



Heaven & Hell

**What Does the Bible
Really Teach?**

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Really Teach?

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Introduction

Most religions and religious organizations, including most Christian denominations, teach that good people go to some sort of paradise, usually heaven, after they die. Heaven is typically characterized as a place of unsurpassable happiness—the ultimate paradise. It is commonly taught and believed that all who go there will live joyfully forever.



Yet despite what a wonderful place it's supposed to be, it seems no one is in a hurry to go there.

Widespread belief in death as the gateway to heaven does not change the fact that most people view death as something to be

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avoided at all costs. Through medical science we usually do everything we can to prevent death as long as possible.

If people could journey right away to eternal life in heaven by means of some heavenly express, wouldn't we find that almost no one would want to buy a ticket? Wouldn't we find that most people would prefer to continue their present life here on earth? The possibility of immediate residence in heaven doesn't seem to be that appealing. Our actions indicate this is the way most of us think.

An eternity doing what?

Perhaps the reason for the reluctance to enter the hereafter through death is that no one has ever provided us with a truly compelling explanation as to what the righteous would do after arriving in heaven. If we are to spend all eternity there, you would think God would tell us in the Bible what we should expect once we arrive. Will we spend our time plucking harps? Will we sit and simply gaze upon God forever and ever? These are

both popular conceptions of heaven, but most people can't imagine doing either for eternity. Eternity is, after all, a long time!

Maybe we should ask ourselves a straightforward question: Do these common concepts even come from the Bible?

Many people who expect to go to heaven admit they can find little in the Scriptures about what they have to look forward to once they get there. British historian and author Paul Johnson put it this way: "Heaven . . . lacks genuine incentive. Indeed, it lacks definition of any kind. It is the great hole in theology" (*The Quest for God*, 1996, p. 173). If heaven is the goal God has set for His servants, why has He revealed so little about it in His Word?

There is a simple reason we encounter a vacuum when we look in the Bible for what the "saved"—those who are spared some sort of eternal punishment—will do in heaven. *The Bible does not say the righteous will dwell in heaven as their reward.* As we will see, the Bible reveals that God has *something else* in mind—something far different and far superior to most people's concepts about heaven!

Troubling questions about hell

But confusion about heaven isn't the only problem we run into when we consider popular views of life after death. What about the *unrighteous*, those who don't measure up? What happens to *them*?

Many who profess Christianity believe the wicked will burn forever in hell. They sincerely believe this is what the Bible teaches.

But we need to ask a



Widespread belief in death as the gateway to heaven does not change the fact that most people view death as something to be avoided at all costs. Through medical science we usually do everything we can to prevent death as long as possible.

simple question: Would a merciful and loving God inflict excruciating torment on human beings for trillions upon trillions of years—throughout all eternity without end? Could the great Creator God of the universe be so unfeeling and uncaring?

The Bible indeed says that God "has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). At that time those who have repented and accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior will be given eternal life. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, New International Version).

But what will happen in that day to the hapless people who have never even heard or been exposed to that name? Will they be cast shrieking into hellfire along with those who knowingly hate and despise God?

Only a minority of the earth's population lays claim to being Christian.



We need to face these questions squarely and honestly. Isn't it time we examined the truth of what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell?

Those who profess Christianity total only about a third of the world's population. Vast numbers of the other two thirds have never had the opportunity to genuinely repent and accept Christ simply because of *where* they live. Millions more through the centuries likewise never had the opportunity because of *when* they lived. Would it be just and right for God to subject them to the same punishment He will give to those who willfully reject Him and choose to make themselves His enemies?

These questions are neither trivial nor hypothetical. They affect the overwhelming majority of all people who have ever lived. When carried to their conclusions, the traditional answers have sobering implications about the character, nature and judgment of the God Christians claim to worship.

We need to face these questions squarely and honestly. Isn't it time we examined the truth of what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell?

Join us on a journey through the pages of history and your Bible as we explore these questions. You may find the answers quite surprising!

The Biblical Truth About the Immortal Soul

Traditional beliefs about heaven and hell are based on an underlying teaching—that everyone has an immortal soul that must go somewhere when physical life ends.

This belief isn't unique to traditional Christianity. "All religions affirm that there is an aspect of the human person that lives on after the physical life has ended" (*World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, Andrew Wilson, editor, 1995, p. 225). In other words, in general, all religions believe in some kind of immortal essence, a spirit that lives on separately after the physical body dies. Most professing Christians call this the immortal soul.

Failure to understand this subject correctly is a fundamental reason for the prevalent beliefs regarding heaven and hell. If an immortal quality exists in a human being, it must depart from the body when the body dies. The typical views of heaven and hell have as their foundation the belief in the immortal soul that leaves the body at death.

What does the Bible say about the existence of an immortal soul? Does this belief have a foundation in Scripture?

Not from the Bible but from Greek philosophy

Many are surprised to learn that the words "immortal" and "soul" appear together nowhere in the Bible. "Theologians frankly admit that the expression 'immortal soul' is not in the Bible but confidently state that Scripture assumes the immortality of every soul" (Edward Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes*, 1994, p. 22, emphasis added throughout).

Considering how confidently theologians hold to this doctrine, it's quite surprising that such an important assumption is not spelled out in the Bible. If it isn't found in the Bible, where did the idea originate?

The *New Bible Dictionary* offers this background on the nonbiblical nature of the immortal-soul doctrine: "The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and they looked for the time when the soul would be free from its shackles. They conceived of life after death in terms of the immortality of the soul" (1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection").

According to this idea, the body goes to the grave at death and the soul continues to exist as a separate, conscious entity.

Belief in a separate soul and body was popular in ancient Greece and was taught by one of its most famous philosophers: "The immortality of



the soul was a principal doctrine of the Greek philosopher, Plato . . . In Plato's thinking, the soul . . . was self-moving and indivisible . . . It existed before the body which it inhabited, and which it would survive" (Fudge, p. 32).

When and how did the concept of the immortality of the soul enter the world of Christianity? The Old Testament does not teach it. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* explains: "We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and

In general, all religions believe in some kind of immortal essence, a spirit that lives on separately after the physical body dies. Most professing Christians call this the immortal soul.

is nowhere found in the Old Testament" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

The first-century Church did not hold to this belief either: "The doctrine is increasingly regarded as a *post-apostolic innovation*, not only unnecessary but positively harmful to proper biblical interpretation and understanding" (Fudge, p. 24).

If such an idea was not taught in the Church during the time of the apostles, how did it come to assume such an important place in Christian doctrine?

Several authorities recognize that the teachings of Plato and other Greek philosophers have profoundly influenced Christianity. History and religious studies professor Jeffrey Russell states, "The unbiblical idea of immortality did not die but even flourished, because theologians . . . admired Greek philosophy [and] found support there for the notion of the immortal soul" (*A History of Heaven*, 1997, p. 79).

The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, in its article on death, states that "the 'departure' of the *nephesh* [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it . . . No biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death" (1962, Vol. 1, p. 802, "Death").

Should we then accept a teaching that is not found in the Bible? Many people take it for granted that their beliefs are based on the life and teachings

of Jesus Christ and God's Word. Yet Jesus said in a prayer to His Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Does God give men the liberty to draw from the world's philosophers and incorporate their beliefs into biblical teaching as though they were fact?

God inspired the apostle Peter to write, "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). We must look to the words of Christ, the prophets and the apostles in the Holy Scriptures if we are to understand the truth about the doctrine of the immortality of the soul or any other religious teaching.

Let's dig further to see exactly what the Bible tells us about the soul.

Soul in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Hebrew word most often translated into English as "soul" in the

Bible is *nephesh*. *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* succinctly defines this word as meaning "a breathing creature." When used in the Bible, *nephesh* does not mean a spirit entity or the spirit within a person. Rather, it usually means a physical, living, breathing creature. Occasionally it conveys a related meaning such as breath, life or person.

Surprising to many, this term *nephesh* is used to refer not just to human beings, but also to *animals*. For example, notice the account of the creation of sea life: "And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:21, King James Version). The Hebrew word translated "creature" in this verse is *nephesh*. In the biblical account, these particular "souls," creatures of the sea, were made before the first human beings were formed and given life.

The term is also applied to birds (verse 30) and land animals, including

Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?

Some believe that various scriptures support belief in an immortal soul. Let's consider some of these passages and understand what they really say.

Matthew 10:28: Destroying soul and body in hell?

"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" (Matthew 10:28).

Is Jesus teaching in this verse that the soul lives on after death and is immortal? Not at all. If you look at this scripture closely, you see that Jesus is actually saying that *the soul can be destroyed*. Jesus is here warning about the judgment of God. He says not to fear those who can destroy only the physical human body (*soma* in the Greek), but fear Him (God) who is also able to destroy the soul (*psuche*)—here denoting the person's physical being with its consciousness.

Simply stated, Christ was showing that when one man kills another the resulting death is only temporary; God can raise anyone to conscious life again either soon after death (see Matthew

9:23-25; 27:52; John 11:43-44; Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-11) or in the age to come after Christ returns to the earth. The person who has died is not ultimately gone forever. We must have a proper fear of God, who alone can remove one's physical life and all possibility of any later resurrection to life. When God destroys one in "hell," that person's destruction is permanent.

What is the "hell" spoken of in this verse? The Greek word used here is *gehenna*, which comes from the combination of two Hebrew words, *gai* and *hinnom*, meaning "Valley of Hinnom." The term originally referred to a valley on the south side of Jerusalem in which pagan deities were worshipped.

Because of its reputation as an abominable place, it later became a garbage dump where refuse was burned. *Gehenna* became synonymous with "a place of burning"—a site used to dispose of useless things.

Only God can utterly destroy human existence and eliminate any hope of a resurrection. The Scriptures teach that God will in the future burn up the incorrigibly wicked in an all-consuming fire, turning them to ashes (Malachi

4:3)—annihilating them forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:23: Spirit, soul and body?

Many are confused by an expression the apostle Paul uses in one of his letters to the Thessalonians: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

What does Paul mean by the phrase "spirit, soul, and body"?

By "spirit" (*pneuma*), Paul means the non-material component that is joined to the physical human brain to form the human mind. This spirit is not conscious of itself. Rather, it gives the brain the ability to reason, create and analyze our existence (see also Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). By "soul" (*psuche*), Paul means the person's physical being with its consciousness. By "body" (*soma*), Paul means a physical body of flesh. In short, Paul wished for the whole person, including the mind, vitality of conscious life and physical body, to be sanctified and blameless.

Revelation 6:9-10: Souls of slain crying out?

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they

held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Revelation 6:9-10).

To understand this scripture, we must remember the context. John was witnessing a vision while he was "in the Spirit" (Revelation 4:2). Under inspiration he was seeing future events depicted in symbolism. The fifth seal is *figurative* of the Great Tribulation, a time of world turmoil preceding Christ's return. In this vision, John sees under the altar the martyred believers who *sacrificed their lives* for their faith in God. These souls figuratively cry out, "Avenge our blood!" This can be compared to Abel's blood metaphorically crying out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Though neither dead souls nor blood can actually speak, these phrases figuratively demonstrate that a God of justice will not forget the evil deeds of mankind perpetrated against His righteous followers.

