

The Sure Word Bible Studies ***Lesson 10***

The Lake of Fire

We have learned the Bible teaches that the wages of sin is death. And because everyone has committed sin, then all will sleep the sleep of death. But remember, Jesus has promised He will awaken everyone of them out of that sleep. Some will be raised back to life in the first resurrection at His coming, and the rest in the second resurrection at the end of the millennium.

But as we continue to study this important topic, keep in mind Romans 6:23, "*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Note the simple contrast: Sin is death and God is life. Sin and death is an enemy that has invaded the world in which God in the beginning had declared everything good. And though He allowed it for the greater good of the universe, sin and death was not God's will nor His design.

Another important fact to remember is that in reality God has not killed anyone, every one who has died have died of natural causes except on occasion, like the flood for example, God has seen fit to put some to sleep for a while but in the end He will awaken them or make them come alive again. What happens after at depends on what kind of people they are and then it will not be something God does to them as we will see as we continue this study.

In the last lesson we saw that after the final judgment the wicked are cast into the "*lake of fire*" and suffer the "*second death*" often thought of as "*hell.*" But hell, just as other topics we have studied, has also come to mean different things to different people.

In Islam, the religion of the Muslims, hell is a vast fiery crater that the souls of the dead cross on a narrow bridge. As they do the wicked fall off the bridge into everlasting torment. In Hinduism and Buddhism, a soul may descend into one of many hells as a result of wicked karma (thoughts, words, and deeds) but the stay in hell is not eternal. It lasts only until the effects of the evil karma have been removed. According to traditional Christianity hell is a fiery place in the center of the earth reserved for the wicked where they will suffer unending anguish and pain. But in modern times, some Christian theologians have questioned whether a just and loving God would have created such a place as hell. According to some scholars hell is not a place, but a symbol of the anguish caused by the loss of God or goodness.

Obviously there are differences of opinion as to just what hell is. But as always, to discover the truth about this issue our question must be, what does the Bible teach?

Remember our rule... *"Don't say 'the Bible says' until you've looked at everything the Bible says."*

We begin by looking at the original biblical word. In the Old Testament Hebrew, "hell" is translated from "sheol" which means, "underworld, grave or pit." In the Bible "sheol" will usually be translated as either "hell," "grave," or "pit."

In New Testament Greek, "hell" is most often translated from the Greek word "hades" which means, "the Greek god of the lower regions" or "the realm of the dead, the grave." Sometimes it is translated "hell" sometimes and as "grave." It is important to remember that only twelve times is "hell" is translated from the Greek word "Gehenna." Gehenna was commonly known as the Valley of Hinnom, a place south of Jerusalem where trash and the bodies of executed criminals and dead animals were cast out and burned.

In light of this when we see the word "hell" in the Old Testament it is always referring to the grave. In the New Testament it is always referring to the grave with the two exceptions. One is the twelve times Jesus mentions "Gehenna," the trash dump. The only other exception is II Peter 2:4 where the word "hell" is translated from the Greek word "tartarus" which simply means the "deepest abyss." Not a fiery burning place. This is the only time this Greek word appears in the New Testament.

The English word "*hell*" came from the old English word "*hele*" which originally meant "to cover over - to hide." It is evident that the word hell in all these languages originally meant the grave, where the dead body is covered over or hidden.

But, as many other words, over the years the word "hell" has taken on a different meaning than what started it out with. The word has generally come to mean a place of torment where the wicked suffer in flames through the endless ages of eternity. Therefore it is important that we go back to the original word and meaning it had when the Bible was written rather than reading into a new meaning as is often the case today.

Since the New Testament Greek word for hell, "hades," in some Bible versions may be translated either hell or grave, we must look at the underlying Greek word in order to know how it is to be understood. For example, in the most widely read version of the Bible, the King James, both of the following verses use the word "hades," but in one is translated "*hell*" and in the other "*grave*."

I Corinthians 15:55 *"O death, where is thy sting? O **grave (hades)**, where is thy victory?"* (KJV)

Acts 2:31 *"He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in **hell (hades)**, neither his flesh did see corruption."* (KJV)

This may not be the case in many modern translations such as the New King James Version which translates these verses as follows -

I Corinthians 15:55 *"O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"*

Acts 2:31 *"He, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption."*

This version does not translate "hades" with hell or grave, but leaves the original word in place, assuming the reader is familiar with the meaning. This is an example of why it is good reason to keep those dictionaries handy and if you are not sure of the meaning of a word, don't guess or read over it, but take time to stop and look it up.

