



WHERE IS HELL?

Course 6, *New World Coming*, Lesson 12

The Problem: What Is Hell Really Like? For centuries, Christian literature has portrayed hell as a place of unending fire—where the wicked are cast immediately at death to suffer eternal torment. Preachers have thundered warnings from pulpits, and artists have painted lurid scenes of agony and flame. Many have been frightened into religious conformity, fearing the misery of eternal hellfire. Others have turned away from God altogether, unable to reconcile the image of a loving Creator with the idea of a cruel tyrant who burns people forever.

But what does the Bible actually teach? Is hell a literal place of punishment where the lost begin burning the moment they die? Or is that idea a myth rooted more in tradition than Scripture? Does the Bible ever refer to hell as a place of punishment—and if so, what kind of punishment, and when does it occur? Is it truly eternal, or does it come to an end?

These are vital questions—and they deserve answers grounded in the Word of God.

Before we explore what Scripture says about hell, we must first affirm a foundational truth: God is love. *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life”* John 3:16.

God’s love is so profound that He endured on Calvary the very punishment that awaits the lost at the end of time. That suffering—though not a literal burning—was the deepest agony of soul, the full weight of sin, and the separation from the Father that sin brings.

“He bore our sins in His own body on the tree... by whose stripes you were healed” 1 Peter 2:24.

“The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all” Isaiah 53:6.

So before we question God’s justice in punishing the wicked, we must consider the measure of His sacrifice. He does not delight in destruction. He gave everything to save us from it.

We’ve already seen in Lesson 10 that death is a state of unconsciousness. That truth must shape our understanding of hell. If the lost are put to death, they are not conscious for eternity—and if they are not conscious, they cannot be suffering in eternal fire.

Let us now turn to the Bible—not tradition, not fear, not folklore—and discover what it truly says about hell.

Objectives:

- I. To understand how the Bible identifies hell as the grave.
- II. To explore hell as an experience of punishment—and ask when and where it occurs.
- III. To clarify what Scripture means by “everlasting destruction.”
- IV. To examine the meaning of “burning forever” in biblical language.
- V. To discover how we can avoid hell—and embrace the gift of eternal life.

I. HELL OFTEN MEANS THE GRAVE

In both the Old and New Testaments hell is very often simply a reference to the grave in which people are in a state of total unconsciousness.

The Bible:

1. In what words did Job identify hell (the grave; Hebrew sheol) as a place of sleep? Job 14:10-13
2. How does the Psalmist identify hell (sheol) with the grave? Psalm 6:5
3. In what sense do both good and bad people go to hell? Psalm 89:48
4. Why is death always associated with hell? Isaiah 28:15
5. What happens in “hell,” when the word means the grave? Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:25-32; Isaiah 38:18-19

Explanation: What Does the Bible Mean by “Hell”? In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word translated “hell” is *sheol*. In nearly every case, it refers to the grave—a place of unconscious rest where both the righteous and the wicked sleep until the resurrection at the end of time. Their bodies decay, and their breath of life—the *ruach*, or spirit—is returned to God who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

There is no passage in the Old Testament that portrays hell as a place of fiery torment immediately after death. Scripture clearly teaches that the suffering of the lost takes place at the end of time, not during the interim between death and resurrection.

In the King James Version, *sheol* is often translated simply as “grave.” Its Greek equivalent in the Septuagint and in the New Testament is *hades*—another word for the grave, not for a fiery underworld.

Consider Job’s words:

“Man lies down and does not rise... till the heavens are no more” (Job 14:12)
“O that You would hide me in sheol, that You would conceal me...” (Job 14:13)

These confirm that those in *sheol* sleep—not suffer.

The Psalms also emphasize that in the grave (*sheol*), God is not remembered nor praised (Psalm 6:5). Ecclesiastes confirms that the dead know nothing, have no reward, and cannot act, feel, or think (Ecclesiastes 9:5–6, 10). Psalm 89:48 unites this witness: “*What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his life from the power of the grave?*” Here, “grave” is again *sheol* in Hebrew and *hades* in Greek.

Death and the grave are often linked in Scripture (e.g. Isaiah 28:15) simply because death places all humans—righteous and wicked alike—into *sheol*. There is no biblical support for the idea of immediate burning or torment.

Some have misunderstood the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) as a literal description of hell. But as discussed in Lesson 10 of this course, this parable was a teaching illustration, not a doctrinal blueprint. It uses familiar imagery to convey a moral lesson—not to outline the structure of the afterlife.

Even Jesus, when He died, was placed in the grave (*sheol/hades*). Yet He did not see corruption (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27). David, who penned Psalm 16, did experience corruption—his body returned to dust, not because he burned, but because his life ended in the grave. Peter confirms this: “*David... is both dead and buried... For David did not ascend into the heavens*” Acts 2:29, 34. These passages show clearly that the faithful do not go straight to heaven at death—and the wicked do not descend to an eternal hellfire. All rest in unconscious sleep until the resurrection.

