

### **We Have a Choice**

One of the most sobering realities of hell is that it is something individuals choose for themselves. In John 3:18, Jesus himself says, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." God's wrath on unbelievers is a choice they make themselves. His judgment on them is only what they choose. As Christian author C.S. Lewis wrote in his book, *The Great Divorce*, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"

According to the Bible, there is only one way to escape God's wrath. In Romans 5:9, the apostle Paul states, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" Only by being justified by the blood of Jesus will anyone escape the wrath of God. Between the sinner and God's divine wrath stands the cross of the Lord Jesus. If we have placed our faith in him as our Lord and Savior, then we are justified, and the wrath that he promises to pour out on the lost will never touch us. But it is only "Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath" (1 Thessalonians 2:10).

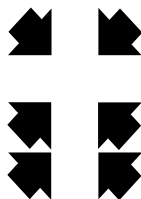
#### ***For Further Reading:***

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## **Hell: Is It Taught In the Bible?**

### ***The Watchtower Society vs. The Bible***

Jehovah's Witnesses abhor the idea that a loving God would sentence someone to an eternity of torment. The Watchtower publication, *Let God Be True* (p. 68), calls the idea of hell a "God-dishonoring religious doctrine." To support its view, the Society insists the term "hell," when used in the Bible, simply refers to the common grave, and that it is the ultimate destination of all mankind. The book, *You Can Live Forever on Paradise Earth* (p. 83), states, "Yes, good people go to the Bible hell...Sheol and Hades refer not to a place of torment but to the common grave of all mankind."

But does the Bible agree with the Society's teachings on hell? Is it just the common grave and the destination of all mankind? And how could a God of love punish someone for eternity? Let's allow the Bible to speak for itself on these issues; only then will we be able to determine whether the Society is professing the truth about hell.

#### **A Biblical Definition**

The Bible describes hell in several ways. Hell is called "the blackest darkness" (2 Peter 2:17), "the punishment of eternal fire" (Matthew 18:8; Jude 7), "the place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:12), "eternal punishment" (Matthew 25:46), the place of eternal "torment" (Revelation 20:10), etc. Jesus himself spoke more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. He constantly warned people about the conditions of hell. But why would Jesus spend so much time warning people about hell if it was simply the common grave? And why would he provide such graphic details if his descriptions were only to be interpreted symbolically? The answer is obvious: because hell involves much more than just lying unconsciously in a common grave. It is every bit as dreadful as Jesus says it will be.

#### **Redefining Terms**

One of the most obvious ways the Society misleads its followers regarding hell is by redefining terms associated with it. The Hebrew word Sheol corresponds to the Greek word Hades, and both refer to the same place. The primary difference is that Sheol is the word used in the Old Testament, while Hades is the term used in the New Testament. According to the Society, both terms refer to the grave—nothing more, nothing less.

The Society's definition of these words totally disagrees with the definition given by Greek scholars. Regarding the word Hades, Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* states, "It never denotes the grave, nor is it the permanent region of the lost; in point of time it is, for such, intermediate between decease and the doom of Gehenna." Thayer's *Greek Lexicon* says Hades is the common receptacle of disembodied spirits.

The Bible's picture of Hades also refutes the Society. One of the best biblical illustrations of Hades is provided in Luke 16:22-28. Jesus tells about a rich man who died and went to Hades (interpreted as "hell" in some translations) and Lazarus, a beggar, who died and went to paradise with Abraham. The rich man was in torment, while Lazarus was comforted. The Society contends that this story is entirely symbolic. According to its publication, *Let God Be True*, "The rich man represents the ultra selfish class of the clergy of Christendom, who are now afar off from God and dead to his favor and services and tormented by the Kingdom truth proclaimed. Lazarus depicts the faithful remnant of the body of Christ [Jehovah's Witnesses]. These, on being delivered from modern Babylon since 1919, received God's favor, pictured by the 'bosom' position of Abraham, and are comforted through his Word."

