

# Hell: A Different View of the Bible's Teaching

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Most Christians view hell as a place of never-ending torment for immortal souls that are not saved. Some passages of scripture appear to convey this view. This document provides questions and considerations that suggest a different understanding of scripture on the subject—that the human soul is not a naturally immortal entity having consciousness apart from the body; and that hell is the final act of God in judgement whereby all sin is eradicated for ever.

The following is a summary. It is not exhaustive, and it is probably not conclusive for most readers. Each of us must study further, seek the Spirit of Truth, and decide from the biblical weight of evidence.

Whichever view of hell each of us accepts, let's remember that which unites us beyond any difference—that the scriptures are able to make us "wise unto salvation", and that through those scriptures we accept that "Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners". It's our privilege and our calling to embrace one another as Christians, despite differences of understanding on subjects like this one.

## 1) Surprising opposition from bible interpreters

**All doctrines must be determined from the Bible, and not from Bible interpreters. At the same time, it's important to know that many well respected Bible interpreters have rejected the view of the natural immortality of the soul, and eternal torment for the unsaved. The view of righteous souls presently conscious in Heaven and wicked souls enduring an eternal life in hell is so common today that we might think that it has always been believed—but this is by no means the case.**

- *The 1<sup>st</sup> century.* Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Barnabas, Hermas, and Polycarp—Apostolic Fathers—affirmed mankind's natural mortality, death as a sleep, the extinction of the unsaved, and the resurrection of the righteous to enter into immortality at the return of Christ.
- *The 16<sup>th</sup> century.* John Frith assisted Tyndale in translating the Bible into English. He recognised soul-sleep until the resurrection at the return of Christ, and from this understanding opposed the Pope's teaching about purgatory. For this, he was burned at the stake in 1533. Tyndale himself, greatest of the English reformers and translator of the Bible into English, made this significant observation: "And ye, putting [the dead] in heaven, hell, and purgatory, destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. . . . If the souls be in heaven . . . then what cause is there of the resurrection?"
- *17<sup>th</sup>-century Britain.* Those who held to the non-immortality of the soul included the Christian philosopher John Locke, Charles II's personal physician Peter Chamberlain (an Independent Baptist), Archbishop of Canterbury John Tillotson, and the poet John Milton.
- *Luther.* Martin Luther strongly taught that death is a sleep in which consciousness is suspended. "Just as one who falls asleep and reaches morning unexpectedly when he awakes, without knowing what has happened to him, so we shall suddenly rise on the last day."
- *18<sup>th</sup>-century England.* Many teachers of the Word from a variety of denominations—including Anglicans, Baptists and Presbyterians—believed in soul-sleep, natural mortality, and the eradication of the wicked in the fires of judgement at the end of time. Isaac Watts is one example of these.
- *The 19<sup>th</sup> century.* Dr. Edward White, a Congregationalist and a friend of David Livingstone, wrote: "I protest with all my heart and soul and mind, against . . . the doctrine of endless

torments to be inflicted in hell on unsaved men." He believed this and related doctrines to be "directly contrary to both the letter and spirit of the Christian revelation recorded in Holy Scripture."

- *The 20<sup>th</sup> century.* Well-known churchmen or theologians who believed in the non-immortality of the soul include Martin Heineken (professor of systematic theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary), William Temple (Archbishop of Canterbury), James Moffatt (Bible translator), John Baillie (university professor, Church of Scotland), John F. Taylor (Principal, Wycliffe College), and Reinhold Niebuhr (professor, Union Theological Seminary).
- *A declaration.* In 1943, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York commissioned 50 Anglican scholars and theologians to draft a statement on the progress of the Gospel and the duty of the church. In their document appears this statement: "The idea of inherent indestructibility of the human soul (or consciousness) owes its origin to Greek, not to Bible, sources. The central theme of the New Testament is eternal life, not for anybody and everybody, but for believers in Christ as risen from the dead." The document affirms "the final triumph of good and the abolition of evil."

