

# Eternal Hell, Baptism of the Dead, and Who Went to Heaven

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## Eternally Burning Hell (Continued)

[Last month we examined a few Bible verses](#) used to support the idea of an eternally burning hell. This month we will consider a few more verses on this topic before moving on to other conflicts. To begin this study, please consider a critical point: The Bible is like the human body in that both have many different systems operating in perfect harmony. Many specialties in medicine exist today because each system of the body is complicated. The Bible also has many complicated topics. A wise physician knows that every system in the body is related to all of the other systems. No system can be treated or isolated without affecting the others. Similarly, wise Bible students know that if only certain Bible verses are used or isolated from other Bible topics the result will be internal conflict.

The topic of eternal reward is complex and this leads to diversity and confusion. I like to think of eternal reward as an umbrella topic because it includes many sub-topics such as God's character, justice, mercy, grace, law, His judgment of mankind, man's fallen nature, the state of man in death, the atonement provided by Jesus, the rescue of God's people, and the annihilation of the wicked. So, no position on eternal reward can be considered trustworthy until all of the sub-topics operate in perfect harmony.

About A.D. 65, the apostle Peter wrote two letters to Christian converts suffering in Asia Minor because of their life and faith in Jesus. His first letter is important in this study because Peter's choice of words in 1 Peter 3 and 4 are sometimes used to support the idea that when Jesus died on the cross, He went into Hell and offered salvation to those who had been there since the days of Noah. After you read my commentary below, you may want to read all of 1 Peter 3 and 4 in your own Bible so that you can consider Peter's thoughts without interruption. My comments are in brackets []:

1 Peter 3:18-22 **"For Christ died for [your] sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you [near] to God. He [Jesus] was put to death in the body but [on the third day He was] made alive by the [Holy] Spirit [Romans 8:11], through whom also He [Jesus] went and preached [for 120 years through His servant Noah – Genesis 6:3] to the spirits [the people who were living then\*] in [a] prison [of godlessness and rebellion – see Isaiah 42:6,7] who disobeyed [blasphemed the Holy Spirit] long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through [from] water, and this water [that cleansed the Earth of rebellion and godless people] symbolizes baptism that now saves you also – [I'm speaking] not [of] the removal of dirt from the body but [of your faith and your public affirmation to follow Jesus and] the pledge of [allegiance that you have made to Jesus, and that of maintaining] a good conscience toward God. It [is your submission to God's Spirit through faith that] saves you [and this gift of salvation has been made possible] by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has [come out of the tomb and] gone into Heaven and is at God's right hand – with angels,**

**authorities and powers in submission to Him.**

- \* **Note:** In Bible times, the word “spirit” was used in different ways. A spirit could be an invisible demon. (1 Timothy 4:1) A spirit could be an angel from God. (Hebrews 1:14) A spirit could be a human being. (1 Corinthians 14:32, Hebrews 12:9) The Greek word for spirit is pneumas which means wind. The ancients generally thought of spirits in two ways. If a spirit had no body, it was a ghost. (Acts 23:8) If a spirit had a body, it was a human (or an angel in human form). (Hebrews 13:2, 2 Corinthians 7:13) If Peter’s expression “spirits in prison” is understood from his perspective that Jesus preached through Noah to the antediluvians, textual conflict dissolves.

1 Peter 4:1,2 **“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body [from evil people], arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body [from evil people] is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.”**

1 Peter 4:3-5 **“For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do – living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation [immoral and careless living], and they heap abuse on you [because they hate righteousness]. But they will have to give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.”**

1 Peter 4:6,7 **“[Dear brothers, God is not willing that any should perish.] For this is the reason the gospel was preached [among you and] even to those who are now [physically alive but spiritually] dead, so that [upon hearing the gospel] they might be [awakened and] judged [condemned within their hearts by their sins. All of us have sinned] according to men in regard to the body, but [men who repent and] live according to God in regard to the Spirit [will be saved.] The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray [for God’s sustaining power and grace every day].”**

**Summary:** Does Peter mean to say that Jesus offered people in Hell a second chance? If so, what sinner would choose to remain in Hell? If God had wanted to save everyone before the flood came, why did He close the door of the ark before it began to rain? The Bible teaches there is no second chance for salvation after death. (Hebrews 3:7,8; 9:7,28) We determine our eternal destiny in this life. Again we see that if apparent conflicts are not properly resolved, they will put the Bible in a state of internal conflict. Given the many sub-topics involved with eternal reward, Peter’s words can be resolved. Peter is not advocating the idea that while His body was resting in the tomb, Jesus’s spirit went to Hell and offered evil ghosts (who had been captives since the days of Noah) eternal life.