Relevance: Fear of death—and fear of hell—has tormented countless souls over the centuries. Many have imagined they would plunge into fiery torment the moment they died. But this fear is born of myth, not Scripture. The Bible offers peace. Death is followed by the grave—*sheol*—where all people sleep. There is no torment, no consciousness, no punishment immediately after death. The righteous will rise at the second coming of Jesus, and the wicked at the end of

the millennium. God is not a cruel executioner. He is a loving Redeemer. And the Word of God replaces terrifying tradition with profound truth: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord... they rest from their labors”* Revelation 14:13.

II. HELL AS AN EXPERIENCE OF PUNISHMENT

There are several instances in Scripture where hell is referred to as the final punishment of the wicked at the end of the millennium.

The Word:

6. What did Jesus say would bring us in danger of hellfire? Mark 9:43-47; (Matthew 5:29-30; 18:9); Matthew 5:22
7. What will God destroy in hell at the end of time? Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5
8. When is hell as punishment the experience of the wicked? Revelation 20:9, 14

Explanation: What Does the Bible Mean by “Hellfire”? In the New Testament, the Greek word often translated as “hell” in reference to final punishment is *geenna*—a transliteration of Ge-Hinnom, the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. This valley became infamous in ancient Israelite history as the site where apostate kings sacrificed their children to Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). Because of these atrocities, Jeremiah prophesied that the valley would become a “valley of slaughter” (Jeremiah 7:32–33), filled with unburied corpses consumed by beasts and birds.

By Jesus’ time, Gehenna had become a vivid symbol of divine judgment—a metaphor for the final destruction of the wicked. When Jesus warned of hellfire (Mark 9:43–47), He was not describing a place of eternal torment immediately after death, but the fiery judgment at the end of the millennium, when the lost are resurrected and attempt to overthrow the New Jerusalem (Revelation 20:5, 9).

Some interpreters claim that phrases like “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43) imply eternal burning. But in Scripture, unquenchable fire means fire that cannot be extinguished until it has completed its work—not fire that burns endlessly. This is consistent with the language of Malachi 4:1, 3, which describes the wicked as being reduced to ashes, leaving *“neither root nor branch.”*

Similarly, the phrase *“their worm does not die”* (Mark 9:48) has been misinterpreted as referring to an immortal soul. But the Greek word *skólex* means maggot—a symbol of decay, not eternal consciousness. Maggots do not survive fire; the point is that corruption and judgment are thorough and irreversible, not perpetual.

Jesus Himself clarified the nature of hellfire in Matthew 10:28: *“Fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”* The word for “soul” here is *psuchē*, meaning life or life-principle. If both body and life are destroyed, then the soul is not immortal, and the punishment is not eternal torment—it is complete extinction.

Even Satan and his demons are not currently suffering in hellfire. 2 Peter 2:4 uses the verb *tartarōō*—meaning “to confine in Tartarus”—to describe their present condition. Tartarus, in Greek thought, was a deep abyss reserved for divine judgment. Peter’s use of the term does not endorse Greek mythology; it simply conveys that the fallen angels are held in darkness, awaiting judgment (compare Jude 6). Their punishment, like that of the wicked, comes at the end of the millennium (Revelation 20:10).

Relevance: The final punishment of the wicked is described in Scripture as hellfire, but it is not a place of torment immediately after death. Nor is it a fire that burns eternally. It is the consuming fire of God’s judgment at the end of the millennium—thorough, just, and final. This truth replaces centuries of myth and fear with biblical clarity. The dead rest in unconscious sleep until the resurrection. The righteous rise at Christ’s return; the wicked rise at the end of the thousand years. And then, in full view of the redeemed, God brings the great controversy to a close—not with endless torture, but with righteous judgment and restoration.

III. WHAT IS MEANT BY “EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION”?

Several times in the New Testament the destruction of the wicked is said to be "everlasting" or "eternal." For that reason, some interpreters of the Bible have assumed that the wicked will burn in hellfire for eternity. We will examine the passages and see for ourselves what they mean.

The Word:

9. How did Jesus describe the fire that would destroy the wicked? Matthew 3:12; 18:8; 25:41, 46
10. According to Paul, what kind of destruction will be meted out upon the lost? 2 Thessalonians 1:9
11. What kind of fire destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah? Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:6
12. What kind of fire did Jeremiah predict would destroy the old city of Jerusalem? Jeremiah 17:27
13. Was Jerusalem destroyed as Jeremiah predicted? Did the fire burn out? 2 Chronicles 36:19, 21
14. Will the fire that destroys the wicked burn out? What will be their state then? Malachi 4:1-3

Explanation: What Does “Eternal” Really Mean in the Bible? Jesus warned that the fire which destroys the wicked is “unquenchable,” “everlasting,” and “eternal.” Paul likewise spoke of “everlasting destruction” for those who reject the gospel. But do these terms mean that the wicked will suffer endlessly in conscious torment?