This verse does not describe living souls that have gone to heaven. The Bible confirms that "no one has ascended to heaven" but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven [Jesus Christ] (John 3:13). Even righteous King David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), was described by Peter as being "dead and buried" (Acts 2:29), not alive in heaven or some other state or location (verse 34).



cattle and “creeping” creatures such as reptiles and insects (verse 24). It follows, then, if we make an argument for man possessing an immortal soul, animals must also have an immortal soul, since the same Hebrew word is used of man and animal alike. Yet no biblical scholars would seriously make such claims for animals. The truth is, the term *soul* refers to *any living creature*, whether man or beast—not to

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a “soul” more than 130 times. But the same Hebrew term is also applied to sea creatures, birds and land animals, including cattle and “creeping” creatures such as reptiles and insects. All are “souls.”

some separate, living essence temporarily inhabiting the body.

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a “soul” (Hebrew *nephesh*) more than 130 times. The first place we find *nephesh* in reference to mankind is in the second chapter of Genesis: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (verse 7, KJV).

The word translated “soul” in this verse is again the Hebrew word *nephesh*. Other translations of the Bible state that man became a living “being” or “person.” This verse does not say that Adam *had* an immortal soul; rather it says that God breathed into Adam the “breath of life,” and Adam *became* a living soul. At the end of his days, when the breath of life left Adam, he died and returned to dust.

The Old Testament plainly teaches that the soul dies. God told Adam and Eve, two “living souls,” that they would “surely die” if they disobeyed Him (Genesis 2:17). God also told Adam that He had taken him from the dust of the earth and he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19).

Among the plainer statements in the Bible about what happens to the soul at death are Ezekiel 18:4 and 18:20. Both passages clearly state that “the soul who sins *shall die*.” Again, the word for “soul” here is *nephesh*. In fact, this same word was even used of corpses—dead bodies (see Leviticus 22:4; Numbers 5:2; 6:11; 9:6-10).

Not only do all these scriptures show that the soul indeed can and does die, but the soul is identified as a *physical* being—not a separate spirit

entity with existence independent of its physical host.

The Scriptures tell us that the dead have no consciousness: “For the living know that they will die; but the dead *know nothing*” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They are not conscious in some other state or place (see “Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep”).

The New Testament teaching

The New Testament contains several statements confirming that the

The History of the Immortal-Soul Teaching

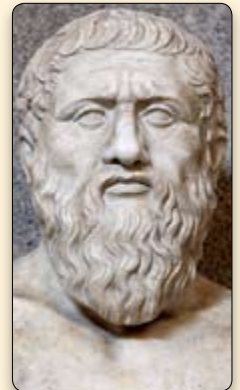
Despite widespread use of the phrase *immortal soul*, this terminology is found nowhere in the Bible. Where did the idea of an immortal soul originate?

The concept of the soul’s supposed immortality was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. “The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is . . . speculation . . . nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture . . . The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek

Early Christianity was influenced and corrupted by Greek philosophies as it spread through the Greek and Roman world. By A.D. 200 the doctrine of the immortality of the soul became a controversy among Christian believers.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology notes that Origen, an early and influential Catholic theologian, was influenced by Greek thinkers: “Speculation about the soul in the subapostolic

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the immortal soul separate at death.



thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended” (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941, Vol. 6, “Immortality of the Soul,” pp. 564, 566).

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the “immortal soul” separate at death. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* comments on ancient Israel’s view of the soul: “We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament” (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, “Death”).

church was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. This is seen in Origen’s acceptance of Plato’s doctrine

of the preexistence of the soul as pure mind (*nous*) originally, which, by reason of its fall from God, cooled down to soul (*psyche*) when it lost its participation in the divine fire by looking earthward” (1992, “Soul,” p. 1037).

Secular history reveals that the concept of the immortality of the soul is an ancient belief embraced by many pagan religions. But it’s not a biblical teaching and is not found in either the Old or New Testaments.

wicked who refuse to repent will die—permanently. In Matthew 7:13-14, in exhorting His disciples to choose the way that leads to life, Jesus states that the end of those who do not choose life is *destruction*. He contrasts that path with the way of righteousness, telling us, “Narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

Jesus, moreover, made it quite clear that utter destruction includes both “soul and body” (Matthew 10:28), the Greek word for “soul” (*psyche* or *psuche*) referring to physical, conscious existence (see “Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?” beginning on page 8).

The apostle Paul also stated that the wicked will die. In Romans 6:20-21 he talks about those who were slaves of sin and says that for them “the end of those things is *death*.” So those who are slaves of sin, who habitually commit sin, can *perish completely*. Yet many attempt to redefine death here and in other scriptural passages to mean merely separation from God.

Romans 6:23 is one of the best-known verses of the Bible. It plainly states, “For the wages of sin is *death*, but the *gift of God is eternal life* in

Jesus Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep

What happens to a person when he dies? The Bible compares death to a state of sleep. It is not a normal “sleep,” of course. It is a sleep in which there is no thought, brain activity or life whatsoever. Passages throughout the Bible show this to be the case.

For example, Ecclesiastes 9 states, “For the living know that they will die; *but the dead know nothing* . . . For there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (verses 5, 10).

Daniel 12:2 describes the dead as “those who sleep in the dust of the earth,” who later “shall awake” through being resurrected.

Job speaks of the state of the dead on more than one occasion. “Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? . . . For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest . . . There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest” (Job 3:11, 13, 17).

Many centuries later the biblical account of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, illustrates

death to be a sleeplike state. “Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany” (John 11:1). Jesus decided to go to him, but, so He could perform a miracle to strengthen His disciples’ faith, He waited until Lazarus died.

Before going to Bethany, Jesus discussed the condition of Lazarus with His disciples. He told them Lazarus was asleep and that He was going to awaken him (John 11:11-14). The disciples responded that sleep was good because it would help him get well (verse 12). Jesus then plainly told them, “Lazarus is dead” (verse 14). Notice that Jesus stated emphatically that Lazarus was dead, but at the same time He described death as a condition like sleep.

When the time came for Jesus to act, “He cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes . . . Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go’” (verses 43-44).

Lazarus had not gone to heaven or hell. He had been entombed, where he “slept” in death until Jesus called him out of the grave by a miraculous resurrection.

Christ Jesus our Lord.” Again, people will argue that death here means an eternal *life* of separation from God. Note, however, that *death* here is directly contrasted with *eternal life*. How, then, can death involve eternal existence through an immortal soul?

This verse plainly tells us two crucial truths. First, the punishment of the wicked is *death*, utter cessation of life, not a life of eternal suffering in another place (see also Philippians 3:18-19; 2 Thessalonians 1:9). Second, we do not *already have* eternal life through a supposed immortal soul. Eternal life is something God must *give* us through our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul also tells us that *God alone* has immortality.

Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 6:8: “The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction*; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap *eternal life*” (NIV). This tells us what happens to unrepentant sinners. Eventually they will reap destruction, referring to wasting away and perishing, but those who repent and obey God will ultimately receive eternal life.

Like Lazarus, everyone enters a figurative state of sleep at death. The dead are unconscious. The common belief is that at death the body goes to the grave and the soul remains conscious and goes either to heaven or hell. Yet as we have seen, this belief is not biblical.

In another reference that describes the state of the dead, Paul refers to the righteous dead who will be resurrected to meet Christ in the air as being “asleep”:

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who *are asleep*. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

So those who are in their graves will be resurrected, rising to meet the returning Messiah along with His followers who are then still alive. They all will be caught up in the air to meet Christ in the first resurrection. They will then return to the earth to reign with Him in the Kingdom of God.

That the dead are figuratively in a state of sleep, awaiting the resurrection, “was the preva-

lent opinion until as late as the 5th century” (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 35). The change away from the biblical teaching occurred several centuries after Christ. The plain teaching of the Bible is that the dead are unconscious, waiting in the grave. They are, as Jesus and Paul put it, sleeping. They will not awake until the resurrection.

Even Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, wrote at one point: “It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment . . . On what authority can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep . . . in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their downlying at night and their uprising in the morning?” (Letter to Nicholas Amsdorf, Jan. 13, 1522, quoted in Jules Michelet, *The Life of Luther*, translated by William Hazlitt, 1862, p. 133). Yet the Reformation did not embrace the truth that the dead sleep in total unawareness.

Eventually all will arise from this sleep. As Jesus said, the hour is coming “in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). This is the comforting and encouraging truth revealed in the Scriptures.

No conscious afterlife without a resurrection

So *is* man an immortal soul? No. Does he *have* an immortal soul? No. The Bible declares plainly that man is temporary, of the dust of the earth. There is no immortal quality about man at all—unless and until he receives it from God through a resurrection, which means being brought back to life in a body, raised from the dead as Jesus was.

The Bible clearly states that man puts on immortality at the *resurrection* (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), not at the end of his physical life. Until that time man has no more permanence than animals.

Nor does man have some spiritual soul with conscious awareness independent of the physical body. This has been proven time and time again when individuals have gone into comas for weeks, months and sometimes years at a time, only to emerge from that comatose state with no memory or recollection of the passage of time.

If one had a soul that existed independently of the human body, wouldn't that soul have some memory of remaining aware during the months or years the body was unconscious? That would be powerful and logical proof of the existence of an independent soul within the human body—yet no one has ever reported any such thing, in spite of thousands of such occurrences.

This fact likewise supports what the Bible teaches—that *consciousness ceases at death*. Only through a resurrection to life will consciousness return.

The Spirit in Man

Human beings do have a spiritual component to our makeup. As Job 32:8 says, “There is a spirit in man.” Zechariah 12:1 tells us that God “forms the spirit of man within him.” And the apostle Paul pointed out, “For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11).

It is this human spirit that imparts human intellect to our physical brains, creating the human mind. This is what makes people vastly more intelligent than animals.

Yet this spiritual aspect of human existence is nothing like the immortal soul concept. It is something distinctly different. The spirit in man is not animate of itself. It is not a spirit entity that “lives on” after death. As Scripture shows, the human spirit has no consciousness apart

from the body, for man is mortal. When we die, we will have no awareness of anything at all.

Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us that, at death, “the spirit returns to God who gave it”—where it is retained until the future time when God places those individual spirits within new bodies at the resurrection, thereby bringing individuals back to life with their personality and memories preserved and intact.

The human spirit is critical to our destiny, since God's Holy Spirit joining with it is what makes us God's children (Romans 8:16). And just as the human spirit gives us human understanding, so God's Spirit gives us higher, godly understanding (1 Corinthians 2:10-16). We are not born with the Holy Spirit but receive it from God following repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38).

Will a Loving God Punish People Forever in Hell?

Take this simple test. Or perhaps it's better if you just imagined it, since the actual test would prove quite painful.

Light a match, then hold your finger in its tiny flame for five seconds. What happens? You'll likely scream involuntarily and suffer misery for several days from a painful burn.

Perhaps you've seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrible accident, his flesh gnarled and misshapen. Imagine being trapped in flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. What would that kind of agony feel like if it went on for a minute? For a year? For a *lifetime*? For *ever and ever*?

Most people would find the idea horrifying almost beyond imagination. They would understandably be aghast and sickened that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to accept the idea that the God they worship and hold in highest esteem would willingly inflict such punishment not on just a few, but on a great multitude of people who die every single day? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible's description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

Just what is the truth about hell?

Hell through the centuries

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries. Perhaps one of the earliest to expound this view among Christians was the Catholic theologian Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage also wrote: “The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end” (quoted by Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This belief has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: “Whoever says or thinks that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal . . . let him be anathema” (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed its belief in eternal

torture of the wicked in these words: “The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil” (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: “Christ will return . . . to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment” (Toon, p. 131).