## 2) The character of God

**The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity raises critical questions about the character of God, and may hinder the path of faith for many who try to understand the Christian way.**

- *God is love.* "And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16).
- *Eternal tormentor?* God is the judge of all the earth, and the message of his judgement is important. The judgement of God may well be understood as his final act of love in making all things fair and just for eternity. But does God include in his judgement a punishment of active, never-ending torture? Are people who sinned for one lifetime punished through lifetimes without number? Can this be "justice"? Can this be God?
- *God less than human?* In our contemporary society, we can barely tolerate the death penalty, in which a violent criminal is first made unconscious and then painlessly euthanised. How, then, can we conceive that God takes people of his own creation and torments them with flames for eternity? If this is God's plan for all of the future, how can we "know and rely on" his love in the present life? Such teaching drove Charles Darwin away from Christian faith: "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brothers, and almost all my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."
- *One question*—What does the Bible teach? If such a view of hell is irrefutably taught in scripture, then we should accept it in spite of our qualms, and commit our lack of understanding to God. But the overwhelming view of scripture that "God is love" compels us to go back to the Bible to see if this view of hell is in fact irrefutably taught, or if it might be a distortion that has arisen in the course of church history.

## 3) The accomplishment of the Cross

**The teaching that evil lasts as long as good brings into question the power of God to destroy evil through the complete sacrifice of Christ on Calvary.**

- *"To do away with sin."* The death of Jesus on the Cross was "once for all to do away with sin" (Hebrews 9:26). Christians hold that through his death, Jesus perfectly met the requirements of justice and mercy, and ushered in righteousness forever. Christians

understand that by his death, Jesus undid all the results of sin and allowed the world to begin again with a clean slate, as perfect as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

- *Can the presence of sin never be removed?* If the results of sin continue forever in a never-ending hell, what does this say about the effectiveness of the sacrifice of Jesus? If the death of Jesus can remove the penalty of sin but not—in any complete sense—the *presence* of sin, does this not impugn the power of the Cross? Jesus died, but sin's presence continues forever; evil goes on and on and on. As long as there is good, there is also evil in God's universe. What does this proposition say about the great plan of God to deal fully and finally with sin?
- *A perpetual stain.* If there is a hell that goes on as long as Heaven, does not this become a perpetual stain in the universe, and a continuing evidence that God could not deal finally with evil, even by the death of his Son?

#### 4) The eradication of sin and evil

The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity appears to be at odds with the biblical teaching that at the end of time, God will eradicate sin and make "all things new".

- *"No more pain."* "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true'" (Revelation 21:1–5).
- *"Everything is new."* The context shows that this description encompasses Heaven and earth. The old order is gone, everything is new. The words "no more death, mourning, crying or pain" are especially compelling. Some may say, "Well, this applies only to the realm of the saved." There is no such qualification in scripture. The burden of proof would have to rest with those who claim that God's cosmic plan for no more mourning, crying or pain applies only to the tiny percentage of earth's inhabitants who have entered the door of salvation—while the vast majority of human beings endure not only another lifetime of mourning, crying and pain, but an eternity of it.
- *Two questions.* Two questions must be raised if the description God gave to the apostle John applies to only a portion of God's universe. First, What can we say about a God whose redemptive plan falls short of eradicating evil, leaving a place in the universe where moans and screams and cries of pain provide a permanent reminder of the intrusion of Satan? And second, How can the saved go through eternity without crying or pain, knowing that their unsaved brother, sister, child, parent, or friend at that very time is undergoing fierce torture—at the hand of the very God the saved worship saying "Just and true are your ways, King of the ages" (Revelation 15:3)? No wonder traditional Jewish teaching holds that the wicked will be *expunged* (annihilated) from the presence of God.

#### 5) A biblical view of the "soul"

The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity may well be derived from a non-biblical view of the "soul".

