

Sermon – What Is Hell?

I'm going to assume that everyone hearing this sermon has, at one time or another, burned themselves. Perhaps it was a minor burn from touching a hot pan handle or the burner on a stove. Perhaps it was a very bad sunburn. In any case, you know the pain involved.

Perhaps you've seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrible accident – their skin burned away, revealing charred flesh. Imagine walking into flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. How would that kind of agony feel like for a minute? For a year? For a lifetime?

Most people would find that idea horrifying almost beyond imagination and would understandably be appalled that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to believe that God would willingly inflict such punishment on those who die not having received salvation? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible's description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

According to the traditional views of Christianity, the saved go to heaven and the unsaved go to Hell. We'll deal with the true reward of the saved in another sermon, but just what does the Bible teach about "hell"?

MILLIONS are in confusion 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?

Consistently in polls taken here in America, more people believe in heaven than in 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 of 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 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."

Sixth 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."

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

Well during our sermon time today, we **are** going to think about it. And what's more, we are going to look at the truth about hell as found in the pages of the Bible. We must not allow the myths and fables we've been taught to cloud our minds when it comes to such important matters. Let's get to the bottom of Hell!

Hell through the centuries

Most 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 the devil rules with his demons. It is invariably pictured with ever burning flames that torment the inhabitants. There is bitter weeping and wailing, agonized cursing, shrieks and screams from those in eternal torment--according to this concept.

Here is the brief 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 Mohammedan's conception...The main feature of hell as conceived by Hindu, Persian, Egyptian, Grecian, and Christian theologians are essentially the same" (from the article on "Hell,")

But why do people believe what they believe? Where have these popular ideas come from?

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries. Perhaps the first to expound this view among Christians was Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225. Other early "Church fathers" began to express similar views. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage wrote: *"The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end"* (Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This view has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: *"... Whoever says that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal ... let him be anathema"* (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed belief in everlasting punishment in these words: *"The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil ..."* (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: *"Christ will return ... to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment"* (Toon, p. 131).

Where is Hell?

Hell's location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have held the idea that it was in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber.

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but in the 14th-century work "Divine Comedy", written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

Although Dante's purpose for writing his "Divine Comedy" was to ridicule the religious concepts of hell which were prevalent during his day, his writing nevertheless tremendously influenced popular thought and teaching. *"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 man since his day...he wrote, in incomprehensible verse, an imaginative and lurid account of a dismal hell--a long poem containing certain phrases which caught the attention of the world, such as 'all hope abandon...ye, who enter here!'...His 'Inferno' was based on Virgil and Plato"* (Dante and His Inferno).

So we see that Dante wrote from the ideas and concepts of the pagan philosophers Plato and Virgil and the prevalent "Christian" concepts of his day.

But who were Plato and Virgil?

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

Plato, born in Athens, Greece, 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" and an "immortal soul" is admittedly a product of human thinking – of pagan speculation – as men puzzled over the eventual fate of the wicked.

Immortal Soul?

At this point, one may well ask "Doesn't the Bible teach that man has an immortal soul?" The short answer is "No". Quite the contrary, the Bible clearly states "...*The soul who sins shall die*" (**Ezekiel 18:4; 20**). In the account of the creation of man, recorded in **Genesis 2:7**, we read "...*the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.*" The word translated "soul" is the Hebrew word "nephesh". It is also translated "life", "person", "mind", "creature" and "dead body", among other things. The truth is, man doesn't have a soul, man IS a soul! And the soul that sins shall die!

This erroneous concept of an immortal soul didn't begin with Dante's fantastic poetry, nor even at the beginning of the Church in 30 AD, but some 6 centuries earlier. This satanic teaching has its roots in Hellenism. In his book "*Primitive Christianity in Crisis*", my good friend, author and historian Alan Knight explains that around the 6th century BC – the time that the Messianic Prophecies were being given to men like Isaiah – a culture known as "Hellenism" had taken root in the Greek and Roman world of that time. Now Hellenism is not a religion or belief system, but rather a philosophical culture that provided a fertile medium in which other belief systems took root and began to grow. For example, the philosophies of Plato and Socrates came out of this culture – as well as Epicureanism, Asceticism, Stoicism, and especially **Gnosticism** – all heresies that sprang up in the early New Testament Church.

Let's turn to the book of **Jude**. We see here that very early into the Church era, Satan was already busy perverting the true faith by the introduction of such vain philosophies.