In any case, the majority of people today see or hear the word hell they think of an eternally burning place in the center of the earth where sinners are suffering horrible torment in the flames. Therefore there are three basic questions we need to consider on the subject of hell. 1) When? 2) Where? and 3) For how long?

1) When will the wicked be cast into hell?

After learning the truth that the dead are not in heaven or hell but asleep in the grave, common logic gives us but one answer as to when they will meet their final destiny and that is after their resurrection. When Jesus explained to the disciples the parable of the wheat and tares He revealed when the wicked will be cast into the fire.

Matthew 13:37 - 40 *"He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age."*

Then add to that -

II Peter 2:9 *"Then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment until the day of judgment,"*

This makes it clear the wicked are "reserved" (most in the grave) "for the day of judgment." So from these verses we can conclude that no one is burning in hell now, that will not happen until the day of judgment at the end of the millennium.

2) Where is hell?

Some say hell is "down yonder." But that idea did not come from the Bible, it came from the ancient Greeks who believed that Hades was in the center of the earth.

So where does the Bible say the lake of fire is? We go back to Revelation chapter twenty which gave us the answer:

Revelation 20:7 - 9 *"Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number is as the sand of the sea. They went up on the breath of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them."*

According to this passage, the wicked are on the earth when the fire comes down out of heaven and devours them.

3) Now that we know when, (end of this world), and where, (on the earth), our third question is - how long will this fire burn?

Revelation 20:9,10 *"They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."*

Note the contradiction in these two verses. Verse 9 says they will be *"devoured"* by the fire and verse 10 says *"they will tormented day and night forever."* Common sense tells us that the fire can't devour and torment forever at the same time, It must be one or the other. What we must keep in mind is Revelation is a book of picturesque language and symbols. Fire is a symbol of something that consumes. Jesus once said the wicked, instead of fire, would be *"cast into outer darkness"* (Matthew 22:13). Then at other times He said the fires of Gehenna or the burnugn fiery furnace, which is it? The point is that much of what is in the scripture is figurative language and we must be careful to distinguish the figurative from the literal. We must learn to take the Bible as a whole and look at everything the Bible says before drawing definite conclusions.

For example, we have learned that the Bible teaches that man is mortal saying, *"the soul who sins shall die"* (Ezekiel 18:4). But if wicked people live in the flames of hell forever, that would be eternal life! Not very pleasant, but eternal life just the same. But the Bible says the tree of life is in heaven (Rev 22:2), not in hell. It is clear that *"The soul who sins shall die,"* and that can only mean that they will perish, they will not burn forever.

But what about those expressions in the Bible like, "eternal fire", "unquenchable" fire, and "forever?" As we look at those remember one of our rules of study - apply reason or logic, ask what does that mean? What we read must make sense, if not, the only conclusion we can make is that we must keep studying.

"Eternal fire" - Jude 7 *"Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire."*

Is Sodom and Gomorrah still burning today? No, the following text says they were turned to ashes.

II Peter 2:6 *"Turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly;"*

According to this we understand that the results of the fire was eternal, not the fire itself. Those destroyed in that fire are no more, and the fire burned itself out.

"Unquenchable fire" - Jeremiah 17:27 *"But if you will not heed Me to hallow the Sabbath day, such as not carrying a burden when entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will kindle a fire in its gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched."*

This prophecy came true in 586 BC when King Nebuchadnezzar came and completely destroyed the city of Jerusalem including the temple.

Jeremiah 52:12 - 14 *"Now in the fifth month, on the tenth day of the month (which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon), Nebuzaradan, the captain of the guard, who served the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He burned the house of the LORD and the king's house; all the houses of Jerusalem, that is, all the houses of the great, he burned with fire."*

Is Jerusalem still burning today? No. God said the fire *"shall not be quenched"* – meaning that man could not quench it, but when it burned up the city, the fire went out.

