



THE BIBLE STANDS

*The Bible stands though the hills may tumble,
It will firmly stand when the earth shall crumble;
I will plant my feet on its firm foundation,
For the Bible stands.*

Answers to Special Passages on the Death of the Wicked

Does the story of the rich man and Lazarus prove the immortality of the soul (Luke 16:19-31)?

There are several points here that should be considered:

1. This story does not teach that immortal souls leave the body at death--yet that is what some people say it teaches.

If the story is to be taken literally, after death the rich man is said to have had eyes and a tongue,--real body parts. He asked that Lazarus dip the tip of his finger in water. That would mean the whole body was in heaven or in hellfire. Yet, at death the body goes to the grave.

2. If this story is literal, then heaven and hell are within talking distance of each other. What misery this would bring to the people in heaven!

3. When the rich man pleaded that Lazarus be sent back to earth to warn others against hell, Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And "if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead" (Luke 16:29, 31).

Notice here what Christ is actually teaching: (1) If living humans want guidance, they should study the Bible. (2) If they reject the Bible, it would do no good if one rose from the dead and tried to instruct them.

The wording here is exquisite: "Neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." Christ does not say, "though one came back from the spirit world," but "though one rose from the dead". For that is where people are after they die: dead.

This parable teaches that some people are alive, others are dead, and the live people had better read and obey the Word of God before they are dead!

4. If the story is to be taken literally, Abraham is the great center of heaven, not God, and then those in heaven are leaning on "Abraham's bosom".

5. Doctrines should not be built upon parables or allegories. To base a doctrine on this one, leads to spirits with bodies, and heaven and hell next to each other.

6. If this parable is to be taken literally, then Christ is contradicting His own statements made elsewhere, where He definitely states the time when the faithful will receive their reward and the wicked are cast into consuming fire:

"When the Son of man shall come in His glory, . . . and before Him shall be gathered all nations: ... then shall the King say unto them on His right hand, Come, ye blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom . . . Then shall He say unto them on the left hand, Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire."--
Matthew 25:31-32, 34, 41.

7. The message is for us today: We, the living, "have Moses and the prophets"; let us "hear them." Yes, let us study God's Word to know the truth of this matter. And, doing so, we learn that everyone is unconscious at death, and that the righteous are not immediately taken after death to heaven, and the wicked are not judged until a future time.

8. A parable or allegory may be used to teach a lesson, but that does not make every part of the story true. In Judges 9:7-15, is the story of the trees going "forth on a time to anoint a king over them." The story was meant to teach a lesson, but we do not accept that the story is itself true. (Another example would be 2 Kings 14:9, where the thistle sent the cedar the message, "Give thy daughter to my son to wife.") We do not attempt to prove that trees talk and they have kings, or that thistles get married. To do so would be trying to make the story prove more than was intended by the speaker. The same would apply to this parable by Christ.

In the Bible, we find such phrases as "everlasting punishment" (Matthew 25:46), "everlasting fire" (Matthew 25:41), and "tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). Doesn't this prove an eternally burning hell and an immortal soul?

The truth is quite different. The Greek and Hebrew words, sometimes translated "everlasting" or "forever," only mean a period of time until a certain thing is ended. Consider these points:

1. The New Testament words, translated "everlasting" and "for ever", come from the Greek noun, *aion* (or from the adjective *aionios* derived from the noun). Learning how these words are used elsewhere in the Bible, we find their real meaning. Here are several examples:

Matthew 13:39--"The end of the world [*aion*]."--But how could something supposedly "endless" have an end? And, according to this verse, it did have an end.

Ephesians 1:21--Christ has been exalted above "every name that is named, not only in this world [*aion*], but also in that which is to come".

1 Corinthians 2:7--What "God ordained before the world [*aion*]."

Hebrews 5:6--"Thou [Christ] art a priest for ever [*aion*]." Yet Christ will only be a priest until sin has been blotted out.

