

Will Hell Ever Freeze Over?

People will use various idiomatic phrases to describe an impossible or very unlikely situation or event. One such phrase is, "When (or until) hell freezes over." This speaks to the fact that the fires of hell will endure forever. However, there is one place where you could not use this phrase. Every winter Hell, Michigan does freeze over. However, if global warming continues as predicated this may not be true much longer.

Have you ever heard an individual remark after enduring a long sermon, "I thought I'd die before we got out of church. The preacher went on preaching for eternity!" It is difficult for our time bound minds to truly understand the concept of eternity. Eternal punishment is even more difficult for the human mind to fathom. In reality, hell has no space and time such as we are bound to in this world. That fiery realm is spaceless and timeless, or the opposite of space and of time, both of which are wholly inconceivable to us in our present state.

Meaning of Eternity

The word "everlasting" comes from the Greek word "aionios". It means "without beginning or end, that which always has been and always will be" (Thayer's p. 20). The term is used to refer to: Hell; God (Rom. 16:26); His power (1 Tim. 6:16); His glory (1 Pet. 5:10); the Holy Spirit (Heb. 9:14); redemption is affected by Christ (Heb. 9:12); consequent salvation of men (Heb. 5:9); God's rule (2 Pet. 11); etc. Thus, hell is just as everlasting as God, the Holy Spirit, etc.

Some teach that "eternity" means only "age-lasting." The word "eternal" may denote

"age-lasting," that is, so long as an age endures, whether of man, a dispensation or time. When it pertains to the age beyond the judgment and the passing of this present order of time, it has the literal meaning of eternal or never-ending. The present age (this world) is always contrasted with the age to come as temporal, while the future age is to be endless. Is heaven just age-lasting? (Mt. 25:46). Is God just age-lasting? (Rom. 16:26). If God had intended to say the wicked will be punished eternally, what words would He have used to describe it? They make it impossible to convey the idea in human language.

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus used the same Greek word in the same sentence to describe eternal life and to describe eternal punishment. Jesus said, *"And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."* The longevity of Heaven stands or falls alongside the longevity of Hell; if one will eventually end, so will the other. Any argument that will shorten the time in one will do so in the other. Thus, we must either admit the endless wretchedness of hell or give up the endless happiness of heaven. It is curious that there is no dispute over the duration of heaven. All understand the meaning of "eternal" when applied to heaven. Why would the meaning automatically change when applied to hell?

Consider the fact that there will be eternal day in heaven and eternal night in hell. The righteous (before the throne of God) *"serve him day and night"* (Rev. 7:14,15). The wicked (who worship the beast) *"...have no rest day and night"* (Rev. 14:11). Of heaven it is said, *"there shall be no night there"* (Rev. 21:25). Hell is darkness of night. Thus, when the day ends in heaven, the continuous torture in hell will cease.

C.S. Lewis once wrote, "I have met no people who fully disbelieve in Hell and also had a living and life-giving belief in heaven."

Descriptions of Eternal Punishment

A couple of descriptions of hell denote

its eternal duration. First, hell is described as an unquenchable fire (Mk. 9:48). As the bush burned before Moses and yet was not annihilated (Ex. 3:2) so are the fires of Hell. To say that Hell shall end is to say its fire shall be quenched. The second phrase denoting the duration of Hell is, *"Worm dieth not"* (Mk. 9:48). It is a figure borrowed from the city dump of Jerusalem, where maggots were forever feasting on rotting corpses. The undying worm everlastingly consuming and never consumed.

Arguments Against an Eternal Hell

Some will argue that an eternal Hell is contrary to the nature of a just God. It is argued God would be unjust to punish men eternally for sins committed over a few decades. Yet, man is too sinful or foolish to see His justice. *"Who hath known the mind of God or who hath been His counselor?"* (Rom. 11:34). The principles of good and evil are eternal. Justice requires eternal happiness as a reward for good. The punishment for evil is eternal misery. Nothing short of this will appease Divine Justice. God is not saving Hell to spring on us as a surprise on Judgment Day. Man has been thoroughly and lovingly warned (Lk. 12:4,5). No one will go there by accident. They fail to realize that there are many things we do not want, but that justice nevertheless demands. In 2 Peter 3:9, God is not willing that any should perish, but verse ten says many will perish.

Punishment reinforces the justice of God, it does not violate His justice. In Psalm 50, God speaks to the wicked (those guilty of stealing, adultery, slander, deceit) and says in verse twenty-one, *"These things you have done, and I kept silence: You thought that I was just like you; I will reprove you, and state the case in order before your eyes."* Because God had not immediately punished their wickedness, the transgressors assumed that He was just like them; no holier, no purer, and just as indifferent to sin. Adam and Eve knew that it would be possible to hide from one another in the garden,

so they thought they could hide from God (Gen. 3:10). Ananias and Sapphira knew that it was possible to lie to men, so they thought they could lie to God (Acts 5). God is not slack concerning His promise as men are (2 Pet. 3:9).

Critics of an eternal Hell argue, "Eternity is too long to punish the wicked. It is unjust to punish a man eternally for sins committed in so short of time." Can one really envision a judge sentencing a thief to prison for a period of time not to surpass the number of minutes it took him to steal? Does anyone sincerely think it violates justice to sentence a murderer to a prison stretch measured in years when the murder was committed in a matter of minutes? The fact is the time it takes to commit a crime has nothing to do with determining the duration of punishment. Our system of law demands that the criminal be punished in relationship to the magnitude of the crime committed, and not the amount of time it took to perpetrate the crime. Remember, the greatest crime is spurning the greatest gift God has ever given man, that is, eternal life through the sacrifice of Christ. How long should one suffer for this is ingratitude.

Some argue, "No human parent would inflict such a punishment upon his child for a crime." Neither would we punish a child as severe as nature will. (Examples: Drugs, fingers in wall plugs, drinking and driving, etc.) A teenager drinks too much at a party, drives his car into the headlights of a semi-trailer and is a paraplegic for life. A few moments of promiscuity can cause some dreaded disease to begin its awful spread. Actions often have outcomes that go far beyond their immediate cause. If they had the power to prevent it, how many human fathers would allow their children to be born horribly deformed? God who has such power, does allow these things to happen to His creatures. God even permits such things to happen to some of the most godly of saints. Our point is: what God will allow to happen cannot be determined on the basis of what finite and time-bound creatures, such as you and I,

would permit to happen.

Sinful creatures like ourselves are not capable of estimating how horrendous sin really is. Should lawbreakers be permitted to be the lawmakers? Do murderers serve as defense witnesses, sit on the jury, and wear judge's robes in determining the sentence of one who has harmed another? Then why should the sinner be so bold as to question the penalty for sin. Esau in a moment of hunger sold his birthright for some pottage, but the loss was irrevocable and it was for life? Can one estimate the lasting effects of World War II which was the doing of Hitler? How are the evils of Hitler measured? How long will he deserve to be in Hell? Hell is eternal because the consequences of sin are never temporary.

If Hell endured a million years a soul could stand it. After all, after spending one day there he could reason that he only had 999,999 years and 364 days left. Those who rejected the God of Heaven could hope for day Hell would end. Hell does not last a thousand years. Instead it lasts forever and forever and forever. Hell is a place where men live (or die) forever.

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by Daniel R. Vess