"Forever" - I Samuel 1:22 *"But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "Not until the child is weaned; then I will take him, that he may appear before the LORD and remain there forever."*

The Old Testament Hebrew word Hannah used translated "for ever" is "*olam*" which can mean "a long duration, everlasting, perpetual, or a long time." As you can see, it has several meanings and does not always mean never ending. When Hannah said "forever" she only meant as long as he lives. Note what she says in verse 28 -

Verse 28 *"Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD."*

The New Testament Greek the word translated "forever" is "*aion*" which can mean "an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, an age, or, a period of time."

Though the word "aion" can mean forever, it can also mean only a period of time, either long or brief depending on the way it is used. Note the following verse -

I Corinthians 8:13 *"Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble."*

This means that as long as he lives he will not eat meat. Notice how the King James Version translates this verse:

"Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." (I Corinthians 8:13 KJV)

In these verses the phrases, "while the world standeth," and "never again" is from the same Greek word, "aion," in this context meaning for only as long as the world lasts or for as long as he lives and not for all eternity.

More than 50 times the Bible speaks of things lasting "forever" that have already ended, such as Samuel's service or King Solomon's reign. In fact this term is still used in the same way today. We often hear someone say something like: "I sat in traffic forever!" We know they only meant that it was to them a long time.

In the Bible there are more than hundred texts that state that the wicked do not burn forever, but will be destroyed or annihilated. But remember, many of us are "programmed" to believe in eternal torment so we will need to look at these passages very thoughtfully. The following are a few examples:

Psalms 37:9 - 10 *"For evildoers shall be cut off; But those who wait on the LORD, They shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place, But it shall be no more."*

Verse 20 *"But the wicked shall perish; And the enemies of the LORD, Like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away."*

Psalms 92:7 *"When the wicked spring up like grass, And when all the workers of iniquity flourish, It is that they may be destroyed forever."*

This means they are gone forever. They will perish and be no more.

Malachi 4:1 - 3 *"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."*

Obviously there will be nothing left, it will be as though they had never been.

Matthew 7:13 *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it."*

Note it says, *"leads to destruction,"* not living in the fires of hell forever.

John 3:16 *"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."*

This well known verse says *"not perish"* not burn in hell for ever.

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

The wages, meaning the reward or the consequences of sin is death – death is the cessation of life - it cannot be eternal life in hell or any other place.

Mark 9:43 *"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched--where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.'"*

This is one of the verses where "hell" is translated from the Greek "Gehenna." This is the place where Jesus says *"the worm does not die, and the FIRE is not quenched,"* NOT the body that is thrown into it. Just as those bodies of dead animals and criminals thrown into the trash dump at Gehenna, the bodies of the wicked will be consumed by worms, and what the worms don't eat, the fire will consume with nothing being left.

When Jesus said this He likely had the following text in mind:

Isaiah 66:24 *"And they shall go forth and look upon the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh."*

Note it says the *"corpses"* of the men who have sinned. The fire and worms are devouring dead bodies, NOT burning living people to death. (We will take a closer look at this in the next lesson.)

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."*

Again, the word used for the fate of the wicked is *"destroy."* The expression *"soul and body"* imply the entire being. The unrepentant sinner will be completely destroyed in the end. These texts are not speaking of the *"sleep of death,"* but the *"second death."* The death from which there will be no awakening, no resurrection. The second death is an everlasting, forever, eternal, cessation of life.

Matthew 25:46 *"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."*

We should be careful not to read more into the Bible than it says. The result of the “punishment” is everlasting, but not the “punishing.”

Now let’s look at one of the key texts in Revelation that some use to support an unending fire in hell.

Revelation 20:10 *“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever”*

Now we that understand “forever” comes from a Greek word that does not always mean without end, but may mean only a certain period of time. And according to the other passages we studied, even though this period of time may be brief, the results may be everlasting. That being the case, then what happens to Satan in the end? Will he be down there “prodding the wicked in the flames?” Is Satan immortal? The following text from Ezekiel in the King James Version gives us the answer.

Note: The King James Version is used for the passage from Ezekiel 28 instead of the New King James Version is because it does the best job of expressing the true meaning of the original Hebrew. The New King James and some other modern versions translate it in a way that the fate of Satan appears to be in the past, but according to Revelation chapter 20 it is clearly in the future at the end of the millennium.