Philemon 15-16--"Thou [Philemon] shouldst receive him [Onesimus] for ever [*aionios*] . . . both in the flesh, and in the Lord." Is Philemon to take back Onesimus as his servant forever?

H. C. G. Moule, the well-known Greek scholar, makes this comment about Philemon 15-16:

"The adjective tends to mark duration as long as the nature of the subject allows."--The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges.

Jude 7--"Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them . . . suffering the vengeance of eternal [*aionios*] fire." But those cities are not still burning. They are though by some today to be under the south part of the Dead Sea. God turned "the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes." (2 Peter 2:6).

If the *aionios* fire of Sodom and Gomorrah, sent as a judgment from God to destroy the wicked living there, burned itself out in ashes and is no longer burning, we can conclude that the *aionios* fire of the final judgment on the wicked will do likewise.

2. *Olam* is the Old Testament equivalent to *aion* in the New Testament. Here are some examples:

Exodus 12:24--The Passover was to be kept "forever [*olam*]." But it ended at Calvary (Hebrews 9:24-26).

1 Chronicles 23:13--Aaron and his sons were to offer incense "for ever [*olam*]," and have an "everlasting [*olam*] priesthood" (Exodus 40:15). But that priesthood ended at the cross (Hebrews 7:11-14).

Exodus 21:1-6--A servant who desired to stay with his master, must serve him "for ever [olam]." Must he serve him through all eternity, after both reach heaven?

Jonah 2:6--Later describing his experience in the whale, Jonah said, "the earth with her bars was about me for ever [olam]." Yet this "for ever" was only "three days and three nights" long (Jonah 1:17).

2 Kings 5:27--Because Gehazi lied in order to enrich himself, Elisha said, "The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed for ever [olam]." Was Gehazi's family to never end, and that leprosy to be perpetuated for all time to come?

3. The Old Testament word, olam, and the New Testament word, aion, are equivalent terms. We know this to be true for two reasons: (1) The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, always translates olam by aion. (2) Whenever an Old Testament passage containing olam is quoted in the New Testament, aion is used (Hebrews 1:8; 5:6; 6:20; 7:17,21; 13:20; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 1:11).

Both words clearly have a very limited time value, and do not mean an eternal time length.

According to the Bible, don't passages in which the word "hell" is used, show that the wicked go there as soon as they die, and then remain there?

1. In the Old Testament, the word, "hell," is always translated from one word. That word is sheol. Sheol means "the grave," and never "a place of burning" or "hellfire." Sheol simply means "the unseen state." Study any analytical concordance, and you will nowhere find the idea of fire or punishment in the usage of sheol.

Jonah 2:1, 2--This is a good example of how sheol is used. "Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, . . . out of the belly of hell [sheol] cried I." There is no hellfire in a whale's stomach. The marginal reading of this text is "the grave."

At death, everyone, both good and bad, goes to sheol.

Psalms 89:48--"What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave [Sheol]?"

Job 17:13--Regarding godly Job: "If I wait, the grave [sheol] is mine house."

Psalms 9:17--Regarding the wicked: "The wicked shall be turned into hell [sheol]."

2. In the New Testament, the word, "hell," is translated from three different words:

(1) Tartaros, which means "a dark abyss." This occurs only in 2 Peter 2:4. Satan and his angels have been cast out of heaven and down into the darkness of this world, and they are being "reserved" unto the day of judgment, a future time when they will receive their punishment.

(2) Hades, which means only "the grave," is translated, "hell," ten times in the New Testament.

The Septuagint (which is the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament) almost always translates sheol (the Old Testament Hebrew word for grave) by the word hades. Therefore, they have the same meaning.

Psalms 16:10--This is a prophecy of Christ in the grave, and says, "Thou [God] will not leave My soul in hell [sheol]." It is quoted in the New Testament as "hell [hades]" (Acts 2:27). It is clear that sheol and hades mean "the grave." That is the meaning given to them by all Bible scholars.

