

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

IS THE PUNISHMENT OF HELL ETERNAL?

Joseph A. Islam

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This has been a question that has troubled many. It is often asked, how can a merciful God punish His creation in an **eternal fire** for sins they may have committed in a relatively short period of life on Earth or if their balance of scales did not quite fall in their favour? What about all the verses relating to God's mercy and also of just retribution? How could an eternal punishment be a befitting requital for a 'finite' life? How does one reconcile a serious criminal and an ardent sinner such as Pharaoh who receives the same eternal punishment of burning in hell as with one whose sins are not of that magnitude, but has been doomed for eternity? What does it actually mean when the Quran informs the reader that not an atom's weight of injustice will be done? (99:7-8).

There are many other related questions that get asked.

It must be appreciated that God is not only a **merciful** God but also a **just** God and His justice also extends to **just retribution**. It is only correct therefore, that one expects to be recompensed for what they have earned which is the fundamental teaching of the Quran.

Though children have no qualms in posing such questions, it appears many adults try not to deal with this or simply hope that in some way despite their sins, the problem is somehow resolved by a merciful God.

So the question inevitably arises, if one has sinned and the balance of scales are not in one's favour, does this really imply that one will burn and abide in hell forever?

SEEKING THE QURAN'S GUIDANCE

First, we must appreciate that the Lord did not make His creation to **punish them**. He is **foremost most gracious, most kind**.

001:001

"In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful"

006.012

"Say: "To whom belongs all that is in the Heavens and on Earth?" Say: "To God. **He has inscribed for Himself (the rule of) Mercy (Arabic: Kataba ala nafsih i-rahma)**. That He will gather you together for the Day of Judgment, there is no doubt whatever. It is they who have lost their own souls, that will not believe"

See related article [1] below.

'KHALID' AND 'ABAD'

To gain a better understanding of the Quran's point of view, let us first obtain some familiarity with the Arabic verb '**Khalada**'. The root of this term is **KH-L-D** and many Muslims remain familiar with the word from popular names such as Khalid (male) and Khalida (female). Its derivatives appear numerous times in the Quran.

It has also been used to describe the time period for both the dwellers of heaven and hell.

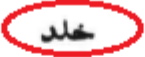
003.107 (Heaven)

"And as for those whose faces have been whitened, in the mercy of God they dwell for ever (**Arabic: Khalidun**)"

016.029 (Hell)

"So enter the gates of Hell, to dwell therein (**Arabic: Khalideen**). Thus evil indeed is the abode of the arrogant."

ROOT KH-L-D



1. **خَلَدَ**, aor. ², inf. n. **خُلُودٌ** (Ṣ, A, L, Mṣb, Ḳ)
and **خُلْدٌ**, (Ṣ, *A, L, Ḳ, * [but the latter is not
said to be an inf. n. in the first nor in the last of
these lexicons, and is perhaps a simple subst.,])
He remained, stayed, dwelt, or abode; syn. أَقَامَ :
(L, Mṣb, Ḳ :) or *he remained, stayed, dwelt, or*

abode, long ; syn. أَطَالَ الإِقَامَةَ : (A:) بِمَكَانٍ (Ş, A, Mşb, K) and إِلَى مَكَانٍ (K) [in a place]; as also † اِخْلَدَ (Ş, A, L, Mşb, K) and † خَلَدَ : (K:) and he remained, or continued, incessantly, always, endlessly, or for ever ; (Ş, A, L, K;) syn. بَقِيَ, (A, L, K,) and دَامَ, (K,) or دَامَ بَقَاؤُهُ ; (Ş, L;)*

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [2]

(God, Ş, L) caused him to remain, stay, dwell, or abide : (L:) or caused him to remain, stay, dwell, or abide, long, in a place : (A:) or caused him to remain, or continue, incessantly, always, endlessly, or for ever, (Ş, L,) in a house, or an abode, not going forth from it : (L:) or caused

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [3]

It is clear that the word exhibits two meanings which are:

- (1) A long duration **or**
- (2) A period that is eternal and unceasing.

Both are correct and restricting the meaning to its present common usage 'eternal' is not correct from a classical Arabic or Quranic perspective.

ROOT A-B-D

Another Arabic word which is at times translated in a manner to imply an unceasing duration is 'abadan'. 'Abad' in Arabic simply means to remain, to stay or dwell. Albeit it can imply duration in an absolute sense, this is not always the case. It can also simply refer to a long duration.