The Society's interpretation of this passage demonstrates the lengths it will go to avoid the realities of hell and the existence of conscious life after death. When interpreting this verse, it's important to remember that Jesus frequently used parables and stories to demonstrate real-life situations. With regard to the realities of these stories, David Reed, in his book, *Jehovah's Witnesses Answered Verse by Verse*, points out that "a prodigal son returned home after squandering his money; a man found a buried treasure in a field, hid it again, and sold everything he had in order to buy that field; a king put on a wedding feast for his son; a slave owner traveled abroad and then returned home to his slaves; a man constructed a vineyard, leased it out to others, but had difficulty collecting what they owed him; and so on." All of these events were common occurrences in Jesus' day.

There is no reason why Jesus' story about the rich man and Lazarus would be any different. Jesus even gives us the name of the beggar, something that would have been useless if this story were only symbolic. Furthermore, if this story was dependent upon the year 1919 for its proper interpretation, God included something in the Bible that was utterly meaningless for almost 1,900 years! Clearly, Jesus was providing real evidence for the terrible realities of Hades and for conscious existence after death.

Another word the Society has redefined is Gehenna. This particular word is used 12 times in the New Testament, and it is uttered 11 of those times by Jesus himself. He frequently used this term when referring to the place where the wicked would suffer in torment. The Society insists that Jesus was referring only to the burning fires in the Valley of Hinnom, which were south of Jerusalem. During Jesus' life on earth, this valley was used as a garbage dump, and the rubbish was kept burning to dispose of it. Prior to Jesus' time, during the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, human sacrifices had been offered there to the Ammonite god Molech. To the Jews, few places were more detestable than the Valley of Hinnom. Not only did it remind them of the apostasy of their forefathers in years past, but it was utterly unclean. In Mark 9:47-48, Jesus issues a strong warning. He states, "And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell (Gehenna), where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" Notice that Jesus warns them about being thrown into a place where the "fire is not quenched." If Jesus was only referring to the fires of the Valley of Hinnom, then the fires in that valley should still be burning. But the fires in the Valley of Hinnom burned out many years ago. Again, the Society is incorrect about its interpretation of Gehenna. Jesus obviously used this most detestable of locations as an example of the horrors of the final place of punishment.

#### **Annihilation vs. Suffering**

In Matthew 10:28, Jesus says "Do not be afraid those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." According to the Society, the word "destroy" in this verse means to annihilate. By interpreting "destroy" in this manner, the Society teaches its followers that God will annihilate people in hell instead of making them suffer. So, does the Bible teach that destroy is synonymous with annihilate?

The original Greek word for "destroy" is *apollumi*. In Vines Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words we are told regarding the word *apollumi*: "The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being." In other words, the word destroy does not mean to annihilate, but to place into a state of ruin, or loss of well-being. Other Bible verses using the word *apollumi* also indicate that this word does not mean to wipe from existence. For example, the wine skins spoken of in Luke 5:37 were ruined (*apollumi*), but they were not annihilated; the sheep in Luke 15:4 was wandering and lost (*apollumi*), but not annihilated; the prodigal son in Luke 15:24 was said to have been lost (*apollumi*), but he was not annihilated. The Society is obviously placing a meaning on the word "destroy" which contradicts its real meaning. When Jesus said to fear the One who could destroy both body and soul in hell, he was clearly indicating the state of ruin that would befall everyone thrown into hell.

Another "proof" text used by the Society is Matthew 25:46, which states "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." To avoid the real meaning of this verse, the Society's New World Translation translates this verse, "And these will depart into everlasting cutting-off, but the righteous into eternal life." Notice the phrase "eternal punishment" has been changed by the Society to "everlasting cutting-off." The word in question here is *kolasis*, which most Bibles translate as punishment. The Society's publication, Reasoning from the Scriptures (p. 171) argues that one meaning of the word is "to cut off, as lopping off branches of trees, to prune." While it is true that the stem of *kolasis* (*kolazoo*) originally meant pruning, Greek scholars agree unanimously that there is no justification for the Society's translation of "cutting off." Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament states that the meaning of *kolasis* in Matthew 25:46 is "punishment." This meaning is also confirmed by other authoritative reference publications, including Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, by William Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich; Moulton and Milligan's The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament; Gerhard Kittel's Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; and W.E. Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words.