Ezekiel 28:13 - 19 *“Thou hast been in Eden the garden of God; every precious stone was thy covering, the sardius, topaz, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jasper, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold: the workmanship of thy tabrets and of thy pipes was prepared in thee in the day that thou wast created. Thou art the anointed cherub that covereth; and I have set thee so: thou wast upon the holy mountain of God; thou hast walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire. Thou wast perfect in thy ways from the day that thou wast created, till iniquity was found in thee. By the multitude of thy merchandise they have filled the midst of thee with violence, and thou hast sinned: therefore I will cast thee as profane out of the mountain of God: and I will destroy thee, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty, thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness: I will cast thee to the ground, I will lay thee before kings, that they may behold thee. Thou hast defiled thy sanctuaries by the multitude of thine iniquities, by the iniquity of thy traffick; **therefore will I bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth** in the sight of all them that behold thee. All they that know thee among the people shall be astonished at thee: thou shalt be a terror, and never shalt thou be any more.” (KJV)*

As we discussed in a previous lesson, this must be Satan, because he (disguised as the serpent) and Adam and Eve were the only ones in the Garden of Eden. In the end Satan is “devoured” by a “fire” that comes from “within” him. What kind of fire could

that be? (We will discuss that in more detail in the next lesson) But the good news here is that the day will come when Satan will be no more!

To review: So far in this lesson we have learned from the scriptures that the fires of hell will fall on the earth at the end of the age and will not burn forever and ever. We have learned that the second death is not eternal life but is eternal death, the never ending cessation of life.

After looking at all the preceding evidence from the scriptures it is clear that the wicked will be "destroyed forever," totally annihilated in the end. But then to realize that the idea that sinners will eternally burn in hell is taught in most churches today we have to ask - How did these false teachings about hell get into the doctrine of the church?

In Funk and Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia by Readers Digest under the heading "hell," we find this false teaching was adopted by the Roman Church back in 533 A.D.

"The second council of Constantinople, in 533 AD, a belief in the eternity of the punishments in hell became characteristic of both the Orthodox and the Roman churches. It also passed into the creeds of the churches of the reformation."

This is all a matter of church history. During the Dark Ages, an age of superstition and ignorance and a time when the Roman Church began experiencing poor attendance and lack of financial support, it began to further develop the horrors of purgatory and the fires of hell so that people would fear God and the Church. This was done as a way of gaining power and control over the people hoping that it would result in better church attendance and more offerings. The King James Version, the worlds most renowned Bible was translated during this time and completed in 1611 AD. It is only natural that its translators would be influenced by those fearful doctrines which is reflected in their translation of certain texts, which in turn has had a great impact on the teachings of Christianity down to this present day.

There are millions of people attending church every week, giving their money and saying, "I love the Lord," when in reality they are afraid of what God will do to them if they don't. The teaching that God will forever torture in the fires of hell those who do not do as He wishes or reject Christ, has actually turned thousands of people away from God and the church. They want nothing to do with a God who would do that! Fear will not promote love and respect.

A powerful person may use fear to cause people to behave in a certain way, but they will not love him or honor him, they will come hate him and eventually rebel against him! The Bible assures us God does not operate this way:

I John 4:18,19 *"There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love. We love Him because He first loved us."*

When the Bible says "God is love" that means more than He simply has loving ways. It means love is His very essence, it is what He is! And everything God does is done out of love for others. True love cannot force, manipulate or compel. Love must love, it can do no other! And learning the truth about God's unconditional love, if not resisted, will draw us to Him and as we get to know Him better we will admire Him more and more and want to become more like Him. As we discussed in a previous lessons, one reason Jesus came to this earth was to demonstrate what God is really like in a way we can clearly understand.

It is also commonly believed that Jesus Christ died in the sinners place, that Jesus suffered the wrath of God against the sinner on the cross so we would not have to. If that is true, then if we go to the cross and watch Jesus die, we should have a better idea of exactly what the lost sinner will suffer in the end. So in the next lesson we will go to the Cross of Christ and watch Jesus die that death as we continue our study of the end of the wicked.

Response Questions:

1. Is it clear to you that there is no one burning in hell now? Yes___ No ___
2. Is it clear to you that hell is not a burning place in the center of the earth? Yes___ No___
3. Is it clear to you God will not burn the wicked for all eternity? Yes___ No___
4. Do you believe that God is love? Yes___ No___

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