أَبَدٌ Time, syn. دَهْرٌ, (Ş, M, Mşb, K,) in an absolute sense : (TA:) or a long time, syn. دَهْرٌ

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [4]

If we analyse the Quran with all the relevant verses in which 'heaven' is coupled with its duration, there seems to be no indication of a limitation of time by the usage of the word 'khalid'. Therefore,

in this context (at least from a scriptural point of view), heaven seems to strongly imply an unceasing, endless abode. Another example is cited further in the article to corroborate this point. (*) (verse 11:108)

However, this is not the case with the duration of Hell.

Indeed, the root 'KH-L-D' has been used numerous times to indicate the duration of Hell as has been shown in example 16.29 above. If there was no further elaboration, then as with heaven, it would appear that the duration of the punishment was also everlasting.

However, all related verses and themes of the Quran must be kept harmonised and it appears that the punishment of Hell is **not** necessarily endless as we note in the following verse.

078.021-3

“Truly Hell is as a place of ambush, for the transgressors a place of destination: They will dwell in it for ages (Arabic: Ahqab(a))”

لِّلَّذِينَ فِيهَا أَحْقَابًا

Ahqab(a)

Illustration - Joseph Islam

WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THE ARABIC WORD 'AHQABA' (AGES)?

The Arabic word 'Ahqaba' is plural and is formed from the root **HA-QAF-BA** which denotes no more than a period of time. Different authorities render different time periods but whichever way one chooses to define it, it is obvious that the term signifies a limited period of time (irrespective of how long) and **not** eternity.

حَقْبٌ, (A, Mṣb, K,) or حَقْبٌ, (Ṣ,) or the latter also, (A, Mṣb, K,) i. q. دَقْرٌ; (Ṣ, A, Mṣb, K, and Bḍ in xviii. 59;) [as meaning] A long time: (Bḍ ib. :) and the former, (Ṣ,) or both, (A, Mṣb,* K,) eighty years; (Ṣ, A, Mṣb, K, and Bḍ ubi suprà;) as some say: (Mṣb and Bḍ :) or more: (Ṣ, A, K :) or, as some say, seventy: (Bḍ :) and a year; (A, K;) as also حَقْبَةٌ: (Ṣ, A, K;) or years: (A, K;) pl. of the former حَقَابٌ [a pl. of mult.], (Ṣ, TA,) and of the latter, (Ṣ, TA,) or former, (Mṣb,) or of both, (TA,) أَحْقَابٌ (Ṣ, A, Mṣb, K) and أَحْقَبٌ [both pls. of pauc.]. (Az, K.)

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [5]

WHERE ELSE IS THE ROOT WORD 'HA-QAF-BA' USED?

018:060

"And when Moses said to his servant: I will not give up until I reach the point where the two rivers meet, though I march on for **ages (Huqba - Root: Ha-Qaf-Ba)**"

أَبْرَحَ حَتَّىٰ أَبْلُغَ مَجْمَعَ الْبَحْرَيْنِ أَوْ أَمْضِيَ حُقُبًا

Huqba (Root: Ha-Qaf-Ba)

Illustration - Joseph Islam

With the use of the word 'ahqab' in verse 78:23, it is clear therefore that the duration of the punishment in hell is not unceasing, but limited.

OTHER EXAMPLES:

006.128

"In the day when He will gather them together (He will say): O ye assembly of the jinn! Many of humankind did ye seduce. And their adherents among humankind will say: Our Lord! We enjoyed one another, but now we have arrived at the appointed term which Thou appointed for us. He will

say: Fire is your home. Abide therein (Arabic: Khalideena feeha), save him whom God wills (to deliver). Indeed! thy Lord is Wise, Aware”

It appears that contrary to the everlasting bliss of paradise (which will also have many ranks - 58.11 in accordance to the measure of one’s deeds 76.16), the suffering of the sinners will also be in accordance to one’s sins, a perfect retribution for **the extent of the sins**, but not necessarily everlasting.

This can again be seen in 11.106-7 where the 'limitation' of the punishment of Hell is alluded to but the rewards for those in heaven seem unceasing which cements an earlier point (*)

011.106-107 (Hell)

“Those who are wretched shall be in the Fire: There will be for them therein (nothing but) the heaving of sighs and sobs: They will dwell therein for all the time that the Heavens and the Earth endure, except as thy Lord wills: for thy Lord is the (sure) accomplisher of what He plans”

(*) 011:108 (Heaven)

“And those who are blessed shall be in the Garden: They will dwell therein for all the time that the Heavens and the Earth endure, except as thy Lord wills: a gift without break (Arabic: Ata'an ghayra majdud)”

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ سُعِدُوا فَيُفَىٰ الْجَنَّةِ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا مَا دَامَتِ السَّمَاوَاتُ وَالْأَرْضُ إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ رَبُّكَ عَطَاءٌ غَيْرَ مَجْدُودٍ

Ata'an ghayra majdud

Illustration - Joseph Islam

In the above verses, both heaven and hell are synonymous with the phrase until the **'heavens and earth endure'** along with the exception, **'as thy Lord wills'**.

