22. Was he later carried by angels to "Abraham's bosom"? Same verse.

COMMENT: If we are Christ's, we become heirs *with* Abraham to receive the promises God made to him (Gal. 3:29). Through faith we may all become the spiritual "children of Abraham" (Gal. 3:7). This is an intimate relationship—a close or *bosom* relationship, *spiritually* speaking—with Abraham. We are to be in close contact with him in sharing the promises. This is the sense in which righteous Lazarus was taken to "Abraham's bosom."

When, then, will Abraham and the Lazarus of Jesus' parable actually receive the promises? The answer given in the Bible is that Abraham and the saints—his spiritual "seed"—will inherit the promises at the *resurrection* of the just, when Jesus Christ returns to earth to establish the Kingdom of God! (The Christian's inheritance is the subject of the next lesson.)

2. And what about the sinful rich man of Jesus' parable? Did he also *die*? Luke 16:22. Do we next see him lifting up his eyes, indicating his having been resurrected, and calling to Abraham for a few drops of water to cool his tongue, being in *mental* torment? Verses 23-24.

COMMENT: The word "hell" used here is translated from the Greek word *hades*, which we know means the "grave." It is *not* from the Greek word *gehenna*, which represents the future lake of fire that will DESTROY the wicked forever. The rich man is pictured at the very moment he *comes up out of his GRAVE* in a resurrection!

Abraham and Lazarus will have already inherited eternal life in God's Kingdom (Matt. 25:34). They will have been immortal for more than 1,000 years BEFORE the wicked rich man is resurrected to be burned in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:4-5, 13-15). Until then, the rich man will have been dead in his grave, having *no consciousness* of the passing of time (Eccl. 9:5).

At his resurrection, the rich man will see the flames of the lake of fire beginning to surround him. He *knows* these flames will destroy him forever. Being in great *mental* agony, he asks for *just a little* water to cool his tongue, which has become dry from his mental anguish. He does not ask for *buckets* or *oceans* of water to put the fire out. He knows such a request would be denied.

3. What did Abraham then answer the rich man? Luke 16:25-26.

COMMENT: The great "gulf" between the two will be the *difference* between mortality and immortality. Those who will have been made immortal shall never die because they will have been born of God (Rev. 20:6). Abraham and the beggar will be on the *immortal* side

of this gulf—the rich man on the *mortal* side, facing imminent eternal death by fire!

Many of the condemned, like the rich man, will want their relatives warned (Luke 16:27-28), not realizing how much time has elapsed since they died and that *all* other people will also have *already* had their chance to receive salvation.

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man does *not* prove eternal punishing by God in hell fire. Rather, Christ used this short illustration to picture to His listeners the REALITY of the *resurrection* from the dead of both the righteous and the wicked. He was picturing the resurrection to ETERNAL LIFE as contrasted with the ultimate fate of the wicked—the resurrection to die ETERNAL DEATH!

GOD IS LOVE

Why do so many people have a false concept of “hell”? Because they have been deceived and do not understand God’s *overall purpose* for creating mankind.

God’s purpose for man is that he develop the holy, righteous character of God, which will make him *fit* to receive the precious gift of eternal life. But God created man of the dust of the ground, subject to death, so that if he failed to develop righteous character, he could be released from his misery by death.

God has no desire to torment or to torture anyone. God is love (I John 4:8). He created us mortal for our own good. He will condemn no one because of ignorance, and will see to it that every person ultimately learns the truth and has a real opportunity for salvation upon sincere repentance, no matter how terrible his or her sins have been.

But if God were to grant eternal life to those who persistently rebel, who stubbornly refuse to repent and therefore fail to develop righteous character, they would simply bring misery upon themselves as well as others *for all eternity!* Certainly the kindest and most merciful thing God can do for all involved is to deny continued existence to such rebels. God will simply put incorrigible sinners to DEATH—not mercilessly torture them forever!

And so the obedient will be given the free *gift* of eternal life. But the disobedient must be paid the “wages” they have earned (Rom. 6:23). It is the final or second death—*eternal* death in the lake of fire. These are the two alternatives God places before each of us.

This *truth* should not inspire unreasoning terror as the satanic, pagan doctrine of eternal punishing in hell fire has caused in so many sincere, but deceived people. On the other hand, the lake of fire should stand as a WARNING to all who *know* God’s truth and still stubbornly refuse to obey it!

You have now proved for yourself that the idea of an “ever-burning hell” is clearly a pagan myth and superstition. It is merely a fable that has crept into professing Christianity. Jesus Christ came to deliver us from the bondage of this world’s Satan-inspired false doctrines and to give us eternal life. Thank God we can know His *truth*, which sets us free!

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