- *Who is immortal?* Historically, Greek dualism appears to be the source of the teaching we refer to as "the immortality of the soul". This teaching, that the "soul" has an independent

and immortal life of its own, separate from the body, is necessary for the teaching of an eternally burning hell. But if human beings—both the wicked and the righteous—are by nature immortal, then what becomes of the Bible’s insistence that “God alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:16)? We must remember Satan’s first lie spoken to human beings: “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4).

- *The concept of the “spirit.”* The concept of “spirit” is used variously in scripture. In general the reference is to our spiritual, psychological and emotional life, in contrast to our physical being. “Spirit” differentiates our character, personality and inner conscious life from our bodily flesh. *There is no question that this part of our being survives bodily death—scripture declares plainly that the spirit “returns to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 23:46). This is a beautiful understanding—that all we are in mind, character and personality is safe with God for eternity from the moment of death.* Nothing in this paper is intended to detract from this belief. There is a question, however, as to whether our spirit, in isolation from the body, constitutes *continuing conscious existence* from the moment of death. A Greek dualistic view says, Yes. But is this the biblical view?
- *A clue from Creation.* Genesis blesses us with a succinct description of the making of mankind: “The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). This is a significant description. In literal terms it might be expressed, “God formed the man from the earth and blew into his nostrils the divine essence of life, and the man became a person.” This description is the beginning of our biblical understanding of Hebrew references to “spirit”—here the concept is rendered “breath”. And it provides a basis for understanding the “soul”—here rendered “living being”. What appears is a unity, not a duality. God took the physical material—the elements of the earth. He infused this physical but lifeless frame with his own divine spirit, and from this combination produced the unity of the human being. The physical elements did not in themselves make a human being. The spirit infused did not in itself make a human being. But *together*, in God’s creative power, a human being—a “soul”—was made.
- *The concept of the “soul.”* In many passages of scripture outside of the creation story, the term “soul” is clearly used in a figurative reference to our inner spiritual and emotional life, in much the same sense as the word “spirit”. When we look in any Hebrew dictionary, we see the same kind of variety of meanings we see in English. Words come to be used in a range of literal and figurative ways, depending on the context. 1 Samuel 18:1 provides an example. In the words of the KJV, “the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul.” It is the Hebrew word *nephesh* that is used for “soul”, just as in the creation story. But is 1 Samuel 18:1 intended as an explanation of the nature of man? No; it is a beautiful, literary expression of the attachment of hearts, illustrated by the NIV rendition: “Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.” When we look for an actual description of the makeup of human beings, we do not go to passages like 1 Samuel 18:1, but to the obvious—to Genesis 1 and 2. And there we see that in literal terms the “soul” is not merely a part of the living being, as in Greek thinking, but the outcome, the finished production, the unity of the physical and spiritual components in the creative power of God. The *nephesh* word is used not only of human beings, but of the entire animal kingdom (see Genesis 1:21 and 24). Would we be prepared to say that the animal kingdom is also inherently immortal? The “soul” in the creation story is the living being, the whole creature. Remove either the bodily or the spiritual component, and there is no more a “living creature”. If any doubt remains, consider the use of the word “soul” in Ezekiel 18:20 (KJV): “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.”

- *A remarkable “oversight” in the Bible?* In the Bible there are more than 1,600 references to “soul” and “spirit”. In how many of these do we find a statement to the effect that the soul or spirit can function without the body, or apart from it? Not one. There is not a single text in the Bible that says this, and yet the majority of modern Christians and preachers say it all the time.