If we read all of 1 Peter, we find that Peter is advocating a glorious and powerful truth. Peter had seen the manifestation and power of the Holy Spirit in his own life many times. Peter saw the Holy Spirit bring a young man to life (Luke 7), bring Dorcas to life (Acts 9), and put a husband and wife to death. (Acts 5) Therefore, Peter exalted the ministry of the Holy Spirit in 1 Peter 3 and 4 by reminding his readers that (a) rejecting the Holy Spirit leads to death – this explains why so few were saved from Noah’s flood and (b) the same Holy Spirit that raised

Jesus from the dead can give a spiritually dead person a new life in Christ! Peter's thoughts are focused on the power and ministry of the Holy Spirit, and when his choice of words are put within this framework, the textual conflict dissolves.

I would like to close this discussion on eternally burning hell with a short explanation. Last month, we noticed that Jesus spoke of "eternal fire" when He said, **"If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire."** (Matthew 18:8) Of course, this text can be used to support the idea of an eternally burning hell. The Greek word in Matthew 18:8 translated "eternal" is *aionios* which is often translated as everlasting or eternal. However, the root word for *aionios* is *aion* and it means an age or a period of time which develops the idea of something being eternal or everlasting.

With this information in mind, please consider Jesus' words: **"Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come."** (Matthew 12:31) The Greek word for "age" is *aion* and it is translated "world" in the KJV. Given the nature of the Greek language, I understand Jesus meant that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven during this period or the period to come. At the end of the 1,000 years, the Bible indicates that fire will fall from the sky and devour the wicked (Revelation 20:9) and they will be reduced to ashes. (Malachi 4:3) Because the fire will burn for a period of time to purify Earth of sin's curse, *aionios* is the appropriate word in Matthew 18:8. Instead of translating the word to mean eternal or everlasting fire, this phrase could be better translated to mean, "It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into the fire that will annihilate the wicked at the end of the age." Of course, translators are not concerned with internal conflicts, their work is to translate each Greek sentence into an English equivalent. Resolving textual conflicts is another task altogether, reserved for Bible students who love God's Word.

## Apparent Conflict #3 – Baptism for the Dead

Does the Bible teach that one person can be baptized for another? Mormons believe this is the case. Please consider the following quote taken from the official Mormon website and as you read, look for their underlying reason:

"Jesus Himself, though without sin, was baptized to fulfill all righteousness and to show the way for all mankind (see Matthew 3:13-17; 2 Nephi 31:5-12). Thus, baptism is essential for salvation in the kingdom of God. We learn in the New Testament that baptisms for the dead were done during the Apostle Paul's time (see 1 Corinthians 15:29). This practice has been restored with the establishment of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Prophet Joseph Smith first taught about the ordinance of baptism for the dead during a funeral sermon in August 1840. He read much of 1 Corinthians 15, including verse 29, and announced that the Lord would permit Church members to be baptized in behalf of their friends and relatives who had departed this life. He told them "the plan of salvation was calculated to save all who were willing to obey the requirements of the law of God" (Journal History of the Church, 15 Aug. 1840).

“Because all who have lived on the earth have not had the opportunity to be baptized by proper authority during life on earth, baptisms may be performed by proxy, meaning a living person may be baptized in behalf of a deceased person. Baptisms for the dead are performed by Church members in temples throughout the world. People have occasionally wondered if the mortal remains of the deceased are somehow disturbed in this process; they are not. The person acting as a proxy uses only the name of the deceased. To prevent duplication the Church keeps a record of the deceased persons who have been baptized. Some have misunderstood that when baptisms for the dead are performed the names of deceased persons are being added to the membership records of the Church. This is not the case.” (Source: <https://www.mormon.org/faq/baptism-for-the-dead>)

Three observations: First, Mormons view baptism as a sacrament instead of an ordinance. A sacrament is something required for salvation, an ordinance is something recommended for salvation. Because Mormons believe a person cannot be saved without baptism, they practice baptism for the dead. Second, Mormons recognize that millions of people have lived and died without any chance of hearing the gospel of Jesus. Therefore, they consider it an act of kindness to serve as baptismal proxies for people who would not otherwise be saved. Finally, Mormons believe that at death, the mortal body is temporarily separated from an immortal soul.