However, with regards heaven, we note the elaboration a **'gift without break'** – 'Ata'an' (Bestowal) 'ghayra majdud' (Uninterrupted). This elaboration is omitted with reference to hell which once again suggests a limitation to the punishment.

Furthermore, when heaven and hell are contrasted **together** in verses 64:9-10 below, the duration of the inhabitants of 'Janah' is described as 'khalidina' with an elaboration of 'abad' which gives a sense of perpetuity / absoluteness. In contrast, the duration of hell is **limited** to 'khalidina' **without** the elaboration 'abad'.

064:009 (part)

"...He will admit them to Gardens beneath which rivers flow, to dwell therein for ever (Arabic: **khalidina fiha abadan**). That will be the supreme achievement."

064.010

"But those who disbelieved and denied our verses, they will be Companions of the Fire, to dwell in it (Arabic: **khalidina**) and wretched is that destination"

HOW CAN A PUNISHMENT BE EXTENDED IF THE PUNISHMENT IS INFINITE?

In the following verse we note a punishment being prolonged or extended. This would arguably be in contention with a view that a punishment in hell is ipso fact, infinite.

019.079

"Nay, but We shall record that which he says and **We will extend / prolong (* yamuddu)** for him from a span of punishment extensively"

* '**Yamuddu**' from the primary verb '**madda**' means to extend, to lead on, prolong, to spread out or the act of extending. This does not imply a sense of infinite punishment.

HELL IS A MULTIFACETED ABODE TO FIT THE CRIME OF THE SINNER

The Quran at many places alludes to the 'abode of the sinners' as a multifaceted place (15.43-44) which is geared to fit the numerous levels of crimes of the sinners. It is not a place where every sinner will be given the same punishment or necessarily of hell-fire.

God informs the reader that not an atom's weight of injustice will occur (4.40). All punishment will be in **exact** accordance to the measure of the evil deed of the sinner.

046.019

"And to all are (assigned) degrees according to the deeds which they (have done), and in order that (God) may recompense their deeds, **and no injustice be done to them**"

010.027 (Part)

"But those who have earned evil **will have a reward of like evil...**"

078.024-26

"Therein taste they neither coolness nor (any) drink. Save boiling water and a paralyzing cold: **reward proportioned (to their evil deeds)**"

006:132

"**To all are degrees (or ranks) according to their deeds: for thy Lord is not unmindful of anything that they do**"

006:160

"He that does good shall have ten times as much to his credit: He that does evil shall only be recompensed according to his evil (or the like of it Arabic: illa mith'laha) : no wrong shall be done unto (any of) them"

The hypocrites however, will be in the lowest depths (4.145)

SOME WILL WANT TO COME OUT OF HELL - BUT THEIR PUNISHMENT WILL ENDURE UNTIL THEY HAVE BEEN FULLY RECOMPENSED

005.037

"Their wish will be to get out of the Fire, but never will they get out from there: their penalty will be one that endures."

032.020

"As to those who are rebellious and wicked, their abode will be the Fire: every time they wish to get away from there, they will be returned to it, and it will be said to them: "Taste the Punishment of the Fire in which you used to deny""

002:167

"And those who followed would say: "If only We had one more chance, We would clear ourselves of them, as they have cleared themselves of us." Thus will God show them (The fruits of) their deeds as (nothing but) regrets. Nor will there be a way for them out of the Fire"

At every moment the sinner intends to escape or plead for a second chance on Earth (2.167), they will be brought back to the recompense that they have earned. The punishment will not be lightened (2.86) and complete justice will be dispensed.

This also negates any form of unqualified intercession. **Please see related article (2) below.**

THE FIRE OF HELL IS FOR THE 'MOST' WICKED

For many Muslims it is commonly understood that despite the various details of 'hell' given in the Quran and many indirectly insinuated, the severe burning in the fire of hell is for everyone that enters it. From a Quran's point of view this does not necessarily seem to be the case. In the following verse it is clear that only the most wretched will experience the fire.

092.014

"Therefore have I warned you of the flaming fire"

092.015

"Which only the most wretched (Arabic: Ashqa) must endure"

لَا يَصْلِيهَا إِلَّا الْأَشْقَى

Ashqa

Illustration - Joseph Islam

The usage of 'Ashqa' is an exaggerated expression signifying an extreme degree (superlative). This can also be seen in verse 87.11.