## 6) **Biblical teaching about death, the return of Jesus, resurrection, and judgement**

**The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity, while taking his saved children immediately into Heaven at their death, appears inherently at odds with the biblical doctrine of soul-sleep, the return of Jesus, resurrection, and judgement.**

- *“Sleep.”* The primary metaphor employed in the Bible for death is one that signifies a temporary halt in conscious life: the metaphor of sleep. This metaphor for death appears more than 50 times, and in both testaments. A poignant example appears in the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. As he was dying, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Then, as recorded by Luke the physician, “he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59–60). We recognise sleep to be a subconscious—not a conscious—state. As Ecclesiastes 9:5 affirms, “The dead know nothing.”
- *A powerful metaphor.* Never does the sleep metaphor appear more strongly than in the record of the death and resurrection of Jesus’ friend Lazarus—John 11. Note:
  - (a) Jesus here plainly identifies death as a “sleep”.
  - (b) Strangely by modern thinking, Jesus makes no attempt to comfort the family members with the typical words of comfort that come from Christian ministers these days. He does not say, “Your brother is rejoicing in Heaven right now.”
  - (c) The hope of Mary and Martha, and the affirmation of Jesus, is simply that of resurrection, when Lazarus will rise again at the last day and be restored to his family —“I know [my brother] will rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (see verses 23–24).
  - (d) Jesus’ concept of death as a subconscious sleep amounts to “never dying” in a spiritual sense (verse 26). *In the teaching of Jesus, death as a sleep is no less comforting than continued conscious existence after death. It is only a second, in our own consciousness, from death to resurrection.* We fall asleep in Jesus one moment, leaving behind our mortal body with all its ills and pains. In the next *conscious* moment, we see Jesus’ face and realise we have left our old, sin-plagued body behind. We are then completely new—new in spirit, new in resurrection body, new in our entire being. This is a message of great comfort, and it provides the context for Paul’s longing to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8).
- *The return of Jesus.* Jesus’ words in John 14:2–3 are significant: “In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” When will we be “with him”? When he comes back! That is when he takes us to be with him, where he is. If we go immediately to Heaven when we die, Jesus’ return is significant only for those who happen to be alive when he comes. And in this case, what need or purpose would there be for resurrection?
- *Resurrection awakening.* How perplexing it would have been, if Lazarus had already spent three ecstatic days in Heaven with God, for Jesus to call him back to this dark world! But rather, Lazarus was simply called out of his sleep in a mighty miracle that assures us of

our great hope—a real, complete restoration through resurrection awakening at the return of Jesus.

- *Little need for resurrection.* If the popular view of the “soul” does in fact mean that I continue to live consciously and fully in the presence of God after my death, then what need is there for resurrection? Why is the doctrine of the resurrection so dominant in Old and New Testaments, when the immortality of the soul would render resurrection incidental and actually unnecessary? No wonder that in modern Christianity it is unusual to hear solid preaching on the resurrection—one of the Bible’s most prominent themes.
- *The great problem of 1 Corinthians 15.* Paul’s comments in 1 Corinthians 15 present perhaps the greatest question in all scripture for those who accept that the believer goes immediately to Heaven at death. After a powerful teaching about the resurrection, Paul says that if the dead are not raised, “Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost” (verses 16, 18). We must think about this and take it seriously, since it is not a parable or an oblique reference, but one of a handful of the Bible’s direct teachings on death. If all the saved who have died are already in Heaven, and if they are already immortal, then how could they be lost if there were no final resurrection? Clearly, in Paul’s mind the solution for death is “sleep in Christ” and the mighty resurrection when Jesus comes—not natural immortality of the soul. The teaching of 1 Corinthians 15 is a major challenge to any concept of death other than soul-sleep and resurrection.
- *When is immortality bestowed?* The apostle Paul gives the truth about immortality. It is not, in literal terms, a present possession but is bestowed at the resurrection when Jesus returns. “Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:51–54, emphasis supplied).
- *Questioning the judgement.* If, the moment I die, I go immediately to Heaven or to hell, what need is there for final judgement? Consider Christ’s description of that event: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world’” (Matthew 25:31–34). When do we receive our final inheritance? When are we ushered into presence of the immortal King? According to Jesus, it is not at the moment of our death, but “when the Son of Man comes in his glory.”
- *“Second death” for the wicked.* The view of the non-immortality of the soul gives proper meaning to the destiny of the wicked portrayed in Revelation 21:8. This description follows the promise that sin will be eradicated and everything made new. “The cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.” Notice that here, the punishment of the wicked is by fire. But it is not called an ongoing life of torment in that fire; it is called a second (or final) *death*. The first death is the natural death that all of us face, a subconscious sleep until the final judgement and resurrection. The second death is distinctive. It is that all-concluding death, a cessation of existence, the end of consciousness for ever. It is not called a sleep

because there is no awakening. As the Lord said through Ezekiel, “The soul who sins will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20).

