

Bible passages on Hell Fire Explained

Question #1 – What does the expression “forever and ever” mean? (Revelation 20:10)

The word “forever” in the Bible is a period of time, limited or unlimited, depending upon what is being described (context). The word “forever” in the Bible is like the word “tall”. Tall has different meanings depending on what is being described, such as a dog, or house, or a mountain. The word “forever” is used 56 times in the Old Testament in connection with things already ended. In the case of man, the Bible teaches that “forever” means man’s lifetime or “as long as a man lives”. In the case of Samuel, “forever” meant “as long as he liveth” (I Samuel 1:22, 28). In Psalm 48:14 “forever” means “until death”. Burning “forever” in the fire means that man burns until he dies.

Question #2 – What does the expression “unquenchable fire” mean? (Luke 3:17)

The Bible says that Jerusalem was destroyed with “unquenchable fire” (Jeremiah 17:27), but it is not still burning today. II Chronicles 36:19, 21 says Jerusalem was burnt with fire to fulfill Jeremiah's prophecy. The fire was never put out by someone but it eventually died out when there was nothing else left to burn. Unquenchable fire of God cannot be PUT out, but it GOES out when everything is burned up.

Question #3 – What does the expression “everlasting or eternal fire” mean? (Matthew 25:41)

Jude 7 says God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with everlasting or eternal fire. And Peter says in II Peter 2:6 that the fire turned those cities into ashes as an example to those who live ungodly. So eternal or everlasting fire turns things to ashes and then goes out. **It is everlasting in its EFFECT and not so much its DURATION.**

Question #4 – What does the expression “everlasting punishment” mean? (Matthew 25:46)

Note that it is not everlasting PUNISHING but rather PUNISHMENT. Paul says that the punishment for sin is DEATH (Rom.6:23). And Revelation calls this death the SECOND DEATH which the wicked die in the fire (Rev.21:8). That death or destruction will be eternal because there is no resurrection from it. The word *punishment*, unlike the work *punishing*, has a finality to it.

Question #5 – Doesn’t the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) teach that there is an ever burning hell?

Jesus is here addressing the Pharisees (vs. 14,15) who were covetous (money-lovers), and emphasizes that the doctrines which they “highly esteemed” (i.e. on divorce - vs. 18 and on death - vs. 19-30) are “an abomination in the sight of God” (vs. 15). The Zondervan Companion Bibles states in the notes on Luke 16:19-31:

“This commences the second part of the Lord’s address to the Pharisees, against their tradition making void God’s word as to the dead... It is not called a “parable”, because it cites a notable example of the Pharisees’ tradition, which had been brought from Babylon.” (Companion Study Bible, p. 1483, Zondervan Publishers)

This story then is an example of what the Pharisees themselves taught concerning the state of the dead, contrary to the testimony of “the law and the prophets” (vs. 16, 31).

“The Pharisees taught that there were three places [where the righteous would go at death]: (1) Abraham’s bosom; (2) “under the throne of glory”; (3) in the garden of Eden (Gr. Paradise). Speaking of death, they would say “this day he sits in Abraham’s bosom”.... The Pharisees taught that in life two men may be “coupled together”, and one sees the other after death, and conversations take

place. The Pharisees gave long stories of similar imaginary conversations and discourses.”
(Companion Study Bible, p. 1484, Zondervan Publishers)

Jesus is here warning the Pharisees of their fate, by using their own doctrine and tradition. Here are 9 reasons why this story that Jesus told the Pharisees of the rich man and Lazarus, cannot be a literal picture of what takes place at death...

