

Forever, Eternal and Everlasting

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“Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever.” ~ Exodus 21:6

Sometimes we are confident that we know the meaning of words and terms. Their definitions seem so fixed and settled in our minds. For instance, what does “for ever” actually mean? Are we sure we know? Just how long is “for ever?”

At our first look into the subject, “for ever” would surely seem to be something about which we could be absolute; but as we look closely at the Scriptures, we will be amazed to find that our definition is not biblical.

Words are simply vehicles to communicate ideas of understanding. As one author clearly has written, “In all languages, it is usage that determines meaning ... Since usage always determines meaning, biblical usage, certainly, always determines biblical meaning.”¹

Actual scriptural usage of “for ever” will clearly demonstrate it cannot carry the religious meaning of “unending” that we have been brought up to accept. Let’s look at a few examples of the usage of “for ever,” where the scriptural meaning obviously cannot mean “without end.”

Jonah and the Whale

The first passage we shall look at is a reference to how long Jonah was in the belly of the whale.

*“I went down to the bottoms of the mountains; the earth with her bars was about me **for ever**: yet hast thou brought up my life from corruption, O LORD my God” (Jonah 2:6).*

1. Loyal Hurley, *The Outcome of Infinite Grace*, Concordant Publishing Concern.

Jonah uses the words “for ever” in reference to his ordeal, but he clearly defines its length as only three days and three nights:

*“Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish **three days and three nights**”* (Jonah 1:17).

The Lord Jesus confirmed this duration.

*“For as Jonas was **three days and three nights** in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Matthew 12:40).

The usage of “for ever” in Jonah 2:6 simply cannot carry the meaning of “unending.”

The Servant

The next passage we shall consider is in reference to how long a willing servant would be indentured to his master.

*“Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him **for ever**”* (Exodus 21:6).

Here, “for ever” could not possibly have extended past the servant’s lifespan. The usage of “for ever” in Exodus 21:6 simply cannot carry the sense of “unending.”

Solomon’s Temple

Another example we see of the scriptural usage of “for ever” is related to Solomon’s Temple. After it was dedicated, the Lord said He would put His name there “for ever.”

*“And the LORD said unto him, I have heard thy prayer and thy supplication, that thou hast made before me: I have hallowed this house, which thou hast built, to put my name there **for ever**”* (I Kings 9:3).

Interestingly, Solomon’s Temple stood for a period of only about 400 years. Thus, the usage of “for ever” in I Kings 9:3 simply cannot carry the definition of “unending” either.

Ten Generations

In the following passage, for ever is clearly defined as ten generations:

*“An Ammonite or Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the LORD; **even to their tenth generation** shall they not enter into the congregation of the LORD **for ever**”* (Deuteronomy 23:3).

The usage of “*for ever*” here in Deuteronomy 23:3 simply cannot carry the definition of “unending” either, since it has been set by the context for a period of ten generations.

“For Ever ... Until”

The last example we shall consider in this brief study is found in the book of Isaiah.

“... *The forts and towers shall be for dens **for ever** ... **until** the Spirit be poured upon us from on high, and the wilderness be a fruitful field, and the fruitful field be counted for a forest*” (Isaiah 32:14-15).

In this prophecy, this “*for ever*” condition would remain “*until*” a time when the Spirit would be poured out. Thus again, the usage of “*for ever*” here, as in the other passages we have considered, simply cannot carry the meaning of “unending.”

Loyal Hurley has noted the significance of “*for ever*” in the first three passages:

“Here is something that ought to be clear to any intelligent, honest man. A word that is used to mean, in one case, three days and nights, in another case, a man’s lifetime, and in still another, a period of about four centuries, surely does not mean unending or eternal – no matter what English word is used to translate it. Usage determines meaning.”²

THE “FOREVER” FAMILY OF WORDS

The principle here does not just apply to “*for ever*,” but to an entire family of English words used in Bible translation. Our English words “*eternal*” and “*everlasting*” are among those in this family. These words also often carry with them the religious idea of “endless.”

“*Eternal*” and “*everlasting*” are but alternate words used to translate the Hebrew or Greek words that have also been translated “*for ever*.” So just as “*for ever*” does not carry the idea of “endlessness,” neither do “*eternal*” or “*everlasting*.”

The Hebrew Word

The Old Testament Hebrew word used to translate “*for ever*” is *owlam*. It is also translated in the *King James Version* by the following English words:

- “*any time*” (Leviticus 25:32).
- “*of old*” (Deuteronomy 32:7).
- “*old time*” (Joshua 24:2).
- “*ancient times*” (Psalms 77:5).
- “*long*” (Ecclesiastes 12:5).

2. Ibid, Hurley.

The Greek Word

The Greek word *aion* (and its forms) is the word used to translate *for ever*, *eternal*, and *everlasting*. This word does not have as its meaning “endless duration” as our religious traditions have taught us; rather it denotes a limited duration, an interval of time. Thus, it is also used to translate our English words “ages,” or “world.”

The Greek noun *aion* is used 128 times. It is translated in the *King James Version* as follows:

Ages	2	Evermore	4
Course	1	Never	7
Eternal	2	World	40
Ever	72		

The Greek adjective *aiōnios* is used 71 times. It is translated in the *King James Version* as follows:

Eternal	42	Everlasting	25
Ever	1	World	3

ETYMOLOGY, DEFINITION, & USAGE

Now, let’s take a closer look at this Greek word *aion*. We will look at its etymology, definition, and usage.

Etymology

“Etymology gives no warrant for applying the idea of eternity to the word ... We find no reason in its etymology for giving it the sense of endless duration.” – J.W. Hanson, *The Greek Word Aion*, 1875 (pages 10-11).

“It must be admitted that the Greek word which is rendered ‘*eternal*’ does not