## 7) A biblical understanding of the concept of “forever”

The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity appears to overlook an essential biblical meaning of “for ever”—as long as life shall last.

- *“Everlasting burning.”* The Old Testament certainly speaks about judgement in terms of eternal fire. Isaiah 33:14 refers to “everlasting burning”. Isaiah 34:9–10 speaks about judgement on the heathen nation of Edom. Edom would be punished with “burning sulphur” that would “not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise for ever.” The same Hebrew word is used of God: He is the “Eternal God” (Genesis 21:33); he reigns “for ever and ever” (Exodus 15:18). His love “endures for ever” (Psalm 136). But the same word is used in other contexts. Psalm 73:12 speaks of the wicked being “always [for ever] carefree.” That “for ever” will certainly come to an end! And Deuteronomy 15:17 speaks about a rite of passage in which a servant could bond himself to a family “for ever”. The NIV appropriately translates this use of the word, “for life”. (Josephus and the rabbinites interpreted this “for ever” as meaning only until the year of Jubilee.) The context must determine the meaning, and we must let the Bible’s original language speak for itself—not imposing unwarranted English meanings. It appears that the fundamental sense of the Bible’s term “for ever” is, *as long as life shall last*. (God’s reign is absolutely for ever, because his life literally goes on for ever.) Hebrew dictionaries do not give an English absolute for the term “for ever”; they provide a variety of meanings depending on the context: long duration, antiquity, futurity, everlasting, ever-more, perpetual, old, ancient.
- *“Torment for ever.”* The New Testament demonstrates the same need to determine the concept of “for ever” by its specific context. “The smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever” (Revelation 14:11). “They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Revelation 20:10). (This is the same term that applies to God and to the saints—they go on in glory for ever and ever.) Conceptually, we must ask: How does this fit in with the passages of scripture already mentioned that describe the eradication of sin and pain from God’s universe; and those passages that declare death for the souls who reject God?
- *Idiomatic language.* The book of Revelation, like all prophetic books of the Bible, has a dominant literary characteristic, and that characteristic is what we call “idiomatic language”—that is, language drawn from the common occurrences and understandings of the day; and language couched in the context of vision and symbol. (For example, “the Alpha and the Omega” in Revelation 1:8 is an idiom that would have been readily understood by John’s readers as the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and meaning, in essence, “the beginning and the end”.) This realisation of idiomatic language takes nothing away from the authority of the word of God. It does mean it is critical that we first see the scriptures in the immediate context of the original people and culture; and in the context of symbolic vision when applicable. Then we can make the application accurately to our own time. The “souls under the altar” that cry out to God (Revelation 6:9–10) are an example. This is a graphic picture, but is it a literal one, or a symbolic one in the context of the overall drama? This is a legitimate question. In the previous chapter Christ is a bleeding Lamb. This is a graphic picture, a dramatic image in the vision—but we would be reluctant to see it as a wholly literal portrayal of Christ.
- *A key example.* A key to the “eternal fire” idiom appears in Jude, verses 5–7. Jude is speaking about the fate of godless beings throughout history. In verse 5 he says God “destroys” the godless. Then, speaking of rebellious angels, Jude says God is keeping

them in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for a particular destiny—“judgement on the great Day”. What kind of judgement is this? Jude gives the example of Sodom and Gomorrah and surrounding towns. “They serve as an example,” he says, “of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.”