The answer, according to Scripture, is no.

- Unquenchable fire means fire that cannot be extinguished until it has completed its work. Jeremiah 17:27 uses the same language to describe the fire that consumed Jerusalem—once it began, no one could stop it until it had finished its destruction.
- Eternal fire refers to the results, not the duration of the burning process. Sodom and Gomorrah suffered “*the vengeance of eternal fire*” (Jude 7), yet they are not still burning. Peter confirms they were “*reduced to ashes*” (2 Peter 2:6). Malachi echoes this: the wicked will be “*ashes under the soles of your feet*” (Malachi 4:1, 3). If the wicked burned forever, there would be no ashes.

Understanding the Greek: *Aion* and *Aionios*: The Greek adjective *aionios* (eternal) and its root noun *aion* (age) do not always mean “never-ending.” Their meaning depends on the nature of the subject being described.

- *Aion* often refers to a finite age or epoch (e.g., Matthew 13:39; Ephesians 1:21).
- *Aionios* can describe something lasting as long as its subject allows. For example, Paul wrote to Philemon that Onesimus might serve him “forever” (Philemon 15)—translated from *aionios*. Clearly, this meant “for life,” not for eternity.

Scholars affirm this nuance:

- Kittel’s Theological Dictionary of the New Testament notes that *aion* can refer to both the eternity of God and the limited duration of the world—two profoundly different concepts sharing the same word.
- Liddell and Scott’s lexicon defines *aionios* as “perpetual” or “lifelong,” depending on context.
- H. C. G. Moule summarizes: “The adjective tends to mark duration as long as the nature of the subject allows.”

The Nature of the Saved vs. the Lost: This distinction is crucial:

- At Christ’s return, the saved are given immortality (1 Corinthians 15:51–54). They live eternally because they cannot die (John 3:16, 36).
- The wicked, however, remain mortal. Paul writes, “*The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life...*” (Romans 6:23). The lost do not receive eternal life in any form—they receive eternal death.

Thus, when Jesus speaks of “everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46), He is not describing endless suffering, but a punishment whose result is permanent: death without resurrection, separation without return. The fire is eternal because it ends the age (*aion*) and its results are irreversible. The wicked do not live on in torment—they are consumed. Their punishment is final, not perpetual.

Relevance: A Just and Merciful End. Neither Jesus nor Paul taught that the lost will burn forever. The Bible is clear: God’s justice is not eternal torment, but eternal death. The wicked are punished for rejecting Christ’s salvation, but they do not suffer through unending ages. This truth reveals a God who is both just and merciful—who does not perpetuate suffering, but brings sin and rebellion to a complete and final end.

IV. WHAT IS MEANT BY “FOREVER AND EVER”?

The same Greek and Hebrew words that are sometimes translated “eternal,” in other contexts are translated by “forever.” In the light of what we have already said about the Biblical meanings of “eternity” and “eternal,” it should be clear that “forever” may also apply to a period of limited duration.

The Word:

15. How long are Satan and his followers said to suffer in the fire at the end of the millennium? Revelation 14:11; 20:10
16. How long was Jonah in the belly of the whale? Jonah 2:6; 1:17; compare Matthew 12:40
17. How long were Gehazi and his seed to be lepers? 2 Kings 5:27
18. How long was the Passover to be kept? Is it still kept by Christians today? Exodus 12:24; 1 Corinthians
19. What is to be the fate of the wicked forever? Jude 13; 2 Peter 2:17

Explanation: “Forever” does not always mean unendingly throughout eternity. It is an English translation of *aion* or *aionios* (Greek), or *’olam* (Hebrew), which we have seen to mean sometimes a period of limited duration. Jonah was not in the belly of the whale eternally, Gehazi and his seed had leprosy only until death, and the Passover ceased to have meaning when Jesus died on the cross. In each case, “forever” meant a period of limited duration.

The Bible uses strong language to describe the fate of the lost—phrases like “forever and ever” and “blackest darkness forever” (Jude 13; 2 Peter 2:17). But do these expressions mean that the wicked will suffer endlessly in conscious torment? Scripture consistently teaches that the fire is *not eternal in duration, but in effect*. The wicked burn “forever and ever” only in the sense that nothing can interrupt or reverse the process until they are fully consumed. Once the fire has done its work, it goes out—just as it did in the destruction of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 17:27) and Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7; 2 Peter 2:6). These cities suffered “eternal fire,” yet they are not still burning. Their destruction was complete and irreversible.

