

How Long Is Forever? Does It Always Mean Eternity?

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The town had been stirred by the sermon preached the night before on the subject of hell. Now, on the following day, a small group had gathered to listen to a neighborhood argument over the matter.

"But doesn't Revelation 20:9 say that 'fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them'?" asked George Brewster, as he argued with Joseph Blevins.

"Yes," retorted Joe, "but doesn't the tenth verse of that same chapter of Revelation say that 'the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night *for ever and ever*'?"

And so they argued, and neither of them knew the way out of the dilemma.

There are expressions in the Bible, it can not be denied, that puzzle and perplex, and at times even appear to contradict each other. Of course, the Holy Scriptures could not be relied upon if they should teach one thing in one place and the contrary in another. What shall we do in this case?

In His word God has spoken to us in *human* speech. Instead of giving the Written Word to us in the language that we speak today, He gave it in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, tongues no longer spoken among men and seldom used among us except in special fields of study. Over a period of nearly 1,600 years, from Moses to John the apostle, holy men of God were inspired to pen the Sacred Writings in those ancient tongues. And that we might have them to read today, learned men have translated the Holy Scriptures into the English language. The Authorized (King James') Version is the most widely used Bible text among English-speaking peoples. This translation was made in A.D. 1611, over 300 years ago. As we read it, we see

that its beautiful English is very different from that which we use today. It is an example of how a language can change in the course of the centuries.

In a few instances it has been very difficult for the translators to find words and phrases in English that exactly express the meaning of the original words of the Bible text. There are a few places in the Bible where the original wording has not been accurately translated, as we have noted in the case of *tartaroo*, the Greek verb used in 2 Peter 2:4. But taken as a whole, the Authorized Version of the Good Book is a very dependable translation.

Words Sometimes Change in Meaning

Some English words used in the Bible do not now have the same meaning that they had when the translation was made in 1611. For example, the word "let" is generally used today to mean "to permit, to allow," whereas 300 years ago it commonly meant "to hinder." And the term "quick" meant "alive, living," back there, while now it is more frequently used to mean "sudden, fast, and rapid." The word "conversation" then referred to the whole conduct of life, but now it is mostly limited to talk.

Therefore, instead of allowing ourselves to become either discouraged or led to hasty conclusions in the study of difficult Bible subjects, we need to dig more deeply into the Sacred Word and to pray more earnestly for divine enlightenment concerning it. *The safest rule to follow when in doubt, is to seek the meaning of terms as they are used by the Scriptures themselves*, instead of depending solely on encyclopedias and dictionaries, which generally give the meaning of terms according to the best modern usage. Do not take a single instance as the basis for important conclusions, but gather a number of them from various places in the Sacred Writings. If these instances agree with each other and with the teachings of the Scriptures in general on the subject, then there is safety in stating what a word or a phrase means.

Now let us take the expression "for ever," and apply this rule to the study of it.

When Moses gave Israel the law regarding the relation of the master to his manservant, it was stipulated that the servant could not be held in servitude more than six years without his consent. If at the end of the six-year period the servant should desire to continue in the service of his master, it would be necessary for them to fulfill the following requirement of the Mosaic law: "Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the doorpost; and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl; and he shall serve him *for ever*."^[1] How long does "for ever" mean here? It evidently means as long as both parties should remain alive. Else, how could a living servant serve a dead master? Or how could a dead servant serve a living master? This law was given to the Hebrew commonwealth more than 14 centuries before the birth of Christ. Surely the masters and servants who entered into such agreements that long ago are not now fulfilling them.