Teachings on the subject of hell have by no means been consistent through the centuries. Beliefs about hell have varied widely, depending on which theologian’s or church historian’s ideas one reads. Generally speaking, the most common belief has been that hell is a place in which wicked people are tortured forever, but never consumed, by ever-burning flames.

Hell’s location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have believed it to be in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber.

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but rather in the 14th-century work *The Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In the first part of this work, called “The Inferno,” Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (*U.S. News and World Report*, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II “declared that hell is ‘not a punishment imposed externally by God’ but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner’s choice to live apart from God” (ibid., p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved.

Why do we see so much diversity in beliefs about hell? Like belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are rife with the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible.

The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

An angry God

One of the most graphic descriptions of the torments of hell as conceived by men was given by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in a 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

He said: “The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrows made ready . . . [by] an angry God . . . It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps

you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction! The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire . . .

“You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him . . .



and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment . . .

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.”

This human concept of hell was so

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but rather in the 14th-century work The Divine Comedy, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

terrible that the prospect of such a fate caused great anguish, fear and anxiety for many Puritans. “The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent” (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 284).

The Puritans were not the only ones tormented by fear of hell. Many people have been terrorized by the thought of hell ever since this non-biblical concept crept into religious teaching. Other ministers and teachers have, like Jonathan Edwards, used a similar approach to frighten people into belief and obedience.

One of the reasons this concept of hell survived is because theologians believed the teaching deterred people from evil. “It was thought that, if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever and that society would collapse into an anarchical orgy” (Walker, p. 4).

Could a compassionate God torture people forever?

Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people through the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

God is a God of love who does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (verse 45). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully torments evil people *for all eternity*—not a few decades or even centuries, but for an *infinite* length of time.

The idea that God sentences



Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people with the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: “Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete . . . 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 . . . will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine” (quoted by Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this “damnable doctrine,” but that men have *misunderstood* what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will be able to witness the torments of the wicked. As one author explains the view some hold, “part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God’s justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss” (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to

Photo illustration by Shaun Venishi/Stockphoto

such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa, relishing in it. Husbands and wives would feel joy in seeing unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic, cruel and merciless.

Those who insist that the Bible teaches eternal torment by fire should ask whether such a belief is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God. For example, how could God justly deal with those who have lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be saved? This would include the millions who died as babies as well as the billions of unbelievers or idolaters who lived and died never knowing God or His Son. Regrettably, the vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category.

Some theologians reason around this difficulty by assuming that those who never had the opportunity to know God or hear the name of Jesus Christ will be given a sort of free pass. The rationale is that since their state of ignorance is due to circumstances beyond their control, God will admit them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. If true, this raises a troubling possibility—that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings being lost!

Quandaries such as this have painted many theologians and other Christians into a corner. Accordingly, some have challenged the traditional concept of a hell of eternal torment through the centuries. “In every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment” (*Four Views on Hell*, William Crockett, editor, 1996, p. 140).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, church councils through the ages have upheld the doctrine. Firmly rooted in traditional Christian belief, it’s an idea that will not go away. A *U.S. News and World Report* poll from not too long ago shows that more Americans believe in hell today than in the 1950s or even the 1980s and early 1990s (Jan. 31, 2000, p. 46).

The prospect of hell will continue to haunt people. As *U.S. News and World Report* concluded, “Hell’s powerful images will no doubt continue to loom over humanity, as they have for more than 2,000 years, as a grim and ominous reminder of the reality of evil and its consequences.”

More than one *hell* in the Bible

So what is the truth about hell? What does the Bible really teach? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of *three* hells—but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us discover why there is so much confusion about hell.

From the original languages in which the Bible was written, one Hebrew word and three Greek words are translated “hell” in our English-language Bibles. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word *sheol*, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as *hades*, one of the three Greek words translated “hell” in the New Testament.

The Anchor Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of both words: “The Greek word Hades . . . is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated ‘hell’ in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead . . . The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often

Lazarus and the Rich Man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Many interpret one of Jesus’ parables to mean that people have immortal souls that go to heaven or hell immediately at death. But does this parable really say that? Let’s examine the matter, paying close attention to the historical context.

Jesus presents the following story: “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

“So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’

“But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’

“And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’

“But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead!’” (Luke 16:19-31).

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the time that Jesus uses to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally.

Bible language expert Dr. Lawrence Richards, in discussing this passage in *The Victor Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology) to point out a spiritual lesson about how we view and treat others.

In this view of the afterlife, Hades, the abode of the dead, was “thought to be divided into two compartments” and “conversations could be held between persons” in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous. “Jewish writings also picture the first as a verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs,” separated from the second, which was described as a parched and dry land. These elements show up in Christ’s allegory.

“In Christ’s story God was the beggar’s only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him! . . . It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His

called Sheol . . . is usually translated as Hades, and the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek” (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, “Hades, Hell”).

Both *sheol* and *hades* refer simply to *the grave*. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this. Psalm 16:10 says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” In Acts 2:27, the apostle Peter quotes this

conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ has said, ‘You cannot serve God and Money’ (16:13). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, ‘What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight’ (16:15).

“There’s no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced . . . And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said . . .

“During this life the wealthy man would surely have been featured on the 1980s TV program, ‘Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.’ The cameras would have focused on his marble mansion with its decorative wrought iron gates . . . and the fabulous feasts he held for his important friends.

“As the TV equipment was taken into the rich man’s home, a cameraman might have stumbled over the dying beggar, destitute and abandoned just outside the rich man’s house . . . Surely he was beneath the notice of the homeowner, who never gave a thought to the starving man just outside, though all Lazarus yearned for was just a crumb from the overlaid tables.

“If we look only at this life, the rich man seems to be both blessed and fortunate, and the poor man, rejected and cursed. There is no question which state people would highly value, and which they would find detestable.

“But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by ‘Abraham’s side,’ a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from the place of blessing by a ‘great chasm’ (16:26). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible—or appropriate! . . .

“The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone. Despite frequent injunctions in the O[ld] T[estament] for the rich to share their good things with the poor, this rich man’s indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God’s ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself. Ah, how well the rich man depicts those Pharisees who ‘loved money’ and who even then were sneering at Jesus!

“And so Jesus’ first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which are hateful to Him. A love of money may serve you well in this life. But in the world to come, you will surely pay.

“But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have ‘Moses and the Prophets’ (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead . . .

“In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus’ words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor . . .

“This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed” (1994, pp. 193-195). This is the point of the allegory Jesus uses, Dr. Richards explains, not to teach the popular (but erroneous) idea of heaven and hell.

verse and shows that it is a reference to Jesus Christ. Here the Greek word *hades* is substituted for the Hebrew *sheol*.

Where did Christ go when He died? His spirit returned to God (Luke 23:46; see “The Spirit in Man” on page 14). His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus’ flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him.

Many scriptures that use the term *hell* in the King James Version are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word *sheol* is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times and “pit”—a hole in the ground—three times.

The Greek word *hades* is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation, in all instances but one the term *hades* is translated “hell.” The one exception is 1 Corinthians 15:55, where it is translated “grave.” In the New King James Version, the translators avoided misconceptions by simply using the original Greek word *hades* in all 11 instances.

One word is for demon imprisonment

A second Greek word, *tartaroo*, is also translated “hell” in the New Testament. This word is used only once in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4), where it refers to the current restraint or imprisonment of the fallen angels, otherwise known as demons.

The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* explains that *tartaroo* means “to confine in Tartaros” and that “Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined” (Lawrence Richards, 1985, “Heaven and Hell,” p. 337).

Peter uses this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were “delivered . . . into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” These fallen angels are now restrained while awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity.

The place where they are imprisoned is not some dark or fiery netherworld. Rather, their confinement is *on the earth*, where they wield influence over the nations and over individuals. The Gospels record that Jesus Christ and His apostles had very real encounters with Satan and His demons (Matthew 4:1-11; 8:16, 28-33; 9:32-33; John 13:26-27). Jesus even referred to Satan as the *ruler* of this world (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11).

The term *tartaroo* applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which human beings are punished after death.

Another word for burning—burning up, that is

Only with the remaining word translated “hell,” the Greek word

gehenna, do we see some elements people commonly associate with the traditional view of hell—but *not* in the manner portrayed in the hell of men’s imagination.



Gehenna refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem. The word is derived from the Hebrew *Gai-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom (Joshua 18:16). “Religiously it was a place of idolatrous and human sacrifices . . . In order to put an end to these abominations, [Judah’s King] Josiah polluted it with human bones and other corruptions (2 Kgs. 23:10, 13, 14)” (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary New Testament*, 1992, p. 360).

At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump—the place where trash was thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The

Many scriptures that use the term hell in the King James Version are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death.

carcasses of dead animals—and the bodies of despised criminals—were also cast into Gehenna to be burned.

Jesus thus uses this particular location and what took place there to help His listeners clearly understand the fate the unrepentant will suffer in the future. They would have easily grasped what He meant.

Immortal worms in hell?

In Mark 9:47-48, for example, Jesus specifically refers to *Gehenna* and what took place there. But without a proper historical background, many people draw erroneous conclusions as to what He said.

Notice His words: “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell [*gehenna*] fire—where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnom—was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly end up with several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the “worm” is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell: “The worm that

dieth not' was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret" (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase "the fire is not quenched" is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" appears in quotation marks. Jesus is quoting from Isaiah 66:24. A proper understanding of His statement begins there.

The context in Isaiah 66 refers to a time when, God says, "all flesh shall come to worship before Me" (verse 23). It is a time when the wicked will be no more. What will have happened to them? In verse 24 we read that people "will go out and *look upon the dead bodies* of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind" (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus notes that the bodies affected by the worms are *dead*. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns, He will fight those who resist Him (Revelation 19:11-15). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980),

Are Some Tortured Forever in a Lake of Fire?

The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are [or were cast, as many acknowledge this should be rendered]. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10).

Does this verse say that these two end-time individuals, the Beast and False Prophet, will be tormented for eternity?

The Beast and False Prophet are human beings. While still alive, they will be cast into the lake of fire. "Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Revelation 19:20).

We see from Malachi 4:1-3 and Mark 9:47-48 that any human being thrown into the lake

of fire *will be destroyed*. He will perish. His *punishment* will be eternal. But he will not be *tormented* for eternity.

Revelation 20:10 is speaking of Satan the devil being cast into the lake of fire at the end of Christ's 1,000-year reign. Reference to the Beast and False Prophet being cast in is only parenthetical here—as they will have died when that happened 1,000 years earlier. They will not still be burning there. Thus being tormented "forever and ever" applies principally to Satan—and presumably to his demonic cohorts as well (compare Matthew 25:41).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Greek phrase translated "forever and ever" here, *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, literally means "unto the ages of the ages." While this might mean for eternity, it could also mean until the culmination of the ages, which would allow for an ending point soon after the casting into the fire.

the original Hebrew word translated "worm" in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 means "worm, maggot, [or] larvae."

Neither Isaiah nor Christ is talking about immortal worms. The vermin of which they speak, maggots, would not die *while* maggots because, sustained with flesh to eat, they would live to turn into flies. The flies would then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle until there is nothing left for them to consume.

This background information helps us better understand Jesus Christ's words. In His day, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were constantly burning there or by a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed.