Jude 1:1-3, "*Jude, the servant of Jesus Christ, and brother of James, to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ, and called: Mercy unto you, and peace, and love, be multiplied. Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.*"

We see that very shortly after the founding of the New Testament Church, Jude exhorts those early Christians to contend for the faith once delivered. It should be clear to us that Jude knew something was wrong – something had changed! Wrong ideas and teachings had crept into the young Church. But notice the clue in verse 4 as to the time of the origin of these errors.

Verse 4, “*For there are certain men crept in unawares [unnoticed], who were before of old ordained to this condemnation...*”

These men were *before of old* commissioned as it were to pervert the plain truth of the Bible. As we discovered, this began almost 600 years earlier in the fertile ground of Hellenism. Now Gnosticism consists of many different variations, just like modern day Christianity. But one concept which they all held was a strong belief against the importance of the physical or material world. What they taught was that the soul originated in heaven and at the time of one's physical birth, the soul descended, passing through the planets, and entered into a physical body here on earth. During the life on earth, the spiritual portion of that person was to become perfected, and if perfection were achieved, the soul would pass again through the planets and back to heaven. If not, it had to be “purged” of its physical contamination (the origin of Purgatory).

Now this sounds very close to what many mainstream Christians believe today, except maybe for the planet thing. This is actually the origin of the doctrine of the immortal soul – a doctrine that was not believed by the Jews, except for those who had come out of the Babylonian captivity and had been “Hellenized” in the process.

This is also the origin of modern astrology, for they believed that as the soul descended through the planets, the exact alignment and configuration of those planets and constellations would affect the life of that soul during its time on earth.

What about the Billions of Mankind?

Let's get back to Hell. But before we examine the Bible to see if the commonly held concepts about hell could be true, let's consider where these ideas, if true, would lead us.

The population of this earth reached 7 billion people on October 31, 2011. The most populous lands are China, India, and others parts of Asia. But in spite of the best efforts of Western missionaries, more than half of all the people 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 having seen a Bible.

Now think what that means. If all the "unsaved" go immediately to a fiery hell at death, then more than half the people who have ever lived on this earth have been consigned to this terrible punishment 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?

The Bible clearly teaches that God treat all men the same and wants all to have an opportunity for salvation. Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people with the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

Romans 2:11 *For there is no respect of persons with God.*

Ezekiel 33:11, *Say unto them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live...*

2 Peter 3:9 *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

God is a God of love. He treats all men the same and does not want any to perish. He tells us to love our enemies (**Matthew 5:44**). *"He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"* (**verse 45**). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully punishes His enemies through all eternity.

The idea that God sentences people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: *"Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete ... I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe ... will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine"* (Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this "damnable doctrine" but that men have misunderstood what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will be able to witness the torments of the wicked. *"... Part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God's justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss"* (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa. Husbands and wives would see unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic and cruel.

Modern attitudes about hell

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (U.S. News & World Report, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II "declared that hell is 'not a punishment imposed externally by God' but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner's choice to live apart from God" (ibid., p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved.

Why is there so much diversity in the teachings about hell? The reason is that, like the belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are more the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible. The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

More than one hell in the Bible

So what then is the truth about hell? What does the Bible teach? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of three hells – but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us see why there is so much confusion about hell.

In the original Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Bible was written, four words are translated "hell" in English. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word *sheol*, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as *hades*, one of the Greek words translated "hell" in the New Testament.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of both words: "*The Greek word Hades ... is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated 'hell' in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead ... The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol ... is usually translated as Hades, and the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek*" (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, "Hades, Hell").

Both sheol and hades refer to the grave. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this.

Psalm 16:10 says, "*For You will not leave my soul in hell [Sheol], nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.*"

In **Acts 2:27** the apostle Peter quotes this verse and shows that it is a reference to Christ. Here the Greek word hades is substituted for the Hebrew sheol.

Acts 2:27 *Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Hades], neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.*

Where did Christ go when He died? He went to the grave. His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus' flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him. Notice where Jesus spent the three days and nights.

Matthew 12:40 *For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*

Jesus was in the tomb, a grave. The majority of scriptures that use the term hell are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word sheol is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated "grave" 31 times, "hell" 31 times and "pit" three times.

The Greek hades is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation in all instances but one the term hades is translated "hell." The one exception is **1 Corinthians 15:55**, where it is translated "grave." In the New King James Version, the translators simply used the original Greek word hades in all 11 instances.

