

Is Hell a Place of Everlasting Punishment?

Bible Answers About Denominations

The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society denies the existence of hell as a place of everlasting punishment for the wicked. They argue, "the doctrine of a burning hell where the wicked are tortured eternally after death cannot be true mainly for four reasons: (1) It is wholly unscriptural; (2) it is unreasonable; (3) it is contrary to God's love; and (4) it is repugnant to justice" (Let God Be True, p. 9).

Let it be noted that the existence of Hell cannot be denied without the denial of Christ Himself. In the face of all of the denials of Hell, there still remains the undeniable fact that Jesus had much to say about Hell and eternal punishment. Some have said that Jesus said more about Hell than Heaven. When correctly perceived, every warning about the Judgment, every prohibition of evil, every encouragement to righteousness, and every declaration about sin has the concept of eternal damnation behind it and embedded in it. Otherwise, they are meaningless, empty words. In fact, the necessity of Jesus' earthly sojourn and the purpose of His coming are rendered vain and unnecessary apart from the reality of the eternal damnation of the souls of men because of their sins. The coming of Christ and His sacrifice of Himself upon the cross for the sins of mankind are the ultimate arguments for the reality of eternal damnation—Hell itself.

For there to be a Hell for man he must survive death, in other words, he must have an immortal soul. Jesus taught unequivocally that man is more than flesh and blood: "And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). Yet, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Adventists believe that man is "wholly mortal"; that is, they believe that the body and soul are one and the same, and therefore, when the body dies, so does the soul. If they are correct then the above statement by Jesus makes no sense. The Bible plainly shows the position of the materialist to be wrong in other passages as well. Notice that James states that "the body without the spirit is dead..." (Jas. 2:26). It is the physical body that is mortal and not the spirit or soul of man. Paul also confirms this thought. "Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day" (2 Cor 4:16). It should be obvious that the outward man is the body which will perish, but the inward man, which is renewed day by day, is the spirit of man. It is the spirit of man that lives on even after death. Jesus said, "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good {deeds} to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil {deeds} to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29). Yes, man will survive death and be raised to a resurrection of life or to a resurrection of judgment.

There is a realm in the world of spirits called "Hell." Jesus clearly referred to Hell in the passage above (Matt. 10:28). He threatened "the hell of fire" for those who pronounce "thou fool" upon their fellows (Matt. 5:22). Jesus again referred to Hell as a real entity and place into which the body would

be "cast into hell" (Matt. 5:29-30). The Lord referred to Hell as the final abode of the wicked no less than eleven times. The English word "Hell" is correctly translated from gehenna, which appears eleven times by the Lord, once by James. Gehenna derived from the Valley of Hinnom just outside of Jerusalem. It is first mentioned in Nehemiah 11:30. Its history includes use as a place where idolatrous Jews burned their children in homage to the pagan god, Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). Josiah, king of Judah, caused this practice to cease and the valley then became a place of abomination and abhorrence. As early as the second century B.C. uninspired Jewish literature used gehenna as a figure to refer to final, eternal punishment of sinners. The Son of God applied this word in the very same way, using the name of the literal valley of abomination and abhorrence to refer to the place of ultimate abomination and abhorrence beyond the Judgment.

Jesus described the final, eternal hell as a place of fire. He twice called it "the hell of fire" (Matt. 5:22; 18:9). He twice referred to it as "the furnace of fire" into which the evil will be cast after the Judgment (Matt. 13:42, 50). He twice called it a place of "unquenchable fire" (Mk. 9:43, 47-48). It is therefore correct to identify the Hell the Lord described with "the lake of fire and brimstone" and "the lake of fire" into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and all those not found written in the book of life were cast for eternal torment (Rev. 20:10, 15; 21:8). Jesus not only teaches the reality of Hell, but the eternity of it. Jesus said, "And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt 25:46). The word for "eternal" is *aiōnios* and is used both for the punishment of the wicked as well as the life for the righteous. The word means eternal, forever, everlasting. Therefore, hell will last forever just as heaven will. "Jehovah's Witnesses" say that eternal or everlasting used in this connection with punishment means that it is eternal in the sense that it is done and over with, will never be repeated, and the results are forever. They say, "Everlasting shows no recovery is possible." (Make Sure of All Things, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1953, p. 163). But the Bible teaches that it is the punishment, not the results that are eternal. How can a person suffer punishment unless he is conscious? He cannot. So, eternal punishment necessitates eternal existence and consciousness.

But "Jehovah's Witnesses" argue that God is able to "destroy" in hell (Matt. 10:28). They say that "eternal destruction is symbolized by Gehenna." (Make Sure of All Things, p. 162). "Jehovah's Witnesses" think the words "destroy" and "destruction" can mean only one thing – extinction, annihilation. Again they are wrong. The Greek word used by Jesus in Matt. 10:28 is *apollumi*. A form of the same word is used by Jesus in telling the twelve to go to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6). The word is translated "lost." It cannot mean non-existent in this passage. Jesus used the same word when He spoke of a man going to find a sheep which was lost (Lk. 15:4). This is sufficient to show that *apollumi* and its cognates do not denote annihilation. That which is denoted is a state of being lost or separated. It is "eternal separation" from the face of the Lord (2 Thess. 1:7-9). It is not destruction in the sense of annihilation, but destruction, being cut off, from the presence of the Lord for ever.

Is there an eternal hell? The Bible is crystal clear in answering yes to this question. Let the Bible be your guide and not the false teaching of men. Paul said, "God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar" (Rom 3:4).

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