What does Jesus mean in Mark 9:48 when He quotes Isaiah in saying, "the fire is not quenched"? With the preceding background we can understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes *entirely* (Ezekiel 20:47). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. Rather, it *burns itself out* when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

When are the wicked punished?

But, we might ask, *when* does this punishment take place?

As we saw earlier, Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time *after* the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity "come and bow down" before Him (Isaiah 66:23, NIV). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus uses a common site of trash disposal in His day—the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem's walls—to illustrate the *ultimate fate* of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire. Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up—*consumed*—by a future Gehenna-like fire more than 1,000 years after Christ returns (Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15).

Peter explains that at this time "the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be *burned up*" (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes: "Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" (Revelation 21:1). The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable

abode for the righteous who, by that time, will have inherited eternal life.

The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus speaks of *gehenna* fire is 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 [*gehenna*].”

We should notice that Jesus does not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He says that God can *destroy—annihilate*—both the body and soul in Gehenna fire. (To learn more, see “Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?” beginning on page 8.)

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But when *God* destroys one in hell (*gehenna*), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls “the second death.”

The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or *gehenna*, at the end of the age. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

This verse and others like it show that the doctrine of universal salvation is false. Not everyone will be saved. Some will, in the end, refuse to repent—and they will suffer punishment. But that punishment is not to burn in fire without ending. Rather, it is to die a death from which there is no resurrection.

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is found in Malachi 4:1: “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.’”

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says: “‘You shall trample the wicked, for *they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet* on the day that I do this,’ says the LORD of hosts” (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate

fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes.

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire—but *not* the mythical hell of men’s imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully choose to reject His way of life, characterized by obedience to His law of love (Romans 13:10), will *die*, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity.

Remember that eternal life is something that God must grant, and He

Will the Torment of the Wicked Last Forever?

“**H**e shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

At first glance this passage may seem to confirm the traditional idea of a seething, sulfurous hellfire, mercilessly and eternally tormenting helpless immortal souls. But if we don’t already hold to a preconceived mental picture of hell, we can quickly grasp that this passage describes a considerably different circumstance.

First, notice the setting for this passage. From the context we see that the events it describes occur on earth amid earth-shaking events and disasters occurring immediately before or at Christ’s return, *not* in hell or the afterlife at all. This warning describes the punishment that will befall all the earth’s inhabitants “who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Chapter 13 describes this “beast”—an end-time dictatorial superpower opposed to God—and its mark. Those who accept this mark show that their allegiance is to this powerful system rather than God, and in chapter 14 God reveals the consequences of that choice—warning of the terrifying punishments that will precede Christ’s return (see verses 14-20 and the following two chapters).

Notice also in this passage that the *smoke* from these terrifying events ascends forever—it does not say that the people’s *actual torment* continues forever. David wrote in Psalm 37:20 that “the wicked shall *perish* [not be tortured forever in hell] . . . Into smoke they shall *vanish away*.”

The smoke is also no doubt associated with God’s wrath poured out on earth as described in Revelation 16—which includes widespread destruction, great heat, warfare and a massive earthquake. All these events will generate massive fires and a huge amount of smoke.

The properties of smoke are such that it “ascends forever and ever” (14:11)—meaning that nothing will prevent or stop it. Being a column of heated gas containing tiny, suspended particles, it rises, expands and eventually dissipates. Moreover, the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” does not have to mean for all eternity. It could just refer to this happening in the culmination of the ages.

The reference in verse 11 to the wicked receiving “no rest day or night” speaks of those who continue to worship the beast and his image during this time. They will be in constant terror and fear for their lives, and thus aren’t able to find a moment’s rest during this terrifying time of God’s anger.

Rather than describing eternal torment of people in hell, from the context we see that this passage is actually describing specific events to take place on earth at the end of this age.

will grant it to only those who repent and follow Him—not those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Realize that the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act not only of justice, but of mercy on God's part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause themselves and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not put them through that, much less torture them for all eternity in excruciating torment without end.

The encouraging truth of the Bible is that God is indeed a God of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. As Psalm 19:9 assures us, “The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.”

Does the Bible Speak of Hellfire That Lasts Forever?

Two verses that many assume prove the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire are Matthew 25:41 and 25:46. But do they? Let's take a closer look.

First, notice the setting to which they refer—when Jesus “comes in His glory” (verses 31-32). We are told that He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (verses 34-40). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners. They are appointed to assemble on Jesus' left hand. He then consigns the goats to “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

The word *everlasting* is translated from the Greek word *aiōnios*. The key to understanding this verse is knowing *what* will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (*aiōnios*) punishment and of life eternal (*aiōnios*). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishing of the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire *perish*—they are killed. As explained elsewhere, they suffer death—the second death

(Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

A plain and simple meaning of Matthew 25:46 that fits with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them—renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the *aiōnios* fire is a *one-time* event. It is a permanent punishment, the *results* of which will remain forever—that is, eternal death. It is not *ongoing* punishing that continues forever without end. This is the only explanation that agrees with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point needs to be made regarding the meaning of *aiōnios*. Genesis 19 describes God's destruction of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, for their wickedness: “Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 19:24). They were utterly destroyed—consumed by fire.

In the New Testament, the book of Jude describes these cities as “suffering the vengeance of eternal [*aiōnios*] fire” (verse 7). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to *aiōnios* fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting *effect*, not how long it actually burns.

Is Heaven God's Reward for the Righteous?

Is the reward of the righteous an eternity in heaven? It seems almost four out of five Americans believe it is (*National Review*, Nov. 9, 1998). Through the centuries this has been the hope taught by traditional Christianity.

What would going to heaven be like? What would we do there for all eternity? More fundamentally, does the Bible actually present heaven as the reward of those who are saved?

Human imaginings about heaven

Beliefs about heaven as the reward of the saved have varied considerably through the centuries. Traditional pictures of heaven sometimes show an entrance with a rainbow arching over it, perhaps marked by a bridge of gold or glass. St. Peter is usually represented as the doorkeeper. The inhabitants are shown accompanied by angels, or they may appear as angels themselves, having apparently sprouted a pair of wings.

Another common view in the popular consciousness has the inhabitants sitting about on clouds plucking harps. The decor of heaven often features jewels, stars, candles and trumpets. Theologians and philosophers have adapted their concepts of heaven through the centuries, influenced by the society around them. “Monks and friars, depending on whether they felt more at home in the countryside or in the city, preached a heaven defined primarily in terms of environment” (Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 1988, p. 108).

Based in part on their own experiences and preferences, some religious teachers have foreseen a rural setting while others have imagined an urban paradise. For the latter, “heaven became a city . . . or the visionary experience of celestial castles. Accounts of the other world resonate with descriptions of golden streets, jewelled buildings, and richly dressed residents” (*ibid.*).

Some in the Renaissance era envisioned a spicier paradise: “In its boldest form, the new theology envisioned heaven as a place of erotic human love in the bucolic setting of a comfortable natural landscape” (*ibid.*, p. 112).

An eternity in heaven doing what?

The relationship the heavenly inhabitants might have with God has been debated. A modern author describes the way many people have imagined interaction with God in heaven: “There the saints shall eternally, without

interruption, feast their eyes upon Him, and be ever viewing His glorious perfections” (John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven*, 1996, p. 221).

Others believe that, if this is all they are to do forever, heaven may prove to be a pretty boring place. As the same writer just quoted from puts it, the prayer of many could be: “Please God, don’t take me to heaven yet . . . I haven’t even been to Hawaii!” (p. 49).

The modern Christian concepts of heaven present a diverse landscape. Another writer says: “I have a theory that heaven will offer faithful Christians whatever they sacrificed on earth for Jesus’ sake. My mountain-climbing friend who intentionally lives in a slum area of Chicago will have Yosemite Valleys all to himself. A missionary doctor in the parched land of Sudan will have her own private rain forest to explore” (Philip Yancey, “What’s a Heaven For?” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 26, 1998).

For many people the most important aspect of heaven is the opportunity to see their loved ones again: “By far the most persuasive element of the modern heaven for many contemporary Christians is the hope of meeting the family again. Countless ‘in memoriam’ sections of newspapers throughout Europe and America reflect the belief that families parted by death will be reunited” (McDannell and Lang, p. 309).

God does have a plan that will reunite loved ones, as we will see. But the popular ideas of heaven fall far short of capturing the majesty and purpose of God’s plan.

Do people go to heaven at death?

The popular belief is that a good person goes to heaven immediately when he or she dies. But for the traditional Christian, things aren’t quite that simple. According to this view, the body goes to the grave, but the soul ascends to heaven.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 17th century, states: “The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, (which never die nor sleep,) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”

But does this concept agree with the Bible? Do the Scriptures indeed state that righteous people go to heaven when they die?

David, the king of Israel and author of many of the Psalms, whom God called “a man after My own heart” (Acts 13:22), did *not* go to heaven at his death. The apostle Peter, speaking under God’s inspiration, states, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that *he is both dead and buried*, and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29). He then

Ancient Pagan Belief in Heaven

The idea that “souls” go to heaven at death originated in pagan religion, not the Bible. A brief look at ancient history reveals that the people of Babylon, Egypt, and other kingdoms imagined such an afterlife.

According to *This Believing World*, by Lewis Browne, the Egyptian god Osiris was thought to have been killed, resurrected and taken to heaven: “Osiris came to life again! He was miraculously resurrected from death and taken up to heaven; and there in heaven, so the myth

the same wild guesses in its convulsive effort to solve the riddle of existence . . .

“In very early times that idea flourished not alone among the Babylonians and Egyptians, but also among the barbaric tribes in and around Greece . . . These mysteries [came] down from Thrace or across the sea from Egypt and Asia Minor . . . They declared that for every man, no matter how poor or vicious, there was a place in heaven. All



The Egyptian god Osiris was thought to have been killed, resurrected and taken to heaven.

declared, he lived on eternally” (1946, p. 83).

Browne explains: “The Egyptians reasoned that if it was the fate of the god Osiris to be resurrected after death, then a way could be found to make it the fate of man, too . . . The bliss of immortality that had formerly been reserved only for kings was then promised to all men . . . The heavenly existence of the dead was carried on in the realm of Osiris, and it was described in considerable detail by the Egyptian theologians. It was believed that on death the soul of a man set out at once to reach a Judgment Hall on high . . . and stood before the celestial throne of Osiris, the Judge. There it gave account of itself to Osiris and his forty-two associate gods” (p. 84).

If able to satisfy the gods, “the soul was straightway gathered into the fold of Osiris. But if it could not, if it was found wanting when weighed in the heavenly balances, then it was cast into a hell, to be rent to shreds of the ‘Devouress.’ For only the righteous souls, only the guiltless, were thought to be deserving of life everlasting” (pp. 86-87).

This idea of men being able to follow their savior-god into heaven was a central focus of the ancient mystery religions. Browne continues: “Mankind everywhere, in Mexico and Iceland, in Zululand and China, makes more or less

one had to do was to be ‘initiated’ into the secrets of the cult . . . then salvation was assured him, and no excess of vice and moral turpitude [i.e., depravity] could close the gates of paradise in his face. He was saved forevermore” (pp. 96-99).

Man has always wanted to live without ever dying. This world and all it offers has never satisfied humanity. For centuries mankind has searched for security and happiness in the hope of going to heaven at death. Regrettably, too many have embraced beliefs that cannot be proven true.

