

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Absolutely Certain: Why is punishment eternal?

### Introduction

I am old enough to remember the days when food products did not have a “Best Before Date” and “Display Until Date”, stamped on the packaging. We relied on colour, taste and smell to determine whether a product was safe to be consumed or not. Even so, there were some products which only needed the “bad” bit cut off and the rest was all right to eat! Surprisingly, in those pre “Best before days”, food poisoning seemed to be a rare thing. Now we have swung to the other extreme where, if the date has expired, then out into the rubbish bin goes food which is probably still safe to eat. Possibly this form of labelling has some merit in trying to protect people, but how often we find products going off, even before the expiry date has been reached. However, there is an upside to dates stamped on packaging; food retailers often reduce the price when the “Best Before” date is due to expire and bargains can be obtained!

### Are People Eternal?

In order to tackle today’s talk “Why is punishment eternal?” we need to think about people and not food products. We are all associated with a “Display until date”. In Ecclesiastes 3:2, we have the statement, “A time to be born, and a time to die”. It might seem a fairly obvious statement but it has big implications, not just for our lives but for all eternity. We are on display in this world until the moment we die; at that point our shelf life for this world has expired. Before we reach the expiry date we should ask ourselves the question; “Will we be deposited in the rubbish bin for eternity or will we be moved to somewhere better?”

We also have a kind of “Best before date” connected with our lives. We need to be sure that when our shelf life has expired in this world, we know where we are going afterwards. So many people do not give much thought to what happens next and suppose many things such as:

- There is nothing after death; you die and that is it.
- Well, God is a loving God so I will be all right in the end.
- I am not a bad person. I have done many good things, therefore I will go to heaven.

There is a true story, not a parable, about a rich man in Luke 16:19-31. This rich man may have had some of those thoughts mentioned earlier, but when he died he found himself in a dreadful place. For mankind, the “Best before date” is NOW. “Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation”, 2 Corinthians 6:2. If we want to make sure that we do not end up in the eternal rubbish bin, we need to make sure where we are going before the “Display until date” expires.

Eternity is real and the Bible clearly teaches there is no end. In Matthew 25:46 we have the two destinations stated very clearly, “These will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” Romans 5:19 states, “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” To be made righteous is only through accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as our personal Saviour. The other part of the above Scripture states that there are some who will go “into everlasting punishment”.

### Why an Eternal Punishment?

The words everlasting, eternal and eternity describe a situation which does not end. Now “Why is punishment eternal?” Punishment is dealing with people (and Satan and his angels) who are eternal creatures. We read in Genesis 1 that all the birds, animal and sea creatures were created, that is, God brought them into being. As to the creature man, he is made in the image of God. There was a likeness about mankind which reflected something of God. There is one God but three persons who are distinct and unique in that one God. They are, as revealed in the New Testament, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. One of the things that distinguishes created man from the rest of creation is that he also is a tripartite being, spirit, soul and body. Additionally when we turn to Genesis 2 we read in verse 7, “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 being (soul).” The basic distinction between birds, animals and sea creatures is at death they cease to exist, but people do not because they are living souls, eternal beings.

Other distinctions that are true of mankind are:

- The ability to understand about making right and wrong decisions.
- To make choices and decisions based on numerous observed facts.
- To understand that rights and privileges bring responsibilities.
- That life is precious.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, they did so having been presented with information from both God and Satan. They then made a conscious decision to believe Satan and act in a certain way. Their action was to disobey God and, in doing so, dramatically altered the whole course of history for mankind. Their action corrupted their sinless eternal existence, caused a distance between them and God both physical and spiritual and the corruption had a genetic impact in that death affected their physical bodies, but not their eternal existence. Even though their bodies would grow old and eventually die, their living souls would continue.

Now we might think that God in His great compassion might overlook sin. After all, He is a God of love. In thinking in this way, we overlook other aspects of God's nature. God is also holy as stated in Psalm 99:9, "Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy." The book of Job in the Old Testament is very instructive both in understanding God's thoughts concerning people and in demonstrating the fact of eternity. Job 1:8 states, "The LORD said to Satan, 'Have you considered My servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, one who fears God and shuns evil?'" We see the LORD's appreciation of Job as to the kind of person he was and in many ways a wonderful example of someone who was God fearing, living an exemplary life. However, during the course of Job's experiences outlined in the book he comes to the conclusion that although God describes him in glowing terms, he still falls far below the perfection seen in a holy God. Job states in 42:5-6, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes." Seeing God the LORD causes Job to lament his life. Yet it is Job who firmly states his own eternal existence, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" Job 19:25-27.