Naaman's Leprosy

When Naaman, the Syrian leper, had been healed, he desired to give to Elisha a costly gift as a token of his appreciation of the prophet's kindness. Elisha refused to accept pay for what God had done for Naaman. But his covetous servant, Gehazi, slipped away from the house after the man had gone, and overtaking him on the way, obtained the gift by telling him a lie. Returning to Elisha after hiding the present, Gehazi lied to the prophet, saying that he had been nowhere. Thereupon the seer reproved the wicked servant, and added: "The leprosy therefore of Naaman shall cleave unto thee, and unto thy seed *for ever*. And he went out of his presence a leper as white as snow."^[2] This took place nearly 900 years before Christ. Is Gehazi a leper today? The only reasonable meaning that "for ever" can have here is that Gehazi would be a leper until death.

The Promise to David

David, in delivering his charge to Israel and to Solomon, declared: "Howbeit the Lord God of Israel chose me before all the house of my father to be king over Israel *for ever*."^[3] David's death is recorded, and it is expressly stated that "the days that David reigned over Israel were forty years."^[4] Peter, on the day of Pentecost, said: "Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulcher is with us unto this day. . . . For David is not ascended into the heavens."^[5] Paul remarks that David "fell on sleep, and was laid unto his fathers, and saw corruption."^[6] How long, then, did God mean that David should reign when He said that this king would rule over Israel "*for ever*"? He meant that David should be king over that people as long as he should live. And it was so, for he reigned over them 40 years, that is, until he died.

Of Aaron's separation to the priesthood, it was written "that he should sanctify the most holy things, he and his sons *for ever*, to burn incense before the Lord, to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name *for ever*."^[7] Aaron died on Mount Hor about 1400 B.C.^[8] He "died there, in the fortieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt, in the first day of the fifth month. And Aaron was an hundred and twenty and three years old when he died in Mount Hor."^[9] The sanctuary services of the Jews were discontinued when the temple was destroyed by the Romans in A.D. 70. How long does it mean when God says that Aaron and his sons should serve Him "for ever" in the sanctuary service? The tabernacle service did not begin until the "second year" after the Exodus.^[10] Aaron's consecration as high priest is recorded in Leviticus 8. Aaron, therefore, possibly served 39 years in his work as high priest. Yet he was consecrated to that work "for ever"! That is, he was to serve as priest as long as he should live.

The Case of the House

In ancient times the buyer of a house within a walled city was not permitted by law to have a clear title to the property until one year had elapsed after the sale was made. During the year the seller could present the purchase price to the buyer and demand the return of the house. But if the seller should fail to do this ere the 12 months should expire, the buyer would have the house with a clear title. The law said: "Then the house that is in the walled city shall be established *for ever* to him that bought it throughout his generations."^[11]

How long was the title good? Obviously as long as the buyer should keep the property. There was no law forbidding him to sell it to another party. And could he still own the house if it should be burned up or destroyed? Would it still be his after he should die? This law was issued about 1,400 years before Christ was born. Are those houses standing yet? The meaning of "for ever" in this case is that the buyer would have a good title to the house for himself and his heirs against the world as long as the property should stand and as long as they should desire to keep it.

A remarkable use of the term "for ever" is found in the Book of Jonah. "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights."^[12] Jesus confirmed the accuracy of this statement.^[13] But when Jonah described the experience that he had in the fish, he said: "I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me *for ever*; yet has Thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God."^[14] How could Jonah be in that condition "for ever" and tell the truth when he said, "Yet Thou hast brought me up"? In this case "for ever" means as long as Jonah was inside the fish, which was three days and three nights. As long as he was confined there, that was the miserable condition in which he lived.

Our Conclusion

Having carefully considered these passages, we conclude that the term "for ever" as used in the Holy Scriptures denotes *continuity* (without a break) of action, being, or state of being. It may mean either a long or a short period of time, either definite or indefinite. The length of time involved depends on the nature of the person or thing to which the word is applied. When we read of God that "His mercy endureth for ever,"^[15] it means that as long as God shall exist, His mercy will exist. Because He is eternal in His nature, His attributes are eternal also.