God alone knows the answers to the mysteries of life and death, and He reveals them in His Word, the Holy Bible. Contrary to what so many think, God does not promise eternity in heaven as the reward of the saved. Instead, Jesus says those who overcome will reign with Him in the coming Kingdom of God, which will be established on earth at His return (Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 11:15). Ultimately, they will inherit the entire universe and spirit realm as coheirs with Christ (compare Romans 8:17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:5-11; Revelation 21:7).

Paul's Desire to "Depart and Be With Christ"

The apostle Paul dedicated his life to preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In the process he was subjected to persecution, beatings and several periods of imprisonment. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was enduring a period of house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that the Roman government had authority to put prisoners to death. Paul knew what the future might hold for him, whether it be execution on the one hand or his release on the other.

In Philippians 1:23-24 he writes of the two possible outcomes: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

Many have assumed from Paul's words here that he believed that at the moment of his death his consciousness would leave his body to join Christ in heaven. But is this the case?

Before focusing on what this scripture says, let's notice what it does *not* say. It does *not* say *when* or *where* Paul would be with Christ if he departed. Neither is the terminology of departure intended to be geographic—as in leaving the earth to go to heaven. There is no reference to heaven in these verses. To conclude otherwise is to read assumptions into Paul's words. Paul is simply referring to departing from his present, physical life—leaving it behind through death.

When writing to the Philippians here, Paul was struggling with two desires. He wanted to be done with his fleshly life and be with Christ, but he also wanted to remain with God's people.

In his second letter to Timothy he speaks dogmatically of what lies ahead, knowing the end of his physical life is near and he is ready to depart: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have

finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me *on that Day*, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul, then, understood that he was not to receive his reward *immediately at death*. He knew that if executed, he would go to the grave, and there his remains would lie until the time of his resurrection. He understood that, since the dead have no thought processes whatsoever, in his next waking moment he would be with the returning Messiah, Jesus, joining Him along with the other saints at the time of the resurrection.

As he wrote to Timothy, he knew there was laid up for him a crown of righteousness that he would be given "*on that Day*" of Christ's appearing—at Jesus' second coming. As Paul noted, Jesus will bring Paul's reward with Him. Paul will receive it *at that time*, not before, along with all others who will be resurrected at Christ's return.

Describing this resurrection, Paul explains to the church in Corinth: "Behold I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Paul knew he would receive his reward—his "change"—at Christ's coming. He also knew that death before that time would mean "sleep," unconsciousness, until the resurrection.

The time from Paul's death until his resurrection at the same time as all of Christ's followers will seem to him but a mere moment. He will be with Christ as a glorified son of God in the next moment of his consciousness. No wonder Paul, weary of his sufferings in this life, desired to depart from it and to be with Christ!

adds that "David *did not* ascend into the heavens" (verse 34).

David is included in Hebrews 11:32 among those who died in faith, making him one of those of whom verse 39 says, "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, *did not receive the promise.*"



The Gospel of John, written about 1,000 years after David's death, states, "*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [i.e., Jesus Christ]*" (John 3:13). This means that Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets and all other righteous men

For many the most important aspect of heaven is the opportunity to see their loved ones again.

and women who lived before Christ's first coming *did not go to heaven*. They were buried in the grave as David was.

The view that a person's soul goes to heaven at death—though held by many in good faith—*cannot be found in the Bible*. It results from a misunderstanding of the Scriptures and confusion over what the Bible teaches about the resurrection.

Why a resurrection?

Theologians widely acknowledge that the Bible speaks of a resurrection, even if they're not sure what it means or when it takes place. The most common view is that at the resurrection the body rises to be reunited with the soul in heaven. But, as we pointed out earlier, the concept of the immortality of the soul—the soul as existing as something apart from the body—is not biblical. It takes its origins from pagan philosophy and tradition rather than the writers of the Bible.

We might pose this question: If it were true that at the resurrection the body is to rise to be united with the soul in heaven, why would God do things this way? What purpose would the resurrection serve? Why keep the body in the grave?

If the righteous immediately go to heaven at death, why wouldn't God send the complete being—soul and body—to heaven simultaneously, instead of keeping soul and body apart through the ages? For that matter, why even

Did Elijah Go to Heaven?

A biblical event many cite to support belief that the righteous go to heaven when they die involves the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God in the ninth century B.C. The Bible states that “Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). But does this contradict the testimony of John’s Gospel, which stated some 900 years after Elijah’s time that “no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man”? (John 3:13).

How can we explain this seeming biblical discrepancy? A closer look shows that the two passages can be reconciled easily enough.

Careful study shows that *three* “heavens” are



Three “heavens” are discussed in the Bible. One is God’s dwelling place, the place of His throne and the heaven where the resurrected Jesus is today. Another heaven discussed in the Bible is what we call outer space. It is the domain of the moon, planets, comets, asteroids, sun and stars.

actually discussed in the Bible. One is God’s dwelling place—the place of His throne—and the heaven where the resurrected Jesus is today. Speaking of Christ, who is our High Priest, the Bible says, “We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens” (Hebrews 8:1). Heaven is specifically called God’s dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15). The apostle Paul calls

this heaven the “*third* heaven” (2 Corinthians 12:2)—showing, as noted, that there are two others. It’s described as the “*third*” because, being in the spirit realm, it is beyond the other two, which are in the physical realm.

Another heaven discussed in the Bible, second in proximity to us, is what we call outer space. It is the domain of the moon, planets, comets, asteroids, sun and stars. David spoke of this when he reflected on the awesomeness of God’s creative handiwork, which he described as “Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained” (Psalm 8:3). Many scriptures mention “the stars of heaven” (Genesis 26:4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 28:62; Isaiah 13:10).

Yet another heaven, closest to us in proximity, is the envelope of air that surrounds our planet, consisting of oxygen and other gases. This heaven—earth’s atmosphere—is mentioned in such passages as Genesis 7:11-12, which describes the great flood of Noah’s day: “The windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights.” The Bible also speaks of “the birds of heaven,” those that fly overhead (Job 35:11; Jeremiah 16:4).

To determine which heaven is meant in a Bible

passage, we must carefully consider the context. It was into the lower reaches of this first, closest heaven—the earth’s atmosphere—that Elijah was taken. Let’s notice the proof.

God had earlier told Elijah he was to anoint a man named Elisha as a prophet to succeed him (1 Kings 19:16). Later, as the two men walked together, Elijah said to Elisha, “What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?” (2 Kings

2:9). This led to a discussion of God’s gifts to Elisha that would allow him to fill Elijah’s role.

“Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into



Yet another heaven is the atmosphere, the envelope of air that surrounds our planet, consisting of oxygen and other gases.

heaven” (verse 11). Elijah was now gone. The former followers and students of Elijah were now to look to Elisha as their new leader. “Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, ‘The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha’” (2 Kings 2:15).

Many readers assume that Elijah at that point was made immortal and taken to the heaven where God resides. This was not the case. The sons of the prophets knew otherwise. They knew the whirlwind had simply removed Elijah to another location on earth. They exclaimed to Elisha: “Look now, there are fifty strong men with your servants. Please let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the Spirit of the Lord has taken him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley” (2 Kings 2:16).

The disciples were concerned for Elijah’s safety, so they sent out a party of 50 men to search for him. The 50 searched for three days but did not find him (2 Kings 2:17).

Another passage proves conclusively that Elijah was not taken up to live in heaven. The Bible

records that Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram, the king of Judah, several years after he was removed in the whirlwind.

Notice the sequence of events recorded for us in the Bible. Elijah’s last recorded and dated act occurred during the reign of the Israelite king Ahaziah when Elijah told the king he would die for his sins (2 Kings 1:3, 17). Ahaziah’s reign lasted only about a year, ca. 850 B.C.

Elijah’s removal and replacement by Elisha is then recorded in the next chapter, 2 Kings 2. The story continues with incidents from Elisha’s life, including an encounter with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (2 Kings 3:11-14). Several years later Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, succeeded his father as king of Judah, ca. 845 B.C. (2 Kings 8:16).

Jehoram proved to be a wicked king, leading the nation of Judah in rebellion against God’s

commandments. A few years into Jehoram’s reign, and several years after Elijah’s removal, Jehoram received a letter *from Elijah* warning the king of dire consequences because of his sins. This letter is recorded in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15.

This letter proves that the prophet was still alive and on earth some years after he was removed by the whirlwind and replaced by Elisha. God had chosen Elisha to succeed Elijah as His prophet, so He bodily removed Elijah to another place, where he continued to live for at least several more years—as his letter to Jehoram demonstrates.

The Bible tells us nothing more about Elijah’s life following his writing of the letter. But he eventually died, just like the other prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament, who all died in faith, not yet receiving the eternal life God had promised (Hebrews 11:39).

Again, a careful reading of the Scriptures shows that Elijah’s miraculous removal by a fiery chariot involved transporting him to another location on earth, not to eternal life in heaven.

have a resurrection? If the soul goes immediately to heaven, why bother with bringing bodies back to life? The inescapable fact is that if popular teaching about heaven is true, there would be no logical reason for the resurrection.

Why do we see so much confusion about how the resurrection fits with the traditional view of heaven? Perhaps it's because support for the idea of going to heaven at death is not found in the Bible!

What is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Many people believe they will go to heaven because Jesus spoke repeatedly of the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 5:3, for example, He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Three other verses in Matthew 5 refer to the faithful entering "the kingdom of heaven," and the phrase appears throughout the book of Matthew a total of 32 times.

However, note that while Matthew is the *only* biblical writer who uses the term *Kingdom of Heaven*, other Bible writers use the term *Kingdom of God*—which appears 69 times in the New Testament. A comparison between events described in Matthew's Gospel and the other Gospel writers shows that the terms are used interchangeably.

For example, Matthew 5:3 records Jesus' words as: "Blessed are the poor

in spirit, for theirs is the *kingdom of heaven*." Luke, in describing the same blessing, records Jesus' words as: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the *kingdom of God*" (Luke 6:20).

Similarly, where Matthew 19:14 records Jesus as saying, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven," both Luke 18:16 and Mark 10:14 use the term "kingdom of God" rather than "kingdom of heaven." You can see other examples by comparing Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:14-15, Matthew 13:31 and Mark 4:30-31, and Matthew 19:23 and Luke 18:24.

So why do we see two different terms—"kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God"—used to describe the same thing?

To understand, we must consider an important cultural sensitivity and practice of Christ's day. In obedience to the third of the Ten Commandments, which forbade taking God's name in vain (Exodus 20:7), it was common to avoid routinely using the word "God." Instead people would substitute another word that others would understand as referring to God.

Often this seems to have been Jesus Christ's practice too. For example, shortly before His crucifixion when He is challenged under oath to state whether He was truly the Son of God, He responds: "It is as you said.

Was Enoch Taken to Heaven?

Some people believe Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5 declare that God took Enoch to heaven. But is that what these verses say?

Genesis 5:24 tells us that "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him." Hebrews 11:5 adds: "By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, 'and was not found, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God."

Some erroneously jump to the conclusion that Enoch was taken up into heaven, but notice the Bible nowhere says this. It simply says that God "took him." It does not specify *where* he was taken.

Jesus Christ later states in the Gospel of John that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). One of the points He makes is that one passage of the Bible cannot contradict another passage.

This same Gospel of John reveals a startling fact very pertinent to this matter: "*No one* has ascended to heaven *but He who came down from heaven*, that is, *the Son of Man* who is in

heaven" (John 3:13).