Notice this quote: “Death is not the end. Death is really a beginning — another step forward in Heavenly Father’s plan for His children. Someday, like everyone else, your physical body will die. But your spirit does not die, it goes to the spirit world, where you will continue to learn and progress and may be with loved ones who have passed on. Death is a necessary step in your progression, just as your birth was. Sometime after your death, your spirit and your body will be reunited – never to be separated again. This is called resurrection, and it was made possible by the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ (See 1 Corinthians 15:20-22).” (Source: <https://www.mormon.org/faq/topic/death/question/life-after-death>)

When Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (~A.D. 55), Christianity was about 25 years old. The believers had hundreds of unanswered questions and endless confusion. There were many reports of miracles, but very little knowledge. The apostles had their hands full because Christianity had attracted a diverse body of people who were eager, but ignorant, excited, but frustrated with endless conflict. The New Testament had not been written so Christian doctrine was up for grabs. Some converts in Corinth had been Pharisees and others had been Sadducees. When they joined the church, they brought their religious baggage with them. This explains why some converts were conducting proxy baptisms. As former Pharisees, they believed among other things (like circumcision), that baptism was required for eternal life. On the other hand, many of those converts who had been Sadducees still denied there was a resurrection.

Paul wrote chapter 15 to specifically clear many questions about the death and resurrection of the saints. If you understand the setting in Corinth, that Paul is actually pitting Pharisee against Sadducee converts in 1 Corinthians, his style and explanation of things will make you smile. First, he takes on the Sadducees:

**“For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be**

**pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, [He is] the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to him [will be raised]."** (1 Corinthians 15:16-23)

After these verses, Paul briefly explains that Jesus had to be resurrected and taken to Heaven so that He could accomplish certain tasks which end with Jesus destroying death itself! (See verses 24-28.) Then, Paul returns to the subject at hand by contrasting the actions of the Pharisees. It is as though Paul wrote, "Look at the Pharisees. They are baptizing for the dead and yet, the Sadducees say the dead will not live again. How foolish is this for both groups?" **"Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?"** (1 Corinthians 15:29)

Paul does not advocate baptism for the dead. He simply highlights the conflict between Pharisees and Sadducees because both sides are advocating positions that do not belong within Christianity. Paul does not validate baptism for the dead in any of his writings because the whole idea is contrary to the way that God saves individuals. One man cannot be circumcised for another man. Likewise, one man's faith cannot save another or one man's sins condemn another. God has not overlooked the salvation of millions of people who never heard the gospel of Jesus. (John 10:16; Romans 2:14-16)

**One more point:** The believers at Corinth were curious and confused about the nature of the body that would be given to the saints at the resurrection. Therefore, Paul wrote: **"But someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come [out of the grave]?' How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as He has determined, and to each kind of seed He gives its own body.**

**"All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies [Sun, moon, stars] and there are earthly bodies [trees, mountains and fields]; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another.**

**The Sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable [the body that dies returns to dust, later], it is raised imperishable [a body made for everlasting life]; it is sown in dishonor [our bodies are cursed by the ravages of sin], it is raised in glory [free from sin's curse]; it is sown in weakness [subject to sickness], it is raised in power [free from sickness and deformity]; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body [not the body of a ghost, but a glorified body, like the body that Jesus was given at His resurrection\*]. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body."** (1 Corinthians 15:35-44)

- \* **Note:** Jesus is called the firstfruits of the dead because He is an example of what we

will be after we are resurrected or translated. (1 John 3:2)

The saints will know each another (1 Corinthians 13:12) and have physical bodies in Heaven, just like Adam and Eve did before the fall.

## **Apparent Conflict #4 – Who Went to Heaven?**

For centuries, there has been confusion about 2 Corinthians 12. The question is whether Paul was taken in vision to meet a man who had died and gone to Heaven or Paul himself went to Heaven.

To appreciate the importance of 2 Corinthians 12, some background information is necessary. (When resolving apparent conflicts, circumstances and setting always have to be considered.) When Paul wrote 2 Corinthians, he was confined to a prison in Rome. Some Messianic Jews (Pharisee converts, also known as Judaizers) had gone from Jerusalem to Corinth and their “sophisticated teachings” had gained considerable traction in Corinth. Messianic Jews were visiting the churches Paul established because they thought it was their religious duty to restore the importance of Jewish traditions by “cleaning up” the false teachings which Paul had been promoting. Since Paul was not present to rebuke their teachings, they faced little opposition at Corinth.

