

Hell: A Place of Silence, A State of Extinction

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Two Views: Eternal Torture vs. Soul Sleep

According to a popularized Christian belief, when a person dies his or her soul departs from the body and either floats up to a place of eternal paradise (heaven) or down to a place of eternal torture (hell). This belief has become so widely accepted among Christians that it is often assumed that it must have originated in the Bible.

The concept of the immortal soul first originated in Greek mythology and philosophy. Plato was one of the first philosophers to write about the concept of human beings possessing immortal souls that remain conscious after death. In his book *Phaedo*, Plato wrote, “the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal” and that upon death, the soul “departs to the invisible world to the divine and immortal and rational: thither arriving, she lives in bliss and is released from the error and folly of men, their fears and wild passions and all other human ills, and forever dwells, as they say of the initiated, in company with the gods.”

In contrast to Greek philosophy, the Bible teaches that when a person dies, he or she is literally dead, not simply alive in another form or another place. The scriptures describe the dead as being unconscious, in a state of dreamless “sleep,” awaiting the future resurrection of the dead. Until the time of the future resurrection, the dead are not conscious. Only at the future resurrection of the dead will the dead rise to face judgement.

The word “hell” in the Bible is often misunderstood as the Hades of Greek mythology, where immortal souls are eternally tortured. Yet this kind of thinking comes from Greek philosophy, and not from the Bible. Let us interpret the Bible according to its own teachings, and we will find that “hell” is not a spiritual place where souls are tortured, but a physical place, where dead bodies are buried. This place is commonly called the grave. The Bible teaches that there will be a future resurrection and judgement, in which the dead in hell will rise again and be judged. The wicked will face destruction in a lake of fire. Ultimately, “hell” will be a state of extinction, in which one ceases to exist.

Hell: A Physical Place

Hell is a physical place where the body lies dead, not a spiritual place where the soul is tormented. Ezekiel 32:27 speaks of those who have “gone down to hell with their weapons of war: and they have laid their swords under their head.” How could physical weapons enter a spiritual place?

The word “hell” in this verse is not speaking of a spiritual place, but of a physical reality: it is the “pit” spoken of just two verses later, in which the dead are buried along with their weapons.

Similarly, Jonah 2:2 refers to the belly of the fish as the “belly of hell.” Jonah was “buried” there and thought that it would be the place where he would die, i.e., his grave. Hell is a physical place where the dead lie in rest, not a spiritual place where the soul is eternally tormented.

Resting in Peace

In these verses and many others, the word “hell” is translated from the Hebrew word *sheol*, which is elsewhere translated as “grave.” *Sheol* means “the place of the dead.” It refers to a place of silence and rest, not a place of torment.

There the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor.
--Job 3:17-18

The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence.
--Psalm 115:17

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave [*sheol*], whither thou goest.
--Ecclesiastes 9:10

Let me not be ashamed, O LORD; for I have called upon thee: let the wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave [*sheol*].
--Psalm 31:17

For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave [*sheol*] who shall give thee thanks?
--Psalm 6:5

The dead cannot think, work, or do anything. Rather, when one dies, “his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:4). The Bible tells us that “the dead know not any thing” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They are in an unconscious state that Jesus called “sleep.”

These things said he: and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead.
--John 11:11-14

The book of Daniel refers to death as “rest.”

“But go thou thy way till the end: for thou shalt rest, and stand in thy lot at the end of the days.”

--Daniel 12:13

The dead will remain “asleep” until the future resurrection, when:

Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

--Daniel 12:2

Resurrection: Leaving Hell

Jesus was resurrected out of “hell” when he rose from the grave:

He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.

--Acts 2:31

Similarly, all who sleep in “hell” or “the grave” will one day rise again:

The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave [*sheol*], and bringeth up.

--1 Samuel 2:6

God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave [*sheol*]: for he shall receive me. Selah.

--Psalm 49:15

I will ransom them from the power of the grave [*sheol*]; I will redeem them from death.

--Hosea 13:14a

Though “hell” is often thought of as a place reserved only for the wicked, the Bible teaches that both the wicked and the righteous go to *sheol* upon death, where they await the resurrection in a state of unconsciousness figuratively called “sleep.” Jacob stated “I will go down into the grave [*sheol*]” even though Jacob was not a wicked man. Even Jesus, who never sinned, went to “hell” (Acts 2:31) and thus “made his grave with the wicked” (Isaiah 53:9).