- *As long as life lasts.* The last judgement is a “for ever” judgement with “eternal” fire, similar to that by which God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. There is no escape; the fire will do its work as long as life lasts, until there is nothing left to consume. Are the two ancient cities still burning today? Archeologists believe the ruins lie at the bottom of the Dead Sea. Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a fire from God that cannot be stopped until it has utterly done its work. As long as there is something to burn, there will be burning, until all is destroyed and the earth is cleansed by God’s fire as were the ancient cities of the plain. 2 Peter 2:6 amplifies this truth: “He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly.” What happens to the ungodly? They are burned with eternal fire—to ashes, to eternal non-existence, just like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.
- *Accurate application.* Through Sodom and Gomorrah, the Bible gives a concrete example of the idiom of “eternal fire”. Through this example, we know what is meant by the language, and we can make the application accurately in our own time. Sodom and Gomorrah were not kept alive eternally by God’s fire, they were eternally *destroyed* by God’s fire. Jude himself makes a parallel between “destruction” (verse 5) and “eternal fire” (verse 7). Similarly, when the apostle Paul talks about the punishment of the wicked, he calls it not everlasting torture, but “everlasting *destruction*”—“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). However we interpret the fate of the wicked, we must be true to the Bible’s teaching that it is *destruction*. As Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed, so the wicked in every city and nation of Earth will finally be destroyed.
- *Both destinies are eternal.* What about the parallel language referring to the righteous, that they go on in glory for ever and ever? Is this limited also? Not at all, because their reward is *life*. The one definition of “for ever” that fits all contexts of scripture is, “as long as life shall last.” Accordingly, both the righteous and the wicked receive eternal destinies—one is eternal life, the other is eternal death.
- *The opposite is death.* As Romans 6:23 reminds us, the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. This is an extremely significant point. What does the apostle Paul say is the opposite of eternal life? It is death—not eternal torment, but death. We do not read, “The wages of sin is eternal torment.”

## 8) A biblical understanding of the concept of “hell”

The view that God torments his unsaved children by burning them on and on through all eternity does not appear to be required by the original words for “hell”.

- *“The grave.”* *Sheol* in the Old Testament and *Hades* in the New Testament are used in a variety of ways, most prominently to mean simply “the grave”. In an extended, idiomatic sense, they can also mean a very uncomfortable place of abode for the dead. When reading the word “hell” in the Bible, we must be wary of automatically thrusting our modern conception into this biblical word; and of building a doctrine on a word used in a variety of literal and idiomatic ways.
- *Gehenna.* A word often used for “hell” in the New Testament is *Gehenna*. For example, Mark 9:43: “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.” (See also

verse 48, where in the NIV the phrase is placed in quote marks to indicate a proverbial saying: “where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched’”). *Gehenna* refers to a deep, narrow valley south of Jerusalem, which became the city’s rubbish dump. Here the bodies of criminals and animals, along with all kinds of filth, were cast, and consumed by fire. That fire of the *Gehenna* rubbish dump never went out—it kept on burning as long as there was something to consume. The fire of *Gehenna* kept on burning, but did life keep on living in that place? No. The fire did not maintain life in that place; it destroyed it. And in a literal sense, there came a day when the fire of *Gehenna* did go out, because there was nothing left to burn.

- *There is a judgement and a hell.* These understandings do not diminish the awesome concept of judgement and hell. There is a final judgement that will be terrible upon the earth. There is a real hell of fire in which the devil, rebellious angels and sinners will be punished and destroyed, and all signs of their existence eradicated. In this way a God who is fair and just will make everything new, and there will be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more.
- *Degrees of punishment?* There may well be degrees of punishment in hell; justice would seem to require this. A person missing out on Heaven through neglect might suffer for only a moment; an agent of the devil for great pain on earth might suffer for an accordingly longer time and with greater intensity, so that the universe will see that justice is done. But in any case, this is eternal *punishment* by a just and merciful God, not eternal *punishing* by a cruel tyrant.
- *One is life, the other death.* The bottom line? Both the reward of the righteous and the destiny of the wicked are eternal. The difference is, one is eternal life; the other is eternal death. Like Sodom and Gomorrah, wickedness is punished and destroyed, gone without a trace; the land is cleansed by God’s eternal fire.