The original Old Testament Hebrew word sheol and the New Testament Greek word hades mean the same thing – simply the grave. "Hell" is an old English word, and over 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 which was covered up – a dark and silent place – a grave! But pagan teachings gaining popular acceptance have caused people to misapply the old English word "hell" to the colorful imaginations of Dante Alighieri.

Two other Greek words

Two other Greek words are translated "hell" in the New Testament. One of these is tartaroo, used only once in the Bible (**2 Peter 2:4**), where it refers to the place where the fallen angels, or demons, are restrained awaiting their judgment. The Expository Dictionary of Bible Words explains that tartaroo means "to confine in tartaros" and that "Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined" (Lawrence Richards, 1985, "Heaven and Hell").

2 Peter 2:4 *For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [tartaroo], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;*

Peter used this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were "delivered ... into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment." Fallen angels are in a condition or place of restraint awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God

and destructive influence on humanity. Tartaroo applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which people are punished after death.

The third Greek word used in the Bible and translated "hell" is gehenna. This does refer to a fiery punishment for the wicked-but not in the manner portrayed in the hell of men's imagination.

Gehenna Fire

Gehenna refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem, as all authorities agree. The word is derived from the Hebrew Ge-Hinnom, the valley of Hinnom (**Joshua 18:16**). At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump – the place where garbage, trash and refuse were thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The carcasses of dead animals and the bodies of despised criminals were also cast into Gehenna to be burned. Jesus used this particular location and what took place there to help us understand the fate the wicked and unrepentant will suffer in the future.

Are there immortal worms in hell?

In **Mark 9:47-48** Jesus specifically referred to Gehenna and what took place there. But, without a proper historical understanding, many people draw erroneous conclusions.

Notice His words: *"It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell [gehenna] fire-where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.'"*

Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna – the Valley of Hinnom – was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly hold several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the "worm" is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell. "'The worm that dieth not' was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret" (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase "the fire is not quenched" is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" appears in quotation marks. Jesus was quoting from **Isaiah 66:24**. A proper understanding of this verse begins there.

Let turn to **Isaiah 66:24**.

The context in Isaiah refers to a time when, God says, *"all flesh shall come to worship before Me"* (**verse 23**). It is a time after the return of Jesus Christ and the establishment of God's Kingdom on earth when the wicked will be no more. What happened to them? In **verse 24** we read that people *"will go out and look upon the **dead bodies** of those who rebelled against me;*

their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus was quoting from, the bodies affected by the worms are dead. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns He will fight those who resist Him (**Revelation 19:11-15**). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (1980), the original Hebrew word translated "worm" in **Isaiah 66:24** and **Mark 9:47-48** means "worm, maggot, [or] larvae."

Neither Isaiah nor Christ was talking about "immortal worms". The vermin of which they spoke – maggots – do not die because they turn into flies. The flies then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle.

This background information helps us better understand Christ's words. In that time, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were kept constantly burning there, or a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed (**Joshua 6:18; 7:11, 25**).

What did Jesus mean in **Mark 9:48** when He said, "... *The fire is not quenched*"? With the preceding background we can begin to understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes entirely (e.g., **Ezekiel 20:47**). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. It burns itself out when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

Does the Bible Speak of Hellfire That Lasts Forever?

A scripture that many assume proves the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire is **Matthew 25:41**. But does it? Let's take a closer look.

First, notice the setting, which is when Jesus "comes in His glory" (**verses 31-32**). We are told that He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (**verses 34-40**). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners. The goats are appointed to assemble on Jesus' left hand. He then consigns the goats to "the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (**Matthew 25:41**).

Matthew 25:41 *Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels:*

The word everlasting is translated from the Greek word **aionios** {ahee-o'-nee-os}. The key to understanding this verse is knowing what will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In **Matthew 25:46** Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (aionios) punishment and of life eternal (aionios). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishment for the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire perish; they are killed. As we have seen, they suffer death-the second death (**Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8**).

A plain and simple meaning of **Matthew 25:46** that reconciles with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them, renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the aionios fire is a one-time event. It is a permanent punishment, the results of which will remain forever-that is, eternal death. It is not an ongoing punishment that continues forever.

The wicked will never live again. They will be completely destroyed. The fire brings eternal punishment and not a constant, unending punishing. This is the only explanation that accords with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point needs to be made regarding aionios. Genesis 19 describes God's destruction of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, for their wickedness: "*Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah*" (**Genesis 19:24**). They were utterly destroyed - consumed by fire.

In the New Testament, the book of **Jude** describes these cities as "**suffering the vengeance of eternal [aionios] fire**" (**verse 7**). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to aionios fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting effect, not how long it literally burns.