1. A man cannot literally enter into “the bosom” or chest of Abraham. This is obviously a figurative picture of heaven. Since the illustration of heaven is figurative, the illustration of hell must also be figurative.
2. It is impossible for anyone who is literally burning in fire to carry on a conversation.
3. Can those in heaven and hell talk to each other?
4. The rich man is in hell with a body! He has eyes, a tongue, etc. How did his body get into hell fire instead of the grave? Bodies of the dead have been exhumed, and they still had their body parts. Also, Lazarus is in Abraham’s bosom with a body. He has fingers. This story could not be literal!
5. A real person suffering in hell would call for far more than a drop of water on someone’s finger! How much water would be left on the tip of Lazarus’ finger by the time he got through the fire to the rich man? And how much relief would it bring to someone burning in hell? The whole story is unrealistic and figurative.
6. Jesus made no attempt to interpret this story, taken from the Pharisees tradition. He did interpret the parable of the wheat and tares in Matthew 13. In His interpretation of this parable, Jesus plainly said that hell-fire would take place at the end of the world rather than at death (Matt. 13:40-42; 49,50).
7. This example of the Pharisees tradition concerning death, contradicts the rest of the Bible. (See Eccl. 9:5,10; Ps. 6:5; 115:17; 146:4; etc.)
8. Jesus Himself taught that the dead go into their graves to await the resurrection (John 5:38,39).
9. In his epistle, Peter states that the lost will not be punished until the end on “the day of judgment.” (2 Pet. 2:9)

Jesus’ use of the story of the rich man and Lazarus was given to teach an important lesson, and to expose a “highly esteemed” tradition of the Pharisees which is an “abomination in the sight of God.” The Pharisees believed that riches were a sign of God’s blessing, and poverty was a sign of God’s curse, and having abandoned the “sure word of prophecy,” they were following tradition (Mark 7:7,9) and had adopted the pagan concept of the immortal soul.

In this story, Jesus clearly emphasizes that if a person did not believe Moses and the prophets, a resurrection would not convince them (vs. 29,31). Thus Jesus declared that we must believe Moses and the prophets. Nowhere in the writings of “Moses and the prophets” do people instantly go to heaven or hell at death.

Christ probably chose the name of Lazarus to use in this illustration because later he would actually raise Lazarus from the dead. The climactic point of the entire story is found in verse 31. The Pharisees didn't believe in Jesus even when one named Lazarus was raised to life! (See John 11:1-53).

A brief history of how the doctrines of eternal torment and the immortality of the soul entered the church

Some have wondered how the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul (the belief that when a man dies he goes immediately to heaven) and the doctrine of the eternal torment of the wicked (that

the fires of hell never go out) ever became a part of the Christian Church, especially in view of all that the Bible teaches concerning the sleep of the dead, and the utter destruction of the wicked. Again, let it be repeated that the testimony of Scripture is clear, convincing, and complete. We now wish to trace the history of how the Christian Church apostatized from the truth on this doctrine.

The doctrine of man's natural immortality had its origin, not as a revelation from God, but in a revelation to man by *the old serpent* among the beautiful trees of the Garden of Eden. There the tempter suggested to Eve: "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4). Thus, the testimony of Scripture is clear as to who is the originator of this doctrine of man's natural immortality. It is none other than that great Deceiver, the devil himself. This alone ought to make us very cautious about accepting a doctrine originated by the devil.

It can further be traced as it arises out of the *Oriental religions* of the past, with its pantheism, pre-existence of the soul, and reincarnation. Next, it was revealed in the *Egyptian version* of the immortality of the soul, and then in the terrible delusion of the *Persian dualism* (eternal existence of good and evil-neither good nor evil could defeat each other; thus both must always exist). From there it entered into the pagan Greek religions.

It found its greatest period of acceptance and expansion during the fourth century B.C. under the pagan *Greek philosopher Plato*. During these years the Bible record stood almost alone in presenting man as a candidate for immortality, but not possessing it naturally. Then the Old Testament canon closed with the book of Malachi about 425 B.C. It was during this period between the writing of the Old and New Testament, that Judaism became penetrated by the pagan teaching of the immortality of the soul. During this time two schools of thought developed in Judaism:

1. A group that continued to hold to the Old Testament picture of man as a candidate for immortality who rested in the grave until the resurrection.
2. A new group arising around 150 B.C. who introduced the *Platonic philosophy of the immortality of the soul* into the Jewish church.