## 9) **A key principle of biblical interpretation: Interpret symbolic or unclear scriptures with guidance from direct teachings elsewhere on the subject at issue**

When a variety of interpretations surround a Bible teaching, it’s important to interpret the passages that are less definitive based on a foundation of those passages that *are* definitive—and not the other way around.

- *Definitive teachings cannot be swept away by interpretation of one parable.* Some Bible teachers have declared, “All the questions about what happens when you die are immediately settled by Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus.” (The Lazarus in this parable is not to be confused with Jesus’ friend Lazarus, who died and was resurrected.) By such a stance, significant scriptural teachings are rendered unimportant—teachings about death as a sleep, explanations about the resurrection and the putting on of immortality at the last day, promises about an end to all sin and crying and pain, and the real-life action in regard to death and resurrection described in John 11—all of this is subjugated to a parable intended to teach an important lesson, but not intended to describe the exact literal nature of death.
- *One key lesson.* Parables must be understood for what they are—literary devices that powerfully teach one key lesson. Sometimes, Jesus clearly stated the lesson—as, for example in the parable of Luke 18:1–8, the story of the persistent widow. This is a strange parable; a casual reading could leave us with the conclusion that God answers prayer only when we keep bothering him about it. But Jesus clearly states the lesson both at the beginning and the end of the story—that we ought always to pray with faith and not to give up.

- *Find the real point.* Other parables could also cause problems. From the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:1–9) we could come away with the belief that it is all right to be dishonest if it's for a good purpose, and such a course will even secure for us a place in Heaven: "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings" (verse 9). What keeps us from a wrong conclusion? The Bible's direct testimony in other places about honesty and the way of faith. Recognising such clear teaching, we look closely at the parable and see the real point: that if worldly people are so good at using their wisdom to gain worldly wealth that will ultimately amount to nothing, then how much more should we who are spiritual use godly wisdom to ensure progress in spiritual riches that last for ever.
- *Imagery of the culture.* Parables must be recognised as parables—stories that use the varied imagery of the culture to get across a particular point. We must be wary of using the details surrounding that point to establish doctrine. Jewish popular literature sometimes spoke of death as a conscious state of existence, even though this doctrine does not appear in the Old Testament. Jesus uses this popular belief as the "prop" for an important message.
- *Perils of a strictly literal reading.* This parable of the rich man and Lazarus is full of non-literal language, language that grips the imagination to press home the point. Those who would read the parable in a strictly literal sense must see Abraham's bosom as big enough to hold all who have died in the Lord; and they must agree that the dead can carry on conversations between Heaven and hell. A strictly literal and out-of-context reading could also give the reader this false message: "Rich people go to hell; poor people go to Heaven." Only at great peril do we ignore the context, the imagery, and the style of the language in its original culture.
- *Be guided by the definitive teachings.* There is no question that the imagery of Jesus' time included a concept of hell as a dark abode of sinners who had died. This is an old, old concept, and a popular view of the afterlife in Jesus' time. But the question remains, Is this concept a popular and useful literary image, or is it the literal teaching of scripture about the actual nature of death? It is remarkable that in this parable there is no use of the Greek word *Gehenna*, which means "fiery hell". By the interpretation given this parable by many Christians, it would seem natural to use the word for "fiery hell" in this story. But it is not there, perhaps for the very reason of making a point of distinction between the popular view that Jesus was drawing from, and the truth of the matter. The word used for hell in this parable is *Hades*, the Greek word for "grave". It is also remarkable that the words "soul" and "spirit" never appear in this parable. Again, we must remember the definitive teachings of scripture on the subject of death and resurrection (such as John 11 and 1 Corinthians 15), and use these as a guide for interpreting the non-definitive passages like the parable in Luke 16.
- *A significant lesson.* A careful reading of this parable, especially considering Jesus' closing words in verse 31, yields a significant lesson, one echoed well in Hebrews 3:13, 15—"Encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. . . . 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'" The lesson comes home to all of us, regardless of our understanding of hell: We are called to heed the testimony of the scriptures without delay, for it is only in the present life that we can make the choice for an eternal destiny in the presence of the God of love.