However, a legitimate question arises as to why there is significant mention of the fire of hell and many other serious punishments in the Quran, if it is only meant for the most wicked.

Here we must first appreciate that the primary audience for delivery of the Quran are those people that are receiving the scripture **directly from a Prophet of God (Prophet Muhammad)**^(pbuh) who is narrating them the truth leaving them with no reason to deny the message. (Clear manifestation / completion of proof - Itmam ul-Hujjah).

Please see related article [3] below.

Hence the threat of punishment is proportional to the level of clarity of the message that is reaching them. If they continue to reject, they will be classed as 'Kaffir' (Those that deny the truth once it has reached them with utmost clarity) and the punishment would potentially be severe.

Please see related article [4] below.

Nations that have rejected the manifestation of truth to this extent (directly from a messenger appointed by God) and continued with their transgressions have been utterly destroyed; for example, Aad, Thamud, people of the messengers Lot, Noah, Shoaib and others. (Peace be upon the messengers).

There is little or no substitute for the 'complete clarity of message' coming directly from a messenger of God Himself. If despite the fact that the clarity of message from such a messenger has no effect, then indeed we need only to visit the many examples before where nations were destroyed. There is no change in God's ways.

Please see related article [5] below.

Indeed Pharaoh is such an example, who denied all the signs that he received from the Prophets of God (Prophet Moses and Aaron^{pbuh}). Pharaoh will be punished with a **most severe burning and roasting** in the fire of hell because he denied the truth when it reached him until he came to his

earthly demise (40.46). At this point, even his shahada (Testimony) of God (10.90) was deemed unacceptable. He has been rightly cited as an example befitting the severest of punishments.

However there are many punishments described in the Quran and whether they are literal or they take some allegorical form, there is **no doubt** that the **threat** and **significance** of the punishments are a reality and quite severe in some cases.

The paralyzing cold (78.25), scorching fire and scolding water and shade of black smoke (56.43) burning till it changes the colour and skins of man (74.29) and every time their skin is roasted it will be recreated (4.56), They will eat from the deadly tree of Zuqqum with its food like the heads of devils (37.62-68) and like molten brass will boil in their bellies like boiling scolding water (44.43-46) and it will cut up their bowels to pieces (47.15). They will also drink boiling water because of the intensity of their thirst like that of camels (56.55), from a boiling spring (88.5) and eat food of bitter thorns that neither nourishes nor avails against hunger (88.6-7). The fuel of fire is men and stones (66.6) and their garments are of melted copper and their faces will be covered in fire (14.49-50).

The threat of punishment is real and one must **never** underestimate this. However, we must remain hopeful for the Lord's mercy who has inscribed for Himself (Kataba ala Nafsihi) the 'rule of mercy' (6.12; 6:54) who **multiplies** our good deeds but **only** takes one to task for the amount of evil that they have committed (6.160).

Please see related article [1] below.

Having said this we must appreciate that we **will** all be recompensed **fully** for what we have done in terms of evil. Every **hidden** thought will be enquired into and searched out (86.9), every little deed will be laid out bare (99.7-8) and this should keep us humble and always seeking God's mercy and His guidance.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It is neither the purpose of this article, nor for any creation of God to inform of God's will other than what **He Himself** has informed us. We can only remain true to what God has revealed to us and not go beyond into what is concealed from us, as this will amount to nothing more than conjecturing.

This is what this article attempts to explore and challenges the commonly held belief that the punishment of the **fire** of Hell is automatically eternal for **anyone** that enters it.

From a Quran's perspective, it appears that this may not necessarily be the case. (Only God knows best).

As cited already, we can only but remain restricted to the scripture and what it reveals to us in knowledge and within context. I trust that this article has remained true to that sentiment and provides some food for thought.

Whatever one's position, there is one absolute truth without contest. Not an atom's weight of injustice will occur and our Lord God is **perfect** in justice.

Related Articles:

- (1) [A Generous, Loving and Forgiving Lord](#)
- (2) [Intercession and the Prophet's Help](#)
- (3) [Itmam al-Hujjah - Completion of Proof](#)
- (4) [Understanding 'Kufr' \(Disbelief\) from a Quranic Perspective](#)
- (5) [Understanding the term 'Sunna' from a Quran's Perspective](#)

REFERENCES

[1] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 2, Page 783*

Highlights marked in red on the lexicon excerpt are my own insertions. They have no bearing on the original text other than they emphasise relevance to the topic at hand. These are merely illustrations and have solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] *Ibid.*, Page 784

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, Volume 1, Page 4

[5] *Ibid.*, Volume 2, Page 610

[Joseph Islam](#)

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