But when the word "for ever" is applied to things of this world, it can mean only as long as they endure. Because the righteous will be given eternal life, an immortal nature, many things spoken of their future existence as lasting "for ever" mean for eternity, for the expression "for ever" means as long as a thing shall exist. Many Bible scholars have given the original Hebrew and Greek words translated as "for ever" their more precise meaning, which is "age-lasting."

Our English word "always" has a similar meaning. It may mean eternity or it may denote a short period of time. When a person says, "I have *always* lived in New York City," he does not mean that he has lived there during all the eternity of the past, but that during all his past life he has lived there, which may be only 20 years, depending on his age at the time. When a young man promises his bride that he will *always* love her and cherish her, he means that he will do that as long as they both are alive. But when we say, "God has *always* existed," we mean that He has lived during all the eternity of the past. Because His nature is eternal, by reason of the fact that He is immortal, He has existence without end.

Revelation 20:10 does not say, "And shall be tormented for eternity, for ever and ever." If the word "eternity" had been used in the text, there could be no question about the length of time denoted. But the passage really says, "And shall be tormented *day and night* for ever and

ever." Thus it is a matter of days and nights, and not eternity. The suffering of some sinners in the lake of fire undoubtedly will last over a period of many days and nights. Every man will be rewarded "according as his work shall be."^[16] Therefore, some will suffer longer than others, for some have been more wicked than others. Prior to his dying the second death^[17] in the lake of fire, each sinner will suffer the torment proportionate to his guilt. This being so, the devil certainly will suffer long after all other sinners shall have expired in the flames, because he is the author and instigator of all evil.

"Everlasting Punishment"

Jesus said of sinners in the judgment, that "these shall go away into everlasting punishment."^[18] Some have interpreted this to mean eternal torment. But this passage does not speak of everlasting *punishing*; it speaks of "everlasting *punishmen*." "The wages of sin is death,"^[19] says Paul. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die,"^[20] says Ezekiel. That means that the sinner will suffer *everlasting death*, from which there will be no recovery whatever. No resurrection from the second death is promised to any one.

Paul makes clear what is meant by everlasting punishment when he says that "the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: *who shall be punished with everlasting destruction* from the presence of the Lord."^[21] The everlasting punishment to be meted out to the ungodly will be eternal destruction.

Some have inquired about the "everlasting fire" spoken of in Matthew 25:41. This means a fire that will constantly burn until it shall consume everything upon which it feeds, and none shall be able to hinder its destructive work until it is finished. Sodom and Gomorrah, the wicked Canaanite cities that were destroyed nearly 1,900 years before Christ, "are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of *eternal* fire."^[22] And Peter declares that God turning "the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah *into ashes* condemned them with an overthrow, making

them an ensample unto those that after should live ungodly."^[23]

The annihilation of those cities is an example of the fate-eternal destruction by fire-that awaits those who shall be turned to ashes in the lake of fire.

How Long is Forever?

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- [1]. Exodus 21:1-6
 - [2]. 2 Kings 5:27
 - [3]. 1 Chronicles 28:4
 - [4]. 1 Kings 2:10, 11; 1 Chronicles 29:27, 28
 - [5]. Acts 2:29, 34
 - [6]. Acts 13:36
 - [7]. 1 Chronicles 23:13
 - [8]. Numbers 20:28, 29
 - [9]. Numbers 33:38, 39
 - [10]. Exodus 40:17
 - [11]. Leviticus 25:29, 30
 - [12]. Jonah 1:17
 - [13]. Matthew 12:40
 - [14]. Jonah 2:1, 2, 6
 - [15]. Psalm 106:1; 107:1
 - [16]. Revelation 22:12; 20:12, 13; Romans 2:6; Matthew 16:27
 - [17]. Revelation 21:8
 - [18]. Matthew 25:46
 - [19]. Romans 6:23
 - [20]. Ezekiel 18:4, 20
 - [21]. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9
 - [22]. Jude 7
 - [23]. 2 Peter 2:6.