With that said, it's clear that Jesus, in Matthew 25:46, was speaking of punishment suffered by conscious individuals, since punishment can only be experienced by someone who is conscious. Simply stated, if someone is annihilated then they cannot be punished. Punishment means nothing to someone who does not exist. But the Bible tells us that there will even be varying degrees of punishment on the day of judgment (Luke 12:47-48; Hebrews 10:29; Matthew 10:15; 11:21-24). For

anyone to experience these varying degrees of punishment, they must be conscious. Annihilation is not an option.

#### **Does God Mean Torment?**

In Revelation 14:9-11, we are told that anyone who worships the beast and receives his mark "will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever." To avoid the real meaning of this verse, the Society insists these scriptures are totally symbolic. According to the Society, these verses refer to the torment some individuals will suffer—while still alive—because of the message proclaimed by Jehovah's Witnesses. Furthermore, the smoke that rises forever and ever is only symbolic of the everlasting destruction (annihilation) that these individuals will experience. Let's compare this interpretation with meaning of the word "torment" as it is used in these and several other verses.

The verb used for "torment" in these verses comes from the Greek word *basanizo*. Thayer's A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament says the word means "to vex with grievous pains." This definition also agrees with other verses that use the word *basanizo*—where it always refers to real pain. For example, Matthew 8:6 tells of the centurion's servant who was at home paralyzed and suffering (*basanizo*); the demon in Mark 5:7 was worried that Jesus would torture (*basanizo*) him; the woman in Revelation 12:2 was pregnant and cried out in pain (*basanizo*); and Revelation 20:10 says that the devil was thrown into the lake of fire and tormented (*basanizo*). Obviously, when the Bible uses the word *basanizo*, its limited meaning refers to real—not symbolic—suffering and pain.

Further examination of Revelation 14:11 also indicates that the wicked ones mentioned in these verses will never rest, and that they will be tormented forever and ever. However, the Society insists that these wicked individuals will eventually be annihilated. But if someone is annihilated, or wiped from existence, then they are at rest. Again, the Society has misled its followers about the true meaning of these verses.

#### **A God of Love Can Torment?**

The Society has taught its followers that God is too loving and merciful to sentence someone to an eternity of torment. As a result, Jehovah's Witnesses frequently ask the question, "How could a God of love torment someone forever?"

When answering this question, it is important to remember that God demonstrated his wrath and power throughout the Bible. In his book, The Attributes of God, A.W. Pink makes the following statement, "A study of the concordance will show that there are more references in Scripture to the anger, fury, and wrath of God, than there are to His love and tenderness." This brings us to an important point: Love is only one of the many attributes possessed by God. Yes, God is loving and merciful, but he is equally holy and just, among other things. Because God is holy, he hates all sin. For one sin, God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden; Moses was excluded from Canaan; Elisha's servant was struck with leprosy; and Ananias and Sapphira were killed. God's hatred of sin even led him to crucify his own Son.

Unfortunately, most Jehovah's Witnesses have little appreciation for God's hatred of sin, and an even greater lack of reverence for his infinite holiness. This might explain why so many Witnesses make excuses—or rationalizations—to do things they know the Society forbids them to do (i.e., giving gifts the day before or after holidays or birthdays, etc.). Their conception of God's character is so one-sided that they truly believe his mercy will override all of his other attributes.

In Psalm 50:21, God states, "These things you have done, and I have kept silent; you thought I was altogether like you." Since the average Witnesses' view of God is patterned after his or her own thoughts and actions, it's no wonder they have a hard time understanding how God could punish the wicked so severely. But God's anger is in no way similar to man's anger. J.I. Packer, in his book Knowing God, states, "God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. God is only angry where anger is called for."

As stated earlier, God's attributes of holiness and justice demand that he punish the wicked. Why must punishment be eternal? Because God is a holy and infinite being, and sins committed against him require the full magnitude of divine punishment. Therefore, divine justice cannot exist alongside annihilation. Sentencing someone to an eternity of rest (annihilation) is hardly punishment for sins committed against an infinitely holy God. And as mentioned previously, punishment can only be experienced when someone is conscious.