The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus spoke of gehenna fire is **Matthew 10:28**: "*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [gehenna].*"

We should notice that Jesus did not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He said that God can **destroy – annihilate** – both the body and soul in Gehenna.

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But, when God destroys one in hell (**gehenna**), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls "the second death." The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or Gehenna, at the end of the age.

Revelation 21:8, *"But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death".*

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

But notice what else is thrown into the Lake of Fire:

Revelation 20:14 *And death and hell [hades] were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.*

If this Lake of Fire is the Hell-fire or Gehenna-fire spoken of by Jesus, would it make sense to say hell was cast into hell? Of course not! So what does this mean?

1 Corinthians 15:25-26, *"For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. "*

Verse 55, *O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?*

Here we see a verse celebrating Christ's victory over death through His resurrection. This whole chapter is dealing with the concepts of the resurrection of the dead. Death and the resulting grave associated with it are what are destroyed by Christ's victory. They are symbolically thrown into the Lake of Fire to show that they will no longer be able to affect those who have been resurrected to eternal life and are no longer subject to death. They won't suffer eternal torment but, like the wicked, will be destroyed, never to exist anymore.

The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is to be found in the book of Malachi.

Malachi 4:1, *"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," says the LORD of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch'"*

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says:

"You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this," says the LORD of hosts" (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes. Notice the words of the Psalmist:

Psalms 37:20, *"But the wicked shall perish [die, vanish, be destroyed], and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume [cease, end, be finished]; into smoke shall they consume away."*

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire-but not the mythical hell of men's imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully and willingly reject His way of life will die, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity, nor will God grant His priceless gift of eternal life to those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Romans 6:23 *For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

There's no immortal soul here. *"The soul who sins shall die"*. Only those who love God and follow the example of His son Jesus Christ will be given the **gift** of eternal life. We cannot and should not let men reinterpret *death* to mean *eternal life in hellfire*.

Lazarus and the Rich man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Jesus gave a parable:

Luke 16:19-31, *"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.*

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

"But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' "And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'"

"But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'".

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the age that Jesus used to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally. There are other examples of this in Scripture, such as the previously cited example of Peter using the pagan concept of *tartaroos* – the Greek mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined – to describe the place of restraint for fallen angels.

The Victor Bible Background Commentary, New Testament, in discussing this passage, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife to point out a spiritual lesson:

"Not only was Hades thought to be divided into two compartments, popular belief held that conversations could be held between persons in Gan Eden [the abode of the righteous] and Gehinnom [the abode of the unrighteous]. Jewish writings also picture the first as a verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs, while Gehinnom is not only a parched land, but the waters of the river that separated it from Gan Eden recede whenever the desperately thirsty wicked kneel and try to drink.

"... In Christ's story God was the beggar's only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him! ... It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ had said, 'You cannot serve God and Money' (**16:13**). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, 'What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight' (**16:15**).

"There's no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced ... And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said.

"But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by 'Abraham's side,' a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from the place of blessing by a 'great chasm' (**16:26**). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible-or appropriate!

"... The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone

... This rich man's indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God's ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself...

"And so Jesus' first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which are hateful to Him ...

"But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have 'Moses and the Prophets' (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead ...

"In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus' words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor ...

"This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed" (Lawrence Richards, QuickVerse software, 1992-1998).

When are the wicked punished?

The incorrigibly wicked are indeed punished. But, we might ask, when does this punishment take place? As we saw earlier, Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time after the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity "*come and bow down*" before Him (**Isaiah 66:24, NIV**). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus used a common site of trash disposal in His day – the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem's walls – to illustrate the ultimate fate of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire. Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up – consumed – by a future Gehenna-like fire more than 1,000 years after Christ returns (**Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15**).

Peter explains that at this time "*the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up*" (**2 Peter 3:10**). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes:

Revelation 21:1, "*Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea*".

The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable abode for the righteous who will have inherited eternal life by that time.

Mercy and Justice – even for the unrepentant sinner!

In conclusion, when we throw away all of the man-made fables and myths about Hell and instead look at what the Bible has to say, we come away with an entirely different story.

Even the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act of justice and mercy on God's part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause them and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not grant them the gift of eternal life; neither will He torture them for all eternity.

The encouraging truth of the Bible shows that God is indeed a Being of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. Let us be thankful that we serve a just and merciful God.

Psalms 119:137, *“Righteous are you, O Lord, and upright are your judgments.”*