Clearly, Jesus Christ was the only human being who had ascended into heaven. The phrase "who is in heaven" lets us know that this was written by the apostle John after Christ's return to heaven. So even as late as this statement, no human being—and that includes Enoch—had ascended into heaven.

We later read about Enoch's fate in Hebrews 11:5: "By faith Enoch was taken away *so that he did not see death, 'and was not found*, because God had taken him'; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God." The word rendered "taken" can also mean "transferred elsewhere." And the New American Standard Bible says this was done "so that he *would not see death*"—a better translation than "did not," as we know from the same chapter of Hebrews that he died.

Notice in verse 13 the summary given of all of the men and women of faith listed here, including Enoch: "*These all died* in faith, *not having received*

the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (Hebrews 11:13). So Enoch definitely died as well as all the rest.

How, then, can it be that Enoch was transferred elsewhere so he wouldn't see death? God doesn't give us all the details of what happened, but a few scenarios have been proposed that do not conflict with the fact that Enoch died as the Bible says.

It may be that God transported Enoch elsewhere to keep him from being killed at a certain time—perhaps protecting him from martyrdom at the hands of angry persecutors who didn't like his announcement of coming divine judgment (see Jude 14-16). God likewise supernaturally transported Elijah and Philip to other places on earth (see 2 Kings 2:11; Acts 8:39).

On the other hand, we should observe that Enoch died young for his time—at age 365 while those before and after him lived into their 800s and 900s. Because of this, some speculate that God "took him" from life prematurely so that he would not have to live out his remaining centuries

in a miserable world (compare Isaiah 57:1-2). His next moment of consciousness will be the resurrection. In this case, "so that he would not see death" would refer to his not having to experience the process of dying—his life ending instantly.

Still others, putting the likelihood of Enoch experiencing persecution together with his early death, have concluded that Enoch was murdered—martyred for his preaching. Enoch being taken and not found would then refer to God removing his body and burying it—as happened with Moses (Deuteronomy 34:5-6).

In this case, Enoch being taken or transferred so that he would not see death is taken as separate matter—that of him being spiritually converted, transferred from the world's ways to God's way of living, so that he would not see ultimate death in the lake of fire (compare Colossians 1:13; John 8:51).

Again, we don't have enough details to know exactly what is intended. But we do know that Enoch did not skip death and go to heaven. He died, and no human being has ascended to heaven except Jesus Christ.

The Thief on the Cross

As Jesus Christ hung dying, He told a convicted criminal being crucified with Him, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Many people think Jesus assured the man he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what He meant?

The placement of the comma after “you” and before “today” would certainly seem to indicate this. However, notice how an entirely different meaning is conveyed if the comma is placed *after* “today” rather than before: “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.”

No punctuation in the original Bible texts

We need to first understand that original texts of the Bible (Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew and some Aramaic for the Old Testament) used no punctuation.

As Dr. E.W. Bullinger explains in *The Companion Bible*: “None of our modern marks of punctuation are found [in Bible texts] until the ninth century . . . The punctuation of all modern editions of the Greek text, and of all versions made from it, rests entirely on human authority, and has no weight whatever in determining or even influencing the interpretation of a single passage” (1990, Appendix 94, p. 136, emphasis in original).

In most cases translators and publishers of the Bible have done an admirable job using punctuation to clarify the meaning of the Scriptures. But this is one case where their doctrinal bias has regrettably obscured the meaning of Christ’s words. By placing a comma *before* “today” in Christ’s statement to the dying man rather than *after* it, they have Jesus saying something He never intended.

We know this because the Bible clearly says Jesus Himself did not go to paradise or heaven on the day He died! Instead *He died and was buried in the grave*. Notice the apostle Paul’s clear statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that *Christ died for our sins* according to the Scriptures, and that *He was buried*, and that *He rose again the third day* according to the Scriptures.”

Notice what Christ told Mary soon after He had

been resurrected: “Do not cling to Me, for *I have not yet ascended to My Father*” (John 20:17). A full three days after His death, Jesus Himself clearly said that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Jesus had earlier plainly said that He would lie in the grave for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). The Scriptures nowhere say that His body was buried while His soul went elsewhere. Jesus died and was buried. He went only to the grave. Therefore the dying criminal *could not* have been with Jesus in heaven that day, because *Jesus Himself did not go there then*.

If Jesus was not telling the man he would be in heaven or paradise on that day, what was He telling him?

Future Kingdom and paradise on earth

A fundamental principle for sound Bible study is to carefully check the context. Notice the specific wording of the man’s request: “Lord, remember me *when You come into Your kingdom*” (Luke 23:42). Notice that the thief expressed no expectation of immediately going to heaven with Jesus at the moment they died.

He may have already known something about the nature of the Kingdom of God—that it would be a literal kingdom to be established on earth by the Messiah, which many Jews of that day understood. Jesus Himself had previously given an entire parable “because they thought that the kingdom of God would immediately appear” (Luke 19:11). Jesus also taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come” (Luke 11:2). This Kingdom, as explained in our free booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, is the Kingdom that Jesus will establish *on earth at His return*, not a location in heaven to which we go when we die.

Notice also Jesus’ response to the man, telling him, “. . . you will be with Me *in Paradise*.” Understanding the nature of the biblical use of the term *paradise* is crucial to understanding this passage.

The Greek word here translated “paradise,” *paradeisos*, means an enclosed garden or park. In the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament in common use at the time of Christ,

this same word was used in references to the Garden of Eden. Besides its occurrence in Luke 23, the word is used only two other times in the New Testament. In both cases it refers to the place of God’s presence.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Paul describes a *vision* in which he “was caught up into Paradise.” Paul says this paradise was in “the third heaven”—the dwelling place of God.

Jesus tells us that “the tree of life” is located “in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 22:2 explains that the tree of life is to be in the New Jerusalem. God will come *from heaven* with this New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2-3) after the resurrections of the dead mentioned in Revelation 20. Only at that time will men dwell with God in this paradise.

Furthermore, the restoration of the land of Israel that will take place under the coming reign of Christ is compared in Isaiah 51:3 to the Garden of Eden—again, *paradeisos* in the Septuagint.

Putting together all these scriptures, we can see that the paradise Christ mentioned, in which men will dwell with God in His Kingdom, is to be *at a future time*.

How do we know this was Christ’s meaning? Again, as noted above, Jesus plainly said He was going to be dead and buried for the following three days and nights, after which He clearly told Mary that He had not yet ascended to heaven.

Some theologians and religious denominations try to redefine Christ’s use of *paradise* to say that this referred to where the righteous dead went before Jesus came—a sort of temporary “holding place” next to hell because heaven wasn’t available to them until Christ ascended to heaven after His death and opened the way for them to follow.

This concept, however, is straight out of pagan Greek mythology about life after death (the Elysian Fields as the section of the Greek underworld for good people) and not something taught in the Bible. The idea that the righteous dead of Old Testament times went to a place called “paradise” and later ascended to heaven after Jesus was resurrected is disproved by the apostle Peter’s plain statements in Acts 2:29 and 34—almost two months after Christ’s death and resurrection

—that King David “is both dead and buried” and “David *did not* ascend into the heavens.”

Putting together the relevant scriptures, we can see here the truth of the matter. The robber, facing imminent death while being crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39-41), sought comfort and assurance. Jesus provided it, telling the man, “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with Me in Paradise.” The “Paradise” of which Jesus spoke wasn’t heaven, but the Eden-like world to which the man would be resurrected according to God’s plan—as touched on later in this booklet.

Hebrew idiom lost in translation

Part of His reply, “Assuredly I say to you today” was a “common Hebrew idiom . . . which is constantly used for very solemn emphasis” (*The Companion Bible*, Appendix 173, p. 192). Examples of this Hebrew phrase, worded very similarly to Christ’s statement, can be found in Deuteronomy 30:18 (“I announce to you today that you shall surely perish”) and Acts 20:26 (“Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men”—New International Version).

Many centuries later, when the punctuation marks we see in our English versions were inserted, Jesus’ meaning was distorted by the wrong placement of the comma, and this Hebrew figure of speech was obscured. (Several other Bible translations and reference works, among them the Rotherham Translation, *The Emphatic Diaglott*, *The Concordant Literal New Testament* and *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, recognize the Hebrew idiom and correctly place the comma after “today” for proper punctuation.)

In conclusion, Jesus never said nor implied that the dying man would be in paradise or heaven on that very day. Christ was encouraging him by solemnly assuring him that a time would come, in God’s future Kingdom on earth, when the man would be resurrected and would see Jesus again.

This dramatic event can be properly understood only when we comprehend the time frame of God’s plan of salvation and the promised resurrections described in the Bible. These are laid out in greater detail in the next chapter of this booklet.

Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of *the Power*, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64). Here He clearly used “the Power” as a synonym for God—and this was obviously understood by the priests and religious authorities, who wanted to execute Him for blasphemy.

As recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, on about half the occasions when Jesus refers to God the Father, He substitutes another word. When speaking of the Kingdom of God, which was the core of His message (Mark 1:14-15), He nearly always uses the term “kingdom of *heaven*” instead. He isn’t talking about a kingdom that existed in heaven to which believers would go, but

Are There Saved Human Beings in Heaven?

In Revelation 19:1, relaying what he experienced in a spiritual vision, the apostle John states, “After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power to the Lord our God!’”

Must the great multitude praising God here be throngs of saved human beings now living in heaven? Have any human beings ever ascended to heaven?

The popular teaching is that when Christians die they immediately go to heaven, where they take up residence in their permanent abode. But can we find such a teaching in the Bible?

To understand the truth on any biblical teaching, we must consider *all* the passages on a subject. When we do, the truth then usually becomes clear. We must also look at plain biblical statements and passages first, and from them understand the meaning of those that are less clear.

Notice one such clear statement in John 3:13: “*No one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] who is in heaven.”

John wrote these words decades after Jesus died and ascended to heaven—and well after many of Christ’s followers had died—but he still affirmed that *no one other than Jesus* had gone to heaven.

Whose voices, then, could John have been

hearing when he recorded in the book of Revelation what he heard and saw? He refers to voices many places in the book. Let’s notice one example in particular:

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:11-12). So there are at least hundreds of millions of angels, and the voices in Revelation 19 could well be theirs.

Moreover, we should remember that John in the book of Revelation was receiving a vision of the future—with Revelation 19 concerning events at the time of Christ’s return and the resurrection of His followers. Even if verse 1 were referring to saved human beings appearing briefly before God in heaven and praising Him at that time (just after their resurrection), this would not mean that they are doing so today.

Indeed, those who have died are still dead and in the grave—unconscious and unable to praise God (Psalm 6:5; 30:9; Isaiah 38:18). Scripture, as we have seen, shows that no human being except Jesus Christ has ever entered heaven, and that remains so today. The voices referred to in Revelation 19, then, cannot be those of saved human beings now in heaven.

rather using a term that was synonymous with “kingdom of God,” as is clear from the other New Testament writers.

The other writers, who focused more on non-Jewish audiences in their books, use “kingdom of God” to make plain what Jesus meant. Thus, Christ’s use of the phrase “kingdom of heaven” does not mean the Kingdom is *in* heaven, but that it is of God, who is Himself in heaven. At the same time, however, the term is also accurate in the sense that this Kingdom will be established *from* heaven—as Jesus will bring it to earth from there, as we will see.