Hell is the place where all the dead - righteous and unrighteous - await the resurrection at the day of judgement.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.

--Revelation 20:13

The Death Penalty

The Bible tells us that the penalty for sin is death:

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

--Romans 6:23

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.

--Romans 8:13

Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.

--James 1:15

The soul that sinneth, it shall die.

--Ezekiel 18:20a

As we have seen, the Greek philosopher Plato believed that upon death the soul, being inherently immortal, went on to live consciously in another place. But the Bible teaches that the dead are not conscious, and are incapable of thought, knowledge, or work (Ecclesiastes 9:10). At the time of judgement, the wicked will receive death as the punishment for their sins, not conscious existence in another place.

Jesus was not a Greek philosopher. While Greek philosophy taught that an evil person's soul, being immortal, would continue to live consciously even after death, Jesus taught that the soul is mortal and the wicked will face total death - the destruction of both body and soul in hell.

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

--Matthew 10:28

A person cannot continue to live if both body and soul are destroyed! That person will cease to exist. The wicked will face the punishment of complete destruction (Matthew 21:42, 22:7; Mark 12:9; James 4:12) which the Bible compares to the Flood of Noah (Luke 17:27), the destruction of Sodom (Luke 17:28-29) and the death of the Israelite multitude in the wilderness (1 Corinthians 10:10).

In all of these examples, the word "destruction" is synonymous with "death." In the days of the Flood, Sodom, and the Exodus, God didn't torture the wicked for eternity. Rather, he gave them the wages of their sin, which is death (Romans 6:23). So it will be at the final judgement. The dead will rise and be judged (Revelation 20:13). Rather than receiving eternal life in a place of eternal torture, the wicked will receive a "second death" (Revelation 21:8) as the penalty for their sins.

As we have seen, the first death is a “sleep” during which a person unconsciously awaits the resurrection, but the second death will be the “destruction” of “both body and soul” (Matthew 10:28). The first death is temporary, but the second death is “everlasting” (Daniel 12:2; Matthew 25:41, 25:36). The believer who stays faithful will “not be hurt at all by the second death” (Revelation 2:11) for it will have “no power over them” (Revelation 20:6). Because of the original sin, all people will experience the first death (Genesis 3:19, 1 Corinthians 15:22). However, the second death is reserved only for the wicked (Revelation 21:8).

For ye say, Where is the house of the prince? and where are the dwelling places of the wicked? Have ye not asked them that go by the way? and do ye not know their tokens, That the wicked is reserved to the day of destruction? they shall be brought forth to the day of wrath. Who shall declare his way to his face? and who shall repay him what he hath done? Yet shall he be brought to the grave, and shall remain in the tomb.

--Job 21:28-32

As we see here in Job, even in the Old Testament it is clear that the wicked will be resurrected on the day of judgement, or the “day of destruction” and on that day they will face the punishment of death (being “brought to the grave”) that is everlasting (they “shall remain in the tomb,” never to rise again).

The Valley of Hinnom: Hell on Earth

We have seen how the Hebrew word *sheol* refers to the grave. In the New Testament, the Greek word *hades* means the same thing as *sheol* and is used in place of *sheol* in the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament. Another Greek word, *gehenna*, is also translated as “hell.” Similar to how *sheol* refers to the grave, *gehenna* also refers to a physical place where dead bodies were discarded. *Gehenna* is a name for the Valley of Hinnom, located just outside Jerusalem.

Jesus talked about *gehenna* to add imagery to his teachings about the destruction of the wicked. Residents of Jerusalem were surely familiar with the abhorrent garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom, where dead bodies were thrown and left to rot.

Jesus said in Mark 9:43-44 that the wicked would be thrown into “hell” (translated from *gehenna*) where “the fire is not quenched” and “the worm dieth not.” The fact that the fire will not be quenched does not mean that it will burn forever. If a fire burns until its fuel is consumed, that fire is not “quenched.” A fire is only “quenched” when it is put out prematurely, as in the pouring of water over a flame to put the flame out before the fuel is consumed. “The fire is not quenched” means that no one will be able to put out the fire, not that the fire will burn for all eternity.

Similarly, “the worm dieth not” does not mean that the worms possess immortality. These worms are most likely maggots, since the maggot is the most common flesh-

eating worm, and most other types of worms do not typically feed on human flesh. Maggots are actually flies in their larval stages. If a worm eats its fill and matures into a fly, it ceases to be a worm, yet it has not died.