Naturally, Paul was not pleased to hear about the impact which the Messianic Jews had at Corinth because it was the same impact which they had had in other places as well. Several years earlier, Paul had a face to face confrontation with them and the story goes like this:

**“When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. . . . Before certain men came [to Antioch] from James [the president of the church in Jerusalem], he [Peter] used to eat with the Gentiles [which was not permitted for a Jew to do]. But when they [the Messianic Jews] arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group [those insisting that a man must be circumcised in order to be an heir of Abraham and thus be saved]. . . . [Then] The other Jews [with Peter] joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas [my dear companion in the Lord] was led astray. . . . When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile [when the Messianic Jews are not around] and not like a Jew. How is it, then [when the Judaizers show up], that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?” (Galatians 2:11-14)**

The Messianic Jews had argued quite successfully among Jewish converts that Christians must not leave the traditions and rituals of Judaism behind and the Judaizers insisted that new Gentile converts must embrace circumcision and baptism, and other Jewish practices as sacraments. This created conflict in the church at Corinth, because Gentile converts did not want to be identified with Jews or as Jews. Because the “credentials” of the Messianic Jews (they were rabbis) made them “experts” in religious matters, Paul challenged the church at Corinth to compare his credentials with the credentials of the Judaizers:

**“Are they [the Messianic Jews] Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s [biological] descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.”** (2 Corinthians 11:22-28)

**“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying [exaggerating]. I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. (So that you can determine for yourselves who is better prepared to speak for the Lord?) I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven [where God dwells]. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.”** (2 Corinthians 11:30-12:6)

Of course, no one among the Messianic Jews came close to matching Paul’s dedication, experience, or credentials. However, did you notice that near the end of Paul’s report that he suddenly begins to speak of himself in the third person. “I know a man. . . .” Paul used this literary technique so separate himself from self-promotion. Consider two problems:

First, everyone knows that dreams and visions cannot be investigated. The event cannot be replicated, studied, validated, or even confirmed. Liars know this. Therefore, a person can report a dream and no one can say if it is a lie or the truth. For this reason, dreams and visions do not have any corporate value unless (a) they come with a revelation from God, that is, information otherwise unknown is revealed and there is corroborating evidence that God has spoken, and (b) the report of the dream conforms with the Word of God in terms of present truth. (See Deuteronomy 13:1-5 and Ezekiel 13:1;16.) God does give dreams, but 99% of the time their value is limited to one individual, the person who received the dream. (Joel 2:28)

Second, there is a simple rule about boasting: Jesus referred to this rule when He said: **“If I testify about myself, my testimony is not valid.”** (John 5:31) Anyone can say anything about himself that he wants, but truth is established by two or more witnesses. (1 Timothy 5:19) This is why Jesus said: **“There is another who testifies in my favor, and I know that his**

**testimony about me is valid. You have sent to John and he has testified to the truth.’ ”**  
(John 5:32,33) Anyone can boast because boasting is vanity, but validation by two or three witnesses establishes a fact.

Paul spoke of being taken to Paradise in the third person because he did not want to escalate boasting among the Messianic Jews by playing “ego-cards.” Any of the rabbis could have duplicated Paul’s boast of being in Paradise and no one in Corinth would have known the difference. Saying you have received a vision from God does not prove that a vision was received. Paul acknowledged the foolishness of telling the church about his vision and he added an interesting twist. He told the church that God gave him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from being overcome with vanity. Paul knew that he was telling the truth, but Paul also knew the Holy Spirit would somehow validate his testimony before the church.

**“Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”** (2 Corinthians 2:6-10) I believe Paul’s vision was permanently degraded on the road to Damascus (Acts 22:11) and although God improved his sight, it was still poor. As a scholar, this limitation was “a real thorn in his flesh.” If this conclusion is true, this verse confirms it. **“See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand!”** (Galatians 6:11)

Given the conflict, setting, and circumstances in Corinth, the mystery concerning 2 Corinthians 12 is resolved. Paul was taken to Heaven in a vision (just like John in Revelation 4) to see realities too wonderful to express. I would like to close this report by expressing my deepest appreciation to the apostle Paul. He not only deserves “The Medal of Honor,” he deserves a golden crown! His incredible sacrifices for Jesus continue to influence lives and his expansive knowledge of God’s ways and plans continues to expand my understanding of God’s great love. When we all get to Heaven, I am going to find him as soon as possible and give him a hug!

Larry Wilson