The phrase “blackest darkness forever” is a vivid metaphor for eternal death—a state of total separation from God, consciousness, and life. It does not imply ongoing awareness or suffering, but rather the finality of extinction. Psalm 37:10, 20 and 68:1–2 affirm that the wicked will be entirely consumed, leaving no trace. “*The wicked shall perish... into smoke shall they consume away*” Psalm 37:20.

Relevance: Mercy in the Midst of Judgment. God’s justice is not cruel—it is mercifully final. The suffering of the wicked will not stretch into eternity. It will feel like “forever” to them, just as Jonah’s time in the belly of the fish felt endless (Jonah 2:6). But it will end. The fire will go out. The darkness will be complete. And the universe will be clean. “*Affliction will slay the wicked... but the Lord preserves all who love Him*” Psalm 145:20. This is not a doctrine of fear—it is a doctrine of hope. God does not perpetuate suffering. He brings it to an end. And He offers every soul the chance to choose life.

V. HOW DO WE AVOID GOING TO HELL?

The good news is that those who belong to Christ are no longer bound by guilt or condemnation—and they have nothing to fear from hellfire. Their judgment has already been met at the cross, and their future is secure in Him.

The Word:

20. What did Jesus say was the means by which we are freed from condemnation? John 3:18, 36

21. In what words did Paul emphasize the point? Romans 8:1

Explanation: No Condemnation for the Redeemed. Scripture offers profound reassurance: *“He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea”* Micah 7:19. This is the experience of every forgiven sinner. Their guilt is removed, and they stand free from condemnation (Romans 8:1). As long as they remain in a living, victorious relationship with Christ, they will:

- Be vindicated in the pre-advent judgment (Daniel 7:9–14)
- Be declared eternally righteous at the close of human probation (Revelation 22:11)
- Be received by Christ at His return (John 14:1–3)

So why should a believer, resting in such promises, fear the future? *“The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial”* 2 Peter 2:9. Even as He prepares to administer justice upon the unrepentant—through the fires of hell at the end of time—He ensures that none of His children are lost. God’s judgments are not chaotic; they are purposeful, transparent, and rooted in love.

Relevance: Peace in the Love of Christ. You are loved—deeply, immeasurably, eternally. *“The Lord... is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”* 2 Peter 3:9.

Have you turned from guilt and fear, and accepted Christ as your personal Savior? He longs to give you peace in place of struggle, freedom in place of bondage, joy in place of condemnation.

Jesus is not a temporary comfort—He is your forever Friend, your Redeemer, your Advocate, and your soon-coming King. And that means:

- You need not fear the final judgment.
- You are safe in His righteousness.
- You are called to live in confident hope—right now.

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. Hell often simply means the grave, a place of unconsciousness.
 - b. Hell as punishment refers to the punishment of the wicked at the end of the millennium.
 - c. The wicked will burn for eternity.
 - d. When Jesus died, He descended to a place of burning.
2. Discuss:
 - How do you see God's fairness reflected in the timing and nature of the final judgment?
 - What gives you confidence that the judgment is both just and compassionate?
 - How might your understanding of the millennium shape how you view today's spiritual decisions?
3. Further reflection: What About Those Who Never Heard or Never Committed? In every age, there have been individuals who lived decently but never fully committed to God—and others who, through no fault of their own, never heard the gospel at all. Does Scripture account for them? Will they be judged the same as those who openly rebelled?

- a. The Bible affirms that God's judgment is personal, just, and merciful. *"For the Lord does not see as man sees... the Lord looks at the heart"* Samuel 16:7. *"God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ..."* Romans 2:16.
- b. Scripture teaches that God holds people accountable according to the light they were given—their knowledge, opportunity, and response to truth as they understood it.
 - i. Those who had access to the gospel and chose to reject or neglect it will be judged accordingly (John 3:18; Hebrews 2:3).
 - ii. Those who never heard the name of Jesus will be judged by how they responded to the light they did receive: the testimony of conscience, creation, and divine impressions (Romans 2:14–15; Psalm 19:1–3).
 - iii. God's judgment does not lump souls into rigid categories—it understands the nuance of every heart, the sincerity of every choice, and the depth of every opportunity.
- c. God's Love extends beyond human reach.
 - i. Even those outside formal religious exposure may be among the redeemed. As Ellen White wrote in The Desire of Ages, page 638: "Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly... yet they do not knowingly reject the light. These will not perish."
 - ii. This doesn't excuse complacency where truth is known. But it does affirm that God's grace is wider than our grasp and His justice is never unjust. The millennium affirms this: every soul is reviewed individually, every verdict given with perfect understanding.