Acts 2:27--This text speaks of Christ as being in hades. But we all agree that Christ did not go into hellfire! Christ went into the grave.

(3) Gehenna is the third word which, in the New Testament, is translated "hell." This time "hell" is the correct translation!

This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word, Hinnom (Gehinnom, the Valley of Hinnom), the name of a valley on the south side of Jerusalem used as the city dump. Garbage was burned up there.

Of the twelve times Gehenna is used, two facts stand out:

a. The "body" as well as the soul is said to be "cast into hell." Twice the phrase, "the whole body," is used (Matthew 5:29-30; 10:28).

b. In not one of those twelve instances does the text tell when the wicked will be "cast into hell." The fiery judgment is simply described as a future event. Thus it is clear that the Bible never says that anyone who goes into hellfire--goes there at death. Not once does it say that anyone is now suffering in the fire of hell.

Therefore, the fiery hell does not come right after death, but at some later time. The "whole body" is not cast into hellfire at death, but is placed in the grave.

The Gehenna passages indicate that the wicked are "cast into" the fire. The phrase, "cast into hell [Gehenna]," is used in six of the twelve times Gehenna is found in the New Testament. This is matching the parallel where refuse is cast into the fires of Gehenna Valley.

Is there no place where we are told when this hellfire occurs? Yes, there is. Revelation 20 explains that, after the millennium, the wicked are raised to life and, after the final judgment before the great white throne, they are cast into "the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:12-15). It is at that same time that "death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (Revelation 20:14).

Does that lake of fire experience occur eternally? Obviously not, for at the same time that the wicked perish in the flames, "death and hell" are destroyed also! Lastly, we are told what that lake of fire experience actually is: "the second death." It is not eternal life in misery, but the final obliteration of the wicked. There will be no endless misery to cause concern to God's redeemed ones. The fire will burn out in a very short time, and go out.

Then, the righteous will come out of the city and the wicked will be ashes under their feet.

"For, behold the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch."

"But unto you that fear My name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in His wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts."--Malachi 4:1-3.

The bible says that hellfire will not be quenched and that their worm dieth not. (Mark 9:43- 48; Isaiah 66:24). Doesn't this prove the immortality of the soul?

It is clear, from all we have so far studied, that hellfire is a future event and the final death of the wicked. Prior to that time, the lost ones are resting quietly in the grave.

Christ declared we should "fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]" (Matthew 10:28). "Destroy" means "consume" or "annihilate". It does not mean "not destroy."

The Mark 9:43-48 passage refers back to the Isaiah 66:24 statement: "They [the redeemed] shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of them that have transgressed against Me; for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched" (Isaiah 66:24).

This passage is clearly speaking of bodies, not spirits, which the fire and worms work on.

The word "hell" in Mark 9:43-48 is from the Greek word Gehenna--which is the equivalent of the Hebrew, Hinnom, that garbage dump near Jerusalem, where the carcasses of animals were cast.

Jesus uses that town dump as an illustration of the fate that awaits the wicked. In the Valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, the animals are burned up as they are brought and cast there. One animal is burned up, and then another is brought and thrown in.

But, in the final destruction of the wicked,--they are all placed in the hellfire at the same time--and all burn up together, and then are gone forever.

This final fire, which will destroy the wicked, is in the Bible called "unquenchable." Why?

About a hundred years ago, a fire fanned by strong winds roared across the city of Chicago. It was a terrible conflagration. If I told you it was unquenchable, what would that mean to you? Would it mean that fire is still burning? Or would it mean that the fire could not be put out while it was burning? The Chicago fire was unquenchable, yet it only lasted a few days. It was "unquenchable," because no one could extinguish it, yet it went out by itself when there was nothing more to burn.

Elsewhere in the Bible we are told that hellfire will be a devouring fire (Revelation 20:9) and a destroying fire (Matthew 10:28). As soon as the fuel is gone, the fire will stop.

