

20th Century Bible Course

LESSON 12

Dear Student:

Not too long ago a poll was taken of young divinity students to ascertain what they believed about creation, God, heaven, hell, judgment, and other theological subjects. When the results were tabulated, it was discovered that 71 percent of them did not believe in God, and considered heaven and hell to be the product of fanciful thinking or the outgrowth of mythological concepts. If these future spiritual leaders are uncertain about these great themes, how can we expect the 65 million lay people to be anything but confused about the hereafter?

"Ye shall not surely die," Satan said to our first parents back there in Eden. "You are immortal-you cannot die." In our last lesson the arrows of Bible truth completely collapsed this falsehood, and the implications are staggering!

You see, if the good do not go immediately to heaven when they die, it follows that neither do the wicked go straight to hell! Some folks are disappointed when they first learn that their loved ones who have passed on are not now in heaven as they had always pictured them to be. But you know, I have never known anyone who felt the least bit upset to learn that neither are their unsaved loved ones writhing in fiery torments in some great underground pit! The two go hand in hand. If one is true, the other is also.

In this lesson we will focus the Word of Truth on both heaven and hell, so that we will know what we believe about both, and why. First a note on the word "hell."

Hell in the New Testament, is translated from three Greek words: *Hades*-the lower world, the place of the dead, the grave. It is equivalent to *sheol* (Hebrew) in the Old Testament. For example, it is used in Acts 2:27, 31, in quoting Psalm 16:10.

Gehenna- place of burning. This word comes from the Valley of Hinnon, a place outside Jerusalem for burning refuse and the bodies of dead animals or criminals. Fires burned there continuously, and what the fire did not destroy, the worms consumed. Thus it became a symbol of complete annihilation and is used as a name for the lake of fire which will destroy the wicked.

Tartarus- darkness. This figure of speech stems from Tartarus of Greek mythology, and refers to the darkness that surrounds the universe. It is used to describe the darkness that enshrouded Satan and his angels when they were separated from God and heaven, as well as the darkness that has come to the earth because of the presence of the prince of darkness (Isaiah 60:2).

Second, a note on how the word "heaven" is used in the Bible: "Paradise" is called the "third heaven" (2 Corinthians 12:2, 4). This is God's dwelling place (1 Kings 8:27, 30). The starry heavens, which we call "outer space," is generally considered to be the second heaven (Psalm 19:1-4). The atmospheric heaven is that area immediately surrounding our earth where the birds fly and clouds float. (Jeremiah 8:7; 10:13). The rain and snow originate in this heaven (Isaiah 55:10). This is the heavens that Peter speaks about that will "melt with fervent heat" (2 Peter 3:10,12).

It is my desire and prayer that this lesson will be a source of joy and peace for you.

Your Bible Instructor

LESSON 12

TAKE YOUR CHOICE-HEAVEN OR HELL

SCRIPTURE READING: REVELATION 20, 21 (NT 224, 225 [178])

Part 1--THE REWARD OF THE WICKED

It was the Sunday before the crucifixion. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem. Palm branches were strewn in His path and shouts of hallelujah echoed from valley to valley. It was the Saviour's greatest hour. Just then Jesus caught sight of the temple, its white marble dome glistening in the setting sun, and suddenly He was sobbing-weeping as if His heart had been crushed. At His feet lay the city He had come to save. How could He let her go?

Satan pictures God as taking delight in punishing the creatures He has made, rejoicing in their torment as He casts them into never-ending fire. But when we see the depth of sorrow Jesus felt over Jerusalem's pending destruction, it tells a far different story.

It is true that God must destroy sin and sinners. Yet this is so foreign to His character that Isaiah calls it God's "strange act" (Isaiah 28:21). Indeed, it is "a strange act for One who taught men to love their enemies! A strange act for One who refused to let His disciples call down fire upon those who slighted Him! A strange act for One who healed the ear of a man who had come to take His life! A strange act for One who prayed while they crucified Him" (George E. Vandeman, *Planet in Rebellion*, p. 332).

Part 2-- WHAT IS HELL?

1. For whom was hell prepared? Matthew 25:41 _____

Someone has said that any human being who gets into hell is an usurper, for God did not make hell for humans, but for evil angels. Because God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9), He has left no stone unturned to warn us. No opportunity has been passed by to draw us to Him. No appeal has been withheld for all to turn from evil and live. What more can God do if, after all this, we turn Him down?

2. When will the wicked be punished? 2 Peter 2:9 _____ If the wicked are "reserved" for a specific time of punishment, are they burning now?

3. Describe the punishment of the wicked. Revelation 20:7-9 _____ (verse 7)

When is it? _____ (verse 9)

What does it consist of? _____ (verse 9; also Proverbs 11:31)

Where is it? _____

4. What is this punishment called? Revelation 20:14; 15:8 _____ -

The contrast is between eternal death and eternal life, not eternal life in hell versus eternal life in heaven. Fire is simply the means by which God will make an end of sinners (2 Peter 3:7); the punishment (wages) is death (Romans 6:23)-eternal separation from God, the source of life.

5. Who is exempt from the second death? Revelation 20:6,14,15 _____

6. How completely will sinners be destroyed?

Matthew 10:28 it will destroy both _____

Malachi 4:1,3 _____

Ezekiel 28:18,19 God says of Satan, the worst of all sinners, "I will bring thee to _____. . . , and _____ shalt thou be any more."

Part 3-- HOW LONG IS FOREVER?

We have learned that the fire of hell will be literal. It will be hot. But when it has accomplished its purpose, it will go out, leaving nothing but ashes. But, you say, haven't I read that the wicked will burn forever, and suffer eternal torment? Yes, you have. Turn back to Question 1 and reread Matthew 25:41: "Depart from me... into everlasting fire." Verse 46 calls it "everlasting punishment." It's the punishment (death) that is everlasting-not the punishing! That makes a lot of difference, doesn't it?

1. How is "forever" used in other scriptures?

1 Samuel 1:22, 28 Samuel was lent to the Lord "forever," or "as long as _____."

Jonah 2:5, 6 Johah said he was in the fish's belly _____. How long was this according to **Jonah 1:17?**

Jude 7 Sodom and Gomorrha suffered the "vengeance of _____"

Peter 2:6 says they were turned into _____ -

God specifically states that these two cities demonstrate what eternal fire is like.

Thus "forever" can be a short period of time, or a longer one. Even today the word is used loosely. A distraught mother says to her teenager, "Why are you forever asking for more money?" Two lovers pledge their love to each other forever. It depends upon what we are talking about, doesn't it? Which is exactly how Moule's *Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges* (on Philemon 15), defines *olam*- the Hebrew word for "forever": "as long as the nature of the subject allows." It describes time in much the same way as the word "area" describes space. How big is an "area"? Why, you say, that depends on what you're talking about. A pupil mentions the reading area of his classroom, and we immediately visualize a small section of the room. A "disaster area" conveys the idea of cities, counties, or even whole states. If the news media report on a comet in a certain area of the sky, we know it involves millions of light years in distance. How big, then, is an area? As big as the nature of the subject allows. How long is forever? As long as the nature of the subject allows. As for being tormented "for ever and ever" (Revelation 20:10), that too, lasts only as long as the nature of the subject allows. When man's last breath is drawn, "forever" ceases, for you can't torment a dead man. Nor ashes.

How beautifully this definition also fits the righteous, whose reward is "everlasting life." Because they will be given immortality when Jesus comes, their life will never end. Only sin brings death, and thank God, sin will never rise again (Nahum 1:9).

Why not leave it the way God says? Nothing in the sacred book indicates that God takes sadistic pleasure in tormenting the wicked throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Only to preserve the universe in peace and beauty and holiness does He perform "His strange act," and then we may be certain that tears will be streaming down His cheeks.

Part 4-- THE HOME OF THE SAVED

"I asked the children to write an essay about heaven today," a third-grade teacher commented to a friend. "Listen to what one of them wrote: 'Heaven has three stories and a basement. The floor is the clouds. God sleeps in the first two floors and Father Christmas, with his reindeers and toys lives on the third floor. The angels sleep in the basement. The houses are all made of gingerbread and the rivers are all different colors--red, blue, pink, green, orange. That is all.'"

Millions know hardly anything about heaven except that it is *up*, and that St. Peter stands guard at the entrance. Since the only information we have about heaven is found in the Bible, that is where we ought to go to learn what it is like.

Part 5--MORE THAN A HARP AND A CLOUD

1. What planet is to be the home of the saved? Psalm 37:9, 29; Matthew 5:5

Of course, this will not be the earth in its present deformed, sinful condition, but a new one "wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:10-13).

But, you say, didn't Paul say that the saints will be "caught up ... to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:17)? And didn't Christ promise to come again and take us to the mansions He is preparing for us (John 14:1-3)? Yes, Jesus will return to earth the second time. The living righteous will be changed and the sleeping saints called to life. Together they meet the Lord in the air. But this will be a *round trip space flight!* After spending a thousand years with God in paradise, they return in the holy city, which will become the capital of the new earth that God will create for their permanent home (Revelation 21:1-3).

2. How real will be this new heaven and new earth? What activities will we carry out? Isaiah 65:21-23

How about that! An endless variety of satisfying labor, none of it in vain! "Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, . . . new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body" (E. G. White, *The Great*

Controversy, p. 677).

3. What about its beauty? Isaiah 35:1 _____

4. Describe the city. Revelation 21:12,18,19, 21

The walls are made of _____; each of its 12 gates is a _____.

The foundations of the walls are _____; its streets _____.

5. What special food and drink is there? Revelation 22:1, 2

Can you imagine a city 375 miles square! What a landing strip it will need!

Have you ever noticed that much of what the Bible says about heaven tells us what will *not* be there. Why this negative emphasis? Could it be that God faces serious limitations in describing heaven in human terms? How would you describe a tropical island to an Eskimo? You might start with a palm tree, but what would your description mean to a man whose world consists mostly of frozen waters? You'd soon find yourself saying something like this: "There are no polar bears, no freezing temperatures, no ice or snow, no need to trap animals for clothing or food." His lack of understanding about tropical things would force you to use negatives. No wonder when it comes to describing heaven God can only say, "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9)! Let us consider some of these negatives, for they are very revealing.

6. What will not exist in heaven? Revelation 21:1 _____

Exiled on the barren Patmos, no doubt John often watched the restless waves that separated him from his loved ones. Perhaps that's why the first thing he noticed about heaven was the absence of the sea! Nothing that separates!

Revelation 21:4 "There shall be no more _____, neither _____, nor _____, neither shall there be any more _____."

Revelation 7:16,17 "They shall _____,
neither _____ any more; neither shall the sun nor any _____ . . .
And God shall _____

_____ from their eyes." **Isaiah 65:23-25** "They shall not

_____ nor bring forth for _____; . . . The wolf and the lamb shall feed to-gether, and the lion shall eat straw like the bullock: ... They shall not _____ in all my holy mountain."

Isaiah 33:24 "And the inhabitants shall not say, _____."

Isaiah 40:31 "They shall run, and _____,"
and they shall walk, and _____."

The blind shall see; the deaf shall hear; the lame shall walk; and the tongue of the dumb shall sing (Isaiah 35:5, 6, OT 574 [446]). Yes, all defects will be left behind! Gone, too, is anything which robs life of its joy and beauty! Any difficulty accepting that? All these may be negatives, but how they make us long for that day!

7. Will we recognize each other in heaven? Matthew 8:11 We will sit down with _____.

1 Corinthians 13:12 "Then shall I _____ even as I am _____."

8. Who will the redeemed be like? 1 John 3:2 _____ **Philippians 3:21** Our bodies will be like _____.

After the resurrection Jesus appeared to his disciples. "Behold my hands and my feet," He said (Luke 24:39, NT 81 [63]). We will be as real as Christ was after He was resurrected.

9. Best of all, who will be with us in heaven? Revelation 21:3 _____

"If at birth I had been able to make one petition," Fanny Crosby, the gifted blind poet once said, "I would

have asked to be born blind." "Why?" asked her startled friend. "Because, when I get to heaven, the first face I shall see will be that of my Saviour."

10. What will the hope of the second coming and of heaven inspire us to do?

Psalm 24:3, 4 _____

1 John 3:3 _____

2 Peter 3:11,14 _____

A minister was urging Dan to surrender his life to the Lord Jesus. "Don't worry about me, sir," Dan flippantly said. "I'll slip into heaven with the crowd someday."

Looking solemnly into the youth's eyes, the minister replied, "My son, if you slip in with the crowd, you will be in hell, not heaven, for the Bible says, Wide is the gate, and broad the way that leads to destruction, and many go in thereat, but strait is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13,14).

The story is told of an American visiting a great English writer. Noticing that all he had in his room was a bed, a desk and a chair, she queried, "Sir, where is your furniture?"

"Where is yours," the old man asked in reply.

"But sir, I am only a visitor here."

"So am I," was his quiet reply.

Yes, we are only pilgrims here on this earth. But knowing that, I can walk happily through this life, looking forward to that better land.

Will you join me?