Therefore, Judaism stood divided on this issue when Jesus came and reaffirmed the Old Testament teaching that death is a sleep and man will receive immortality at the second coming. This was amplified and expanded by most of the New Testament writers, so that the early Christian Church was brought back to the original teaching of the Old Testament before the writing of the New Testament ceased. Thus we find the early Christian Church for over 150 years holding to the true Biblical picture of death as a sleep and the annihilation of the wicked. Notice the testimony of Justin Martyr who died in A.D. 165 and was one of the leaders of the Christian Church in the early centuries:

"If you have fallen in with some who are called Christians, but who do not admit this truth of the resurrection, and venture to blaspheme the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; who say there is no resurrection of the dead and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians." — Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho, Chapter 80, in Ante Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, p. 294.

So strong was the feeling of the early church, they would not even call a person a Christian who believed that the soul went to heaven at death. Strange as it may seem, it was shortly after Justin Martyr that the pagan concept of the immortality of the soul was first introduced into the Christian Church. Remember there were two different teachings regarding death:

1. The Biblical picture of death, as a sleep, and the wicked as eternally destroyed and annihilated.

2. The immortality of the soul, pagan in origin, stemming from Plato, and incorporating elements of Persian dualism to form a doctrine of eternal torment. Again, Persian dualism taught that good and evil were both eternal and could never be destroyed. Hence the evil power must always exist somewhere, and since it could not be found in heaven, the pagans devised a place of torment for all evil, since even God could not destroy it.

These two different theories existed side by side through the centuries; one held by the pagans, the second held by those who believed in the one true God. Then, one of the greatest tragedies of Christianity occurred when this pagan concept was introduced into the Christian Church.

It was Athenagoras, about 188 A.D., who became the first Christian Father to use the term "Immortal soul". He contended that the soul is immortal and imperishable. Thus, within 25 years of the death of Justin Martyr, who would not even regard a person as a Christian who believed in an immortal soul, we find another church father making the bold pagan suggestion that the soul of man is immortal and cannot die.

A few years later, Tertullian, who died in A.D. 240, further developed the doctrine of the immortality of the soul into a system, adding the dreadful corollary of eternal torment. His argument was that since all souls are immortal, the punishment of the wicked must be eternal. He stressed a sacred fire that never consumes, but renews as it burns; eternally killing, but never terminating. This is simply the old pagan doctrine of Persian dualism, stated now in Christian terminology, but still with the inevitable conclusion that even God cannot put an end to sin and sinners. He must consign them to a place of eternal burning to be punished because they are indestructible. Thus, the God of the Christians became no better than the pagan gods of Greece and Rome. Before this, the uniqueness of Christianity stood on the fact that their God could conquer evil; He could make an utter end; He could do what the pagan gods were unable to do; He could put an utter end to sin and sinners. Now Tertullian had brought Christianity down to a par with paganism; God couldn't conquer evil. He must consign sinners to an eternal hell.

The doctrine of natural immortality and eternal torment was further popularized by *Jerome and Augustine*. In fact, Augustine added such great prestige to the doctrine that it became the predominant faith of the church for over 1000 years.

When the Reformation began, some of the Reformers, such as Martin Luther, recognized the origin of the teaching of natural immortality, but through the influence of *John Calvin and others*, the bulk of the Protestant reformers continued to hold to the pagan teaching of the immortality of the soul and eternal torment of the wicked.

In summation, let us quote from the Methodist-Congregationalist clergyman, Dr. Amos Phelps (1805-1874):

"This doctrine (of natural immortality) can be traced through the muddy channels of a corrupted Christianity, a perverted Judaism, pagan philosophy, and a superstitious idolatry. The Protestants borrowed it from the Catholics, the Catholics from the Pharisees, the Pharisees from the pagans, and the pagans from the old serpent who first preached the doctrine amid the lowly bowels of Paradise to an audience all too willing to hear and heed the new and fascinating theology: 'Ye shall not surely die.'"

(Much of the material here presented has been gleaned from the two volume work: The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers by LeRoy E. Froom.)