Jesus’ followers will join Him on earth

Jesus did not tell His disciples they should expect to dwell in heaven. He spoke instead of a kingdom belonging to God in heaven that is to be established *on the earth* at Christ’s second coming. Notice Jesus’ explanation that He would come to join His followers *on earth at His return* rather than have them come to live with Him in heaven where He currently resides.

After Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, He spent 40 days teaching His disciples, instructing them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). After this He joined His Father in heaven. Notice the instruction His disciples received after He rose into the sky:

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, *will so come in like manner as you saw Him go* into heaven’” (Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus speaks repeatedly of His return to establish the Kingdom of God *on earth* (Matthew 25:31-34; Luke 21:27-31). He will return to earth and establish His Kingdom *here*—not in heaven. In what is commonly called the Lord’s Prayer, He instructs His followers to pray to their heavenly Father, “*Your kingdom come*” (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). That kingdom is the true goal of every Christian (Matthew 6:33); we are to pray for its arrival.

In Luke 19:12 Jesus speaks of Himself in a parable, comparing Himself to “a certain nobleman [who] went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.” The “far country” is His Father’s dwelling place, which is in heaven. Jesus will bring the Kingdom of God to earth at His return. (To better understand what the Scriptures teach about the Kingdom of God, be sure to download or request your free copy of our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

Our eternal abode is to be here

One Old Testament prophecy is so specific about Jesus’ return that it tells

us exactly *where* He will arrive back on earth to establish His Kingdom: “And in that day *His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives*, which faces Jerusalem on the east . . . And the LORD shall be King over all the earth” (Zechariah 14:4, 9).

The incident we read about in the book of Acts that describes Jesus’ ascension tells us that it was on the Mount of Olives that He last talked with His disciples, and it was from the same mountain that He rose into the clouds before their eyes. He will return to the same mountain to begin His reign in the Kingdom of God.

Recall again that in Matthew 5:3 Jesus said the poor in spirit, the humble, would inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. Then consider that just two verses later, in verse 5, Jesus states, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit *the earth*.” How do we reconcile these statements? By understanding that the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, will be established on the earth.

This verse and many others describe the saints ruling *on earth* in God’s Kingdom. For example, Revelation 5:10, speaking of the resurrected saints, says: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and *they will reign on the earth*” (NIV).

Even beyond that, Revelation 21 and 22 state that ultimately God the Father and the heavenly city of God, the New Jerusalem, will descend to the earth, then renewed. The earth, then, will be the place of God’s throne. And the repentant of mankind, then glorified, will dwell with Him forever.

Yet we will not then be confined to the earth but will inherit the entire vast universe and spirit realm as coheirs with Jesus. This amazing truth is explained in our free booklet *What Is Your Destiny?* Be sure to request or download your free copy.

The reward of the saints is eternal life in the Kingdom of God. This will be given when Christ returns, but, as we have seen, Jesus will reign with His faithful followers *on the earth* rather than in heaven. And in the end, even God the Father will dwell with the saved *here*. The glorious future God has planned for us is far beyond any human dreams of life in heaven!

The Resurrection: God’s Promise of Life After Death

“If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). This question has intrigued the minds of men from ancient times to our day.

In the Bible God inspired the patriarch Job not only to pose this important question but to give us the answer. Responding to God, Job says: “All the days of [or from] my hard service I will wait, *till my change comes*. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands” (Job 14:14-15). Job affirmed that the dead *will* live again through a resurrection.

Other passages in the Old Testament also affirm the resurrection. Daniel 12:2, for example, prophesies of a time yet future when “many of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake* . . .”

But the way to eternal life was not fully understood in those days. It remained for Christ to come and fully reveal the truth. Jesus states: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25). It is through Christ that we can experience our own resurrection from the dead. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Let’s delve further into this matter of the resurrection. What is the impact of this teaching? And what lies ahead in terms of who will be resurrected and when?

More than a glimmer of hope

The teaching of the good news of the resurrection—that man can escape the power of the grave—set Christianity apart from other first-century religions and philosophies. Among Jewish sects the concept of a resurrection was a subject of controversy. Some dogmatically denied the dead would rise, and others said they would (Acts 23:8).

The world in which Jesus lived, besides being Jewish, was heavily influenced by the culture of the two empires—Greek and Roman—that had successively dominated the region for several centuries. The Greek and Roman religions held little hope for the dead.

“The old Greek belief, and its Roman counterpart, held that once the body was dead the disembodied soul lived in a miserable twilight existence . . . Sadness, silence and hopelessness seemed to brood over the life after death . . . Death was to men of those days the ultimate disaster” (J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator’s Testimony*, 1967, pp. 40-41).

The *New Bible Dictionary* affirms the dreary outlook of the day and tells us that the resurrection of Christ gave men more than a glimmer of hope. “The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world . . . Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith” (1996, p. 1010, “Resurrection”).

A truth that launched the Church

The riveting truth of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah launched the New Testament Church. Preaching on the day of the Church’s founding, as recorded in Acts 2, the apostle Peter thundered the good news:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; *whom God raised up*, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24).

The news of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth spread like a shock wave through the land. Jesus’ disciples were galvanized into action and began to preach with zeal. What had been regarded as a band of renegade Jews soon grew into the thriving Church.

In its early days the Church grew by thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The young Church spread hope—hope of eternal life through the resurrection. The disciples taught under God’s inspiration that all who accept Jesus as their personal Savior, repent, are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit will be resurrected (compare Acts 2:38; Romans 8:11).

The resurrection the disciples expected was not some sort of substandard half-life, such as the Greeks and Romans believed lay beyond the grave. The disciples were called to “take hold of the life that is *truly* life” (1 Timothy 6:19, NIV).

Jesus had told them before He was crucified, “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). Jesus had also shared with His disciples His intention for all of mankind: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Though we may enter into the abundant life of which Christ spoke in this life, it reaches its full realization in the resurrection from the dead.

The resurrection gives meaning to life

The first-century world held many conflicting ideas about life after death.

Pagan philosophies had clouded the understanding of most people.

Our situation is similar. In the Western world a significant number of people believe nothing lies beyond the grave. Atheism and agnosticism have left their marks. The world needs to hear and understand the original resur-



rection message of Christ and the apostles.

Many people, like those of the ancient world, are anxious about the matter of death. The truth of the resurrection proclaimed by God’s Word can counter the anxiety and hopelessness inherent in any approach that excludes God.

Speaking of the return

Many people, like those of the ancient world, are anxious about the matter of death. The truth of the resurrection proclaimed by God’s Word can counter the anxiety and hopelessness inherent in any approach that excludes God.

of Christ and the accompanying resurrection of the faithful, Paul encourages believers to “*comfort one another* with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The truth of the resurrection provides comfort for our natural anxiety about death.

The resurrection: Historical fact

Why should we believe in a resurrection from the dead? We should take heart because the resurrection of Christ, in whose steps we follow, is a biblically and historically confirmed *fact*.

After being executed and entombed, Jesus’ body disappeared, and even His enemies who wanted to refute His resurrection could not explain away the empty tomb. Jesus’ resurrection was confirmed by many witnesses—including on one occasion 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6). Peter, speaking on behalf of all the apostles, triumphantly proclaimed, “We are His *witnesses* to these things”—to the fact that “the God of our fathers *raised up Jesus*” (Acts 5:30-32).

Years later Paul similarly said of Jesus that “God raised Him from the dead [and] *He was seen for many days* by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are *His witnesses* to the people” (Acts 13:30-31).

The apostles and other members of the early Church *gave their lives* as willing martyrs for this truth—for they knew for certain that it was indeed the truth.

Every person in his own order

The fact that Jesus was resurrected as a forerunner of the future resurrection of His followers is understood by many Bible readers. What is not so clear to many is that the Bible describes *more than one* future resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes: “But now, Christ is risen from the dead, the *first-fruit* of those who have fallen asleep . . . For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ *all* will be made alive. *But each in his own order*; Christ the first-fruits, then those who belong to Christ at his appearing. And then the end, when he shall hand over his kingdom to God his Father” (verses 20-24, Montgomery New Testament).

The reference to firstfruits indicates that *other* fruits are to follow—Jesus here followed by those who are His at His return. Paul specifies that God has set an order in His plan by which He will bring up everyone—“all,” as it says—in a resurrection. And in this order, not everyone will be resurrected *at the same time*.

Notice that Jesus is here called the firstfruits. Yet His followers are elsewhere called firstfruits themselves—and firstborn (James 1:18; Revelation 14:4; Hebrews 12:23). Thus Christ is the first of the firstfruits. The implication is that yet others will follow as later fruits—at “the end,” as we saw in 1 Corinthians 15:24. And other scriptures confirm that, as we will see.

Those who believe that people go to heaven or hell at death have been troubled at the indications they see in Scripture that comparatively few will be saved. They frequently base this assumption on such passages as Matthew 7:13-14: “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. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

In these verses Jesus explains what happens in “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), in which God is not calling everyone to be converted *now*. We read in Revelation 12:9 that Satan “deceives the whole world.” John writes, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19).

Mankind as a whole is deceived—for *the time being*. Jesus states, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44). Jesus plainly indicates here that only certain ones will be in the resurrection to which He refers—those who are specifically called by God. The Bible teaches that in this particular age—the age preceding the return of Christ—God is calling only a small portion of mankind to enter and partake of His Kingdom.

“This is the first resurrection”

The coming resurrection of those who are called now in this age is further described in the 20th chapter of Revelation.

Let’s notice how John describes that resurrection: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. *They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.* (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) *This is the first resurrection.*”

“Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (Revelation 20:4-6, NIV). Notice that some are resurrected at the beginning of the 1,000-year reign of Christ—at “the first resurrection.” Those in this resurrection of the faithful will be raised immortal and incorruptible to reign with Him, never to die from then on.

But notice that the use of the term *first resurrection* shows that at least one more must follow!

Another resurrection follows

Indeed, as we can see, the same passage explains in a parenthetical note, “The *rest* of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” Clearly there is another resurrection 1,000 years *after* the first, and in this resurrection *others* will have the opportunity to receive salvation. They will be called to understand God’s truth and His plan during a period sometimes referred to as the “great white throne” judgment (verse 11).

This time of judgment is further described in verse 12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

Those resurrected in this group have never completely understood the truth of God. Consider that *the majority of all people who have ever lived have never heard God’s truth*. Rather than condemn such people to eternal suffering in a fiery hell, the God of the Bible is much more comforting and encouraging. He will extend the opportunity for eternal life *to everyone*—to relatively few in this age, but to billions of people in the coming second or general resurrection.

Judgment is much more than a final decision to reward or condemn. Judgment is a *process* that takes place over time before a final decision is

rendered. Those brought to a temporary, physical life again in this resurrection (see Ezekiel 37:1-14) will, for the *first* time, have their minds opened to the truth of God's plan. They will have the opportunity to decide whether they will accept and follow God's instruction or not.

After coming to see the truth, they will be judged according to their response to their new understanding. Many will accept that truth, repent and receive God's gift of eternal life—joining those made immortal in the first resurrection.

Past generations will be resurrected together

Jesus Himself spoke of this second resurrection period when He said that even the sinners of the long-destroyed city of Sodom would have the opportunity to repent in a future judgment. As He sent His disciples out on a mission



Jesus said the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical “queen of the South” from Solomon’s time would rise alongside those from Christ’s generation.

to preach the gospel (Matthew 10:9-14), He told them that some they would encounter would reject their message. Of these Jesus said, “Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city” (verse 15).

That there is room for tolerance in that day toward Sodom and Gomorrah shows they will have opportunity to repent and enter God's Kingdom. This is because, when they formerly lived, they either never had opportunity to know God or His way or never fully understood what they heard. The time for their calling and judgment is *yet future*. This is not a *second* chance for salvation, as some might view it. Rather, this will be their *first* chance—their first opportunity to act on a clear understanding of God's truth.

In a similar example, Jesus said the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical “queen of the South” from Solomon's time “will rise up in the judgment” alongside those from Christ's generation (Matthew 12:41-42). The people from those generations had lived and died many centuries earlier, never having understood the true God or

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His plan to offer eternal life through His Son Jesus the Messiah.

Having great mercy toward all people, God will offer salvation to all who lived and died in all ages without ever really knowing Him. The Bible tells us that God does not play favorites (Acts 10:34; Romans 2:11). He calls all at the time that is appropriate for them, and eventually all will be given the same wonderful opportunity to receive His gift of salvation.

Evidence of a third resurrection

Other scriptures indicate that a third group, the wicked who refuse to accept God and His way of life, will be resurrected just before final destruction in the lake of fire.

Jesus explained that some would deliberately and knowingly despise God's truth and spiritual understanding. These individuals, He said, will not be forgiven “either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:31-32).

Yet “*all* who are in the graves will hear [Christ's] voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). Even those who will not be forgiven are to be resurrected from the dead.

This group will consist of those who have deliberately rejected God's way of life even after they have been “once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (Hebrews 6:4-6). These few are people who were once forgiven and converted but later chose to reject the Holy Spirit and priceless knowledge God gave to them.

Because they “trampled the Son of God under foot, . . . treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and . . . insulted the Spirit of grace,” for them “no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Hebrews 10:26-29, NIV).

As we saw earlier, God has revealed that the ultimate fate of the incorrigibly wicked is to be burned up: “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” (Malachi 4:1).

This will be the end for those few who stubbornly have or will have refused to repent of their own self-willed rebellion in spite of all the opportunities made available to them by God. They will be destroyed in the lake of fire, dying in “the second death,” from which there will be no resurrection (Revelation 20:13-14; 21:8).

We are even told that death itself and hades (the grave) will be destroyed in this fire (Revelation 20:14). That is because the judgment of God will then be complete. Those who are saved will never again have to fear death. Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:26 will have then come to pass: “The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

Your Awesome Future

In light of these biblical truths, where does that leave us? As we have seen, the beliefs of people about the nature of heaven and hell have ranged over a broad—and confusing—spectrum. But there is one thing on which we all should agree: “The living know that they will die” (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

The prospect of death has hung over the heads of mankind as long as human beings have existed. When people do not understand God’s truth, they are gripped by the fear of death and enslaved in a cruel and unforgiving bondage.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary summarizes how the truth of the resurrection, exemplified in the resurrection of Christ, transformed the outlook of many: “In the first century this [fear of death] was very real. The philosophers urged people to be calm in the face of death, and some of them managed to do so. But to most people this brought no relief. Fear was widespread, as the hopeless tone of the inscriptions on tombs clearly illustrates. But one of the many wonderful things about the Christian gospel is that it delivers men and women from this fear . . . They are saved with a sure hope of life eternal, a life whose best lies beyond the grave” (Leon Morris, 1981, Vol. 12, p. 29, note on Hebrews 2:14-15).

The Bible reveals that the best that man can experience lies beyond the grave. It shows us that converted Christians will inherit eternal life at the first resurrection and that death will never again lay a claim on them: “So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

The life to come will be vastly superior to this present, temporary existence. It will be a life abounding in both purpose and pleasure: “In your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore,” wrote David (Psalm 16:11).

Let us now catch a glimpse of what awaits those who receive eternal life in the first resurrection.

What will we be like?

We can know in general terms what we will be like in this resurrection because the Bible tells us we will be like the resurrected Jesus. “The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven . . . And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man” (1 Corinthians 15:47, 49).

We learn that in the resurrection we will take on the same image, or likeness, that Christ has. This includes becoming a spirit being with a spirit body rather than flesh and blood (see verses 45, 50).

Moreover, Paul tells us that true Christians will “share the likeness of his Son,” who is “the eldest among a large family of brothers” (Romans 8:29, Revised English Bible). Did you catch that? We will be Jesus’ brothers and share His likeness. Though Christ has eternally existed and we have not, we will be elevated to a plane so high that we are called *children of God* and *brothers of Jesus Christ*.

The apostle John confirms these same two truths—that we’ll be children of God and that we’ll have the same glorified form as Jesus Christ. “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us,” he writes, “that we should be called *children of God*”

(1 John 3:1). And in the next verse he tells us, “We know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is.”

Raised in unimaginable splendor, we will share the divine glory and dominion of Christ (Romans 8:16-18; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Thesalonians 2:14; Hebrews



The prospect of death has hung over the heads of mankind as long as human beings have existed. When people do not understand God's truth, they are gripped by the fear of death and enslaved in a cruel and unforgiving bondage.

1:1-3; 2:5-9; Revelation 21:7)—though we will never equal Him. He is the one Son of God who has always existed, superior to all but the Father.

The glory of Christ

What is the glory of Christ like? During His physical ministry on earth, He gave three of His disciples a preview of His appearance in this glorified spiritual state. “He was transfigured . . . His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2).

Years later, at the writing of the book of Revelation, John saw a vision of the resurrected, glorified Christ. Notice how John describes His awesome appearance: “His hair was as white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed

like fire; his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of a mighty torrent . . . His face shone like the sun in full strength” (Revelation 1:14-16, REB).

This language describes Jesus Christ, the glorified Son of God, as a being of awe-inspiring brilliance. We, too, will share that dazzling appearance!

After His resurrection Jesus had the ability to take on the appearance He had when He existed in the flesh. Early on the morning after He rose from the garden tomb, Mary Magdalene visited His grave. When she saw the tomb was empty, she began to weep (John 20:11).

Then “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, ‘Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.’” (verse 15). So Jesus appeared to Mary



“Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake . . . Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.”

as a normal human being rather than in His radiant state. She at first mistook Him for the gardener.

On another occasion Jesus appeared from nowhere inside a closed room where His disciples were meeting: “And after eight days His disciples were again inside . . . Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’” (John 20:26). After His resurrection Jesus was able to pass through solid barriers—such as the walls of a building or the stone enclosure of His tomb.

Like Jesus, when we are changed to spirit we will not be limited by the laws that govern physical things. With the ability to simply materialize as Jesus did, we will not be subject to restrictions on physical objects. As part of this change we will no longer need to eat to survive, but apparently will have the option of eating for pleasure and fellowship if we choose. In two of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances He shared a meal with His disciples (Luke 24:28-30; John 21:9-15).

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Those to whom God gives eternal life in the resurrection will forever possess these supernatural characteristics. Notice the description of the resurrection in the book of Daniel: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise *will shine like the brightness of the heavens*, and those who lead many to righteousness, *like the stars for ever and ever*” (Daniel 12:2-3, NIV).

To better understand just what all this means, be sure to send for or download our free booklet *What Is Your Destiny?*

What will we do as spirit beings?

As spirit beings in God’s family, we will live and work at the highest possible level and environment. Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). We will spend eternity with God in His environment—the world of spirit and unimaginable power. We will not sit idle in our new life. We will be positively occupied. Jesus said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17).

When Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, those in the first resurrection will serve as judges (Revelation 20:4) and priests (verse 6) and will “reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). We will not go to heaven to live passively and idly.

Jesus will return to a world that has largely destroyed itself by living in opposition to the commands of its Creator. He will teach people to obey God’s laws. He will begin a massive reeducation process to help people *unlearn* their old ways of doing things and for the first time learn to do things God’s way.

Notice Isaiah’s prophecy of this future rule of Jesus as Messiah and King over the earth, wherein “mountains” and “hills” are symbolic of larger and smaller kingdoms or political states respectively:

“Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

“He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:2-4).

At that time Christ will teach all people who have not known God’s way.

He will be assisted in this by all who are changed into glorified children of God in the resurrection at His return (see Luke 20:36).

If we enter that new life we will be endowed with great power and unlimited energy. As immortal members of God's family we will be like "the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, [who] neither faints nor is weary" (Isaiah 40:28).

A change for the better

Describing the event that will change our mortal bodies, Paul writes: "The sun has a splendour of its own, the moon another splendour, and the stars yet another; and one star differs from another in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing *is raised imperishable*. Sown in humiliation, *it is raised in glory*; sown in weakness, *it is raised in power*; sown a physical body, *it is raised a spiritual body*" (1 Corinthians 15:41-44, REB).

God will give us bodies that will never tire nor grow ill—and minds having the kind of supernatural abilities He has. Reigning with Christ (Revelation 2:26; 3:21), we will help bring about worldwide peace. We will assist in spreading the knowledge of God to the most distant lands in His globe-spanning program of reeducation. "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain," He tells us, "for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

Those changed at Christ's return will include all His faithful followers at His return as well as the dead who were called, had repented and who lived in faithful obedience to God. It will include all of the faithful listed in Hebrews 11, who "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (verse 13).

Those who died in faith include Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (verses 17-21). The promise they have not yet received is the promise of the Kingdom of God. As Jesus says, "I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:11). Remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with the Kingdom of God, which Christ will establish on earth at His return.

Responding to God's invitation

You can be among those who arise from all parts of the world in the resurrection to be with Christ in His Kingdom—if *you respond to God's invitation*. God is issuing that call through the preaching of the gospel. This very booklet you are reading is part of that effort.

The calling of God is not offered to everyone in this age. Jesus told His disciples that the understanding of God's truth is not yet available to many:

"It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given" (Matthew 13:11).

The Bible speaks in several places about God's "elect" or chosen people. They are called to understand these things now, in this present age, but the rest—the vast majority—will not be called until later.

Most of the people of Israel, God's nation spoken of extensively in the Old Testament, were not called to understand the Kingdom of God during their lifetimes. Their hearts were hardened, their minds blinded. But the opportunity for most of them will come in the second resurrection. "Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded" (Romans 11:7).

Yet as Paul explains in this same chapter, the time is coming when "all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob [i.e., Israel]'" (verse 26). God's calling is carried out according to His timetable. When all is said and done, His plan is entirely fair to everyone.

Peter explains that those who now become a part of His Church are chosen in this age to receive salvation in the first resurrection. Peter says of them, "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

The good news is that God eventually will offer eternal life to everyone who repents. He desires that everyone enter His Kingdom. He wants to share this opportunity for eternal life with all (2 Peter 3:9).

In a final, breathtaking view of what God has in store for those who serve Him, the apostle John was inspired to write this glimpse of the future in Revelation, the last book of the Bible: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away . . . He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son" (Revelation 21:4, 7).

The future God has planned for us is fantastic beyond belief! It is far superior to the fanciful heaven of men's imagination. God will share the real future with all who repent and turn from their sins. As for those who willfully refuse to repent, they will not suffer forever in hell. They will simply cease to be. But this need not happen to you.

You may share in the eternal Kingdom of God if you heed the words Jesus spoke when He began His ministry: "The time has come . . . The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe the good news!*" (Mark 1:15, NIV).

Take comfort in the truth of God. There is no need to fear death if you turn your life toward Him. After all, He wants you to live with Him in abundant joy forever and ever. And He'll make that happen—if you let Him!

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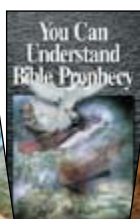
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