That is what happened in the fire God predicted would burn down Jerusalem.

Jeremiah 17:27--"If you will not hearken unto Me, . . . then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof [of Jerusalem], and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched." [In the Septuagint translation, the very same Greek root is here used for "quenched" as is in Mark 9.]

That prophecy was literally fulfilled later, when the Babylonians came and burned down the city (2 Chronicles 36:19-21). But the city is not still burning, even though the fire which destroyed it "shall not be quenched."

Revelation 14:11 says, "The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever." How do you explain that?

The passage says this: "The smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name" (Revelation 14:11).

This passage is taken with little change from an Old Testament prophecy about Idumaea (ancient Edom):

"And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever." --Isaiah 34:9-10.

Notice the points mentioned here: First, about the fire: (1) Not be quenched; (2) night nor day; (3) smoke goes up for ever. Second, about the wasteland which shall afterward result: (1) from generation to generation it shall lie waste; (2) none shall pass through it for ever and ever.

Using the correct meanings of "for ever," which we have discovered, we find that fire predicted by Isaiah to occur in Edom--did just that. It was a thorough fire which could not be quenched while it was burning. It burned night and day as long as it burned. The smoke from the fire went up as long as it burned. When the fire stopped, it would lie waste from generation to generation thereafter, and no one would pass through it. (If the fire did not cease, it could not afterward, as predicted, "lie waste.")

Ancient Idumaea is a desolate wasteland today, and its cities are ruins. The prophecy was exactly fulfilled--yet that fire went out thousands of years ago. The smoke of that burning stopped when the fire went out.

With that in mind, we turn our attention to the equivalent prediction in Revelation 14:11 and, using the correct translation of *aionios* ("for ever"), we find that this verse agrees with all the others: The fire will burn only until the wicked burn up and are consumed. When the fire goes out, the smoke will cease also--otherwise the redeemed could live on the earth amid smoke going up forever!

We must let the Bible agree with itself! The meek will inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5: Psalm 37:11), not the wicked! How could the redeemed enjoy the new earth if the wicked were endlessly burning and suffering on its surface?

To conclude this brief study, let me tell you of a man I met in Oregon, about thirty years ago. He was a lay evangelist, and I asked him how he got started. He told me he once had a friend, with whom he shared our historic beliefs. But his friend simply could not grasp the great truth that God does not burn people in hellfire without end. Yet this man was certain his friend was sincere and would accept the truth if it was presented to him clearly enough.

I asked him what happened. He said he studied with his friend for two years, and during that time, my friend became a thorough Bible student. Then, one evening, he presented to his friend passages he found which described how the hellfire will burn on the surface of the earth, His friend was convinced, for he saw, therefore, that (1) the fire could not be now burning, and (2) it would have to be brief, or the saints could not inherit the earth and live thereon through all eternity.

How thankful we can be that the Bible is so consistent with itself. The apparent problems are caused by misunderstandings by those who translated the book. The King James translators did not understand that *aion* did not mean forever, and that the grave was not hellfire.

The Bible does not say that the judgment fire will burn endlessly, for this blazing fire on the surface of the earth must go out, so God can create "a new earth" (2 Peter 3:12-13 and Revelation 20-21). There must therefore be an end to the fire, else this earth could not be recreated--so the meek could inherit it and dwell on it through all eternity.

How wonderful it is to know that our God is a God of deepest love. Yes, it is true that the wicked must die, for they could never be happy in heaven. But how kind it is of Him to quickly end their miserable lives!

They will be raised after the millennium only long enough to learn the issues in the great controversy between good and evil, and to understand how their lost condition was their own responsibility.

Then they will quickly cease to exist. There will be a few that will burn longer, who like Satan and his angels; will burn for a time; but, for most, death will come very quickly.

The Bible nowhere says that souls are immortal, but instead declares that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4).