## 10) The testimony of the “transfiguration”

The appearance of Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration can be seen as providing subtle, yet pointed, confirmation of the Bible’s teaching about the nature of man, resurrection and immortality. (See Luke 9:30–31.)

- *In this fascinating episode in Christ’s ministry, it is significant that the two people chosen to appear with the Saviour are Moses and Elijah.* There were certainly other choices that Heaven could have made—Abraham, for instance, the great father of the Israelite nation and the patriarch of promise. Joseph and Daniel also come to mind—holy men in whose personal histories no sin is recorded. Perhaps even John the Baptist might have been selected. He was Jesus’ cousin and forerunner; he had only recently died, and Christ called him the greatest man ever born (Luke 7:28). Certainly Moses and Elijah are wonderful selections, with tremendous symbolism attached to their presence on the mountain with Christ—and we would not presume to think any other way than that this selection was a perfect one from Heaven itself.
- *At the same time, we have to believe that the selection of Moses and Elijah was a natural one—since Moses and Elijah were alive and in Heaven, and all the other great worthies (with the exception of Enoch) were sleeping in their graves, awaiting the call of the Resurrection and the Life.* Scripture lifts the veil to allow us to discern only three specifically named people who defeated death in this present age, and are now rejoicing in Heaven with the gift of immortal life. Enoch is clearly described in this way—see Hebrews 11:5. Elijah, similarly, is clearly described as having been translated to Heaven without seeing death—see 2 Kings 2:11–12. In the case of Moses the evidence is not clear; however there is a mysterious hint that begins with the record in Deuteronomy 34:6—“He [the Lord] buried him [Moses] in Moab, in the valley opposite Beth Peor, but to this day no-one knows where his grave is.” How interesting, that the Lord himself buried Moses! All others recorded in scripture were buried by their people, but Moses was tenderly laid to rest by the Lord himself. It is equally interesting that no-one ever discovered the place of Moses’ burial. The hint picks up again in Jude 9, where we find a reference to the archangel Michael in dispute with the devil over the body of Moses—and Michael coming out victorious! This “tiny cracking of the veil” into the mysteries of Heaven has caused great perplexity for Bible commentators over the years. It seems to make no sense to Bible scholars that the *body* of Moses would be in dispute. Some have even suggested Jude was mistaken and probably meant the *soul* of Moses was in dispute. Those of us who believe the Bible teaches the sleep of death and the mighty resurrection do not have such a problem here—we believe the most natural interpretation is that God wanted to resurrect Moses bodily, ahead of time, to the eternal fellowship of Heaven, and the devil was not happy about it! The one explanation of Jude 9 that appears to let the Bible speak for itself is that Moses was given the gift of a resurrection in the present age. So Moses was given early entrance into Heaven as a forerunner of all those who will be resurrected with the return of Christ. This would be a natural honour for Moses, whom scripture describes as knowing the Lord “face to face”, and as demonstrating the character and power of God more forcefully than any others (see Numbers 12:3; Deuteronomy 34:10–12).
- *Moses and Elijah, appearing on the mountain just before the crucifixion of our Lord, are fitting and powerful symbols of the hope each of us has for the final defeat of death, and an eternity with God.* There will be two groups of saved people in Heaven—those who have died in faith and are resurrected to live with Christ forever, and those who are alive when Jesus comes and are translated to Heaven without seeing death. (See 1 Corinthians 15:51–54; 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17.) Moses is the perfect symbol of the first group, and Elijah is the perfect symbol of the second. ❖