“The worm dieth not” means that no one will be able to stop the worms by killing them, not that they will feast on flesh for all eternity. The use of the singular word “worm” instead of the plural word “worms” means either a single worm, or, more likely, a single swarm of worms that are together called “the worm.” It is likely that many individual worms *will* die in the flames, but “the worm” in general will not.

Fire can only burn so long before whatever is being burned is consumed. Worms can only eat flesh until the flesh is consumed and they mature into flies. Neither fire nor worms describe eternal torture. Rather, these are descriptions of the permanence of the death and destruction that awaits the wicked.

No one will be able to quench the fire that will consume them, or the worms that will eat the corpses. Just like the corpses thrown into the Valley of Hinnom in Christ’s day, the wicked will be consumed, and perish. What Jesus is describing is not a picture of eternal torture, but a picture of death and final destruction that will not be undone.

Everlasting Fire

We have seen that hell is not a place of eternal torture, but rather, a place of destruction. Even so, the Bible does speak of hell being a place of fire. Revelation tells us that the wicked will be thrown into a lake of fire. Matthew 18:8 and 25:41 tell us that the wicked will be cast into “everlasting fire.” But what is everlasting fire?

Common sense dictates that when a person is cast into a lake of fire, that person will die, for the simple reason that human beings are not fireproof. When the wicked are cast into the fire, they will die, and will not be screaming in agony for all eternity. The idea of eternal torture would require that the wicked be given eternal life prior to being cast into the fire. But the Bible tells us that eternal life is only for those who believe in Jesus - the rest will “perish” (John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9).

Even if the fire were literally “everlasting” and burned for all eternity, it would only be burning dead bodies, for the wicked will not receive eternal life and will instead burn to death. It is death, not eternal life in fire, that is the penalty for sin (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23, 8:13; James 1:15). The first description of death, found in Genesis 3:19, describes it as a “return unto the ground,” for “unto dust shalt thou return.” Malachi 4:3 tells us that the wicked will become “ashes under the soles of your feet.”

Rather than being tortured for eternity, they will be annihilated - turning to dust and ashes. Their souls will die, proving that the human soul is mortal, not immortal (Ezekiel 18:20, Matthew 10:28). The fire that burns them is said to be “everlasting” because of the permanence of its destruction, not because the wicked will be writhing in agony for millions of years.

Scholars disagree about exactly where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrrha were located, but pretty much everyone agrees that the cities are no longer burning! Yet Jude 1:7 tells us that they too burned with “eternal fire.” This is proof that "eternal fire" is a description of complete destruction, not a description of never-ending flames.

The description of the destruction of Edom in Isaiah 34:10 states that “the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.” If Edom were literally a flaming wasteland for all eternity, how could the world ever be restored to paradise, with “no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain,” as Revelation 21:4 describes? The phrase “for ever and ever” is a description of the *permanence*, not the duration, of the destruction.

Understanding how phrases like “eternal fire” and “for ever and ever” are used in the Bible helps us to correctly interpret Revelation 20:10, which states that the devil will be “cast into the lake of fire and brimstone” and “tormented day and night for ever and ever.” This is the only verse in the entire Bible that mentions eternal torment, and it mentions it only in reference to the devil. In contrast, when Revelation describes human beings being thrown into the lake of fire, it adds, “which is the second death” (e.g. Revelation 21:8), a clear reminder that the fate of the wicked is death, not eternal life in hell.

It is noteworthy that the lake of fire is referred to as “fire and brimstone” in Revelation 20:10. Revelation borrows the phrase “fire and brimstone” from the Old Testament account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24) which was “overthrown in a moment” (Lamentations 4:6) and turned into ash (2 Peter 2:6). This is a description of total annihilation, not everlasting torture.

Descriptions of fire, flames, and smoke are used throughout the Bible to describe death and destruction (e.g. Leviticus 10:1-2, Numbers 16:35, Deuteronomy 29:23, 2 Kings 1:10) but are never used to describe eternal life in torment. The phrase “for ever and ever,” borrowed from Isaiah 34:10, serves to emphasize the totality and permanence of the complete and final destruction of evil.

Just like the “eternal punishment” of Matthew 25:46, the fire of hell is called "everlasting" because its effects are permanent (lasting forever) and will never be undone. Rather than being tortured for eternity, the wicked die and are buried in the grave (“hell”) until they are resurrected, judged, and face destruction. And then even the grave itself (“hell”) will be destroyed (Revelation 20:14), for there will no longer be any death (Revelation 21:4).

According to God’s plan for the restoration of all things, good will ultimately triumph over evil in the end. A correct understanding of hell gives us hope that all the wickedness and injustice in the world will be destroyed and that a loving God will cause life, love, and righteousness to reign victorious. An incorrect understanding of hell causes fear

and confusion, and leads people to believe that God is not loving, but wants to cause endless suffering and pain.

Understanding Hell: Why it Matters

And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

--Revelation 21:4

Not only will evil people be destroyed on the day of judgement, but evil *itself* will be destroyed, for in the new heaven and earth (Revelation 21:1), God will no longer allow evil to exist (Revelation 21:4). God will restore Creation to how he originally wanted it to be: a Creation that is "very good" (Genesis 1:31). God will not be able to call the new earth "very good" if it exists above or alongside a fire full of people screaming in torture.

Revelation 21:4 tells us that pain and sorrow will pass away and be no more. If the wicked are held in a torture chamber for all eternity, how could pain and sorrow ever pass away? The ultimate triumph of good over evil requires that evil ceases to exist - not that evil be sectioned off into its own separate area called "hell."

According to the biblical view of hell, the destiny of the wicked who do not repent is complete and permanent annihilation - not eternal torture! This is important to understand because the idea of eternal torture has caused many to stumble. Countless atheists cannot fathom how a supposedly loving God could torture anyone for all eternity as punishment for even the smallest sins.

Not only is this idea of eternal torture unbiblical, as we have seen, but it also seems unjust from a moral point of view, and simply doesn't fit with common sense. For torturing many innocent people for about ten years, Adolf Hitler is considered one of the most evil men in history, and rightly so. How could a good and loving God torture some of those same victims for not just a few years, but all eternity? The concept of eternal torture has harmed Christianity by making God seem like an unjust bully, rather than the God of love and justice that he is. Because of this false doctrine, many have stumbled and even lost the faith.

The biblical view of hell as a place of the destruction of both body and soul, so that one ceases to exist, is essential to understanding God's justice, love, and mercy. Though the false doctrine of eternal torture has caused many to believe that God is a sadist who loves to see people suffer, the Bible teaches that God takes no delight in punishing the wicked (Ezekiel 18:23, 18:32, 33:11).

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.

--2 Peter 3:9

Conclusion

The word “hell” in the Bible is not the Hades of Greek mythology. Rather than being a spiritual place where souls are tormented for eternity, the Bible describes hell as a physical place (Ezekiel 32:27, Jonah 2:2) of silence and unconscious “rest” in the grave (Job 3:17-18; Psalm 6:5, 31:17, 115:17, 146:4; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 9:10). Jesus referred to death as “sleep” (John 11:11-14).

The Bible teaches of a future resurrection of the dead, when those who “sleep in the dust shall awake” (Daniel 12:2, see also 1 Samuel 2:6, Psalm 49:15, Hosea 13:14). The resurrection will be followed by a judgement (Revelation 20:13). The wicked will be given the penalty for sin, which is death (Ezekiel 18:20, Romans 6:23, Romans 8:13, James 1:15). This “second death” (Revelation 21:8) will be the destruction of body and soul in the lake of fire (Matthew 10:28). They will not be tortured for eternity, as this would require eternal life. Eternal life is granted only to the faithful - the wicked will “perish” (John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9). After they are destroyed by death in the lake of fire, death itself will be destroyed (Revelation 20:14) and there will be no more evil (Revelation 21:4).

Right now, the dead are resting in peace, unconsciously awaiting the future resurrection. The dead are not alive in heaven or hell. The final destiny of the wicked is the punishment of annihilation - the destruction of body and soul (Matthew 10:28). At the final judgement, the wicked will die and cease to exist. They will not be tortured for eternity.

The biblical teaching of the annihilation of the wicked is in direct opposition to Plato’s theory of the immortal soul that can be tormented forever. The musings of Greek philosophers, however imaginative they may be, do not come from scripture. We must choose today whether we will believe Greek mythology, or the Bible.

The Platonic “immortal soul” gloss is not only unbiblical, but dangerous. In opposition to God’s love and justice, the theory of eternal torture would mean a world of unending pain and cruelty, where evil is not destroyed, but actually *preserved* in a torture chamber forever. This is not what the scriptures teach. According to the Bible, all evil will be destroyed, and the wicked will perish. In the age to come, there will be no evil - no more tears, no more death, no more pain.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death,

neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.
--Revelation 21:1-4