The confidence of Job is seen in the words "I know". He knew the person who is his redeemer. Job could see beyond death and knew that even if in the grave for a long time, the power of resurrection would bring his dead body back to life so that in resurrected life with an immortal body he would see God.

Now a large part of the Old Testament teaches that there needs to be a sacrifice to atone for sin. God requires a sacrifice to deal with sin. Something must die to pay the price on behalf of another. The many offerings made to atone for sin proved by their very repetition that they had not the ability to pay the full price for sin once and for all. "But now, once at the end of the ages, Christ has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself", Hebrews 9:26. The Lord Jesus Christ came to be the sacrifice for sin that would satisfy a holy God concerning sin. This is clearly stated in Romans 3:21-30, "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith."

The sacrifice of Christ on the cross is the only eternally acceptable sacrifice. No other sacrifice was good enough. Therefore, both Jew and Gentile must come to Christ, have faith in Him and no other to obtain the forgiveness of sins.

### **God's Rescue Plan**

God has never ceased to love mankind even though such love is not reciprocated by the majority. Because of sin, we have a clear message from God of its consequences. Romans 6:23 tells us plainly, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord". Notice the "but" in the verse. If on the one hand it is sin and death, on the other hand, God has provided a guaranteed and fool proof means of overcoming the eternal problem of being estranged from God. God's gift comes through the only person who had the power and willingness to make the gift possible. It is our Lord Jesus Christ, the very Son of God who became a man in order to righteously pay the price for sin, not for Himself, but for others. The rescue package includes the deliverance from an eternal death to the full and unconditional guarantee of eternal life. This we have succinctly stated again in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as

through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned". Also, in Romans 5:21 we read, "As sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Eternal life is contrasted with eternal death or punishment. Eternal life guarantees a place in the Father's house, as the Lord stated in John 14:1-6, "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And where I go you know, and the way you know.' Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.'" Eternal death does not mean annihilation and neither will eternal punishment terminate with annihilation.

### **What is this eternal death?**

I will read Jesus' story referred to earlier from Luke 16:19-31: "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.'"

Depending on your Bible translation the words Hell, Hades and Sheol all refer to the place that is occupied by the spirits/souls of those who have died without salvation. Abraham's bosom and the phrase "to depart and be with Christ" are references to the place where the spirit/soul of those who have faith in God and Christ reside when death occurs. As to the physical body it is referred to as being asleep in the grave. From the above story we are able to understand that Lazarus, by the very fact that he is in Abraham's bosom (Jewish phrase), he must have believed God in his lifetime even though he had not the best of lives as a beggar. The rich man obviously did not trust God and ended in a place of torment. Eternal punishment has commenced for that unfortunate person. How many others are in that dreadful situation since the beginning of time?

The final place of torment or eternal punishment however is brought before us in Revelation 20:10-15, "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. 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. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." The "Lake of Fire" is the place of eternal punishment. In this Scripture you see the care that God takes to ensure that only those who deserve such a punishment end in this eternally horrendous place. The "Book of Life" is checked for everyone who stands before Christ on the great white throne. Why is it the Lord Jesus Christ who judges? Because God the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, see John 5:22. Is it not fitting that the One who was crucified becomes the judge!

### **If punishment was not eternal what would it mean?**

There are some who say that God who is love could not possibly punish people forever. Now I think that topic has been covered but as we close this radio talk I would just like to touch upon some of the implications of the idea that when the Bible speaks of eternal or everlasting punishment that it does not mean forever. Remember, the story from Luke 16 clearly states that wherever you end up, you are fixed there forever.

If everlasting punishment is not everlasting then:

- There was no need for the Son of God to become man.

- There was no need for the Lord Jesus Christ to die on the cross.
- There was no need for the various animal sacrifices of the Old Testament as an illustration of what God required from a sacrifice to deal with sin.
- There is no need for the Gospel of Salvation to be preached.
- We could all live as we liked, if eventually we are all freed from the lake of fire and taken to heaven.
- There would be no need for the Bible except maybe as an academic study.
- It would mean that many of the things the Lord Jesus Christ said were untrue! As a result the Scriptures would not be inspired from beginning to end. Scripture states that God cannot lie, Hebrews 6:18, we would have to ask, then, whether our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son of God!
- Would it also mean Satan and his followers eventually being released to cause havoc in the world once again? Satan and those fallen angels have no redemption so can only pursue a career of evil.

I am sure there are many more implications but the above is sufficient to show how iniquitous the assertion is of no eternal punishment. In Hebrews 9:27 we read, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." This is a general statement and shows the natural process that people, when left to themselves, will die and judgment will follow. The only way to break that situation is to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour. We have a God of love and it is fitting to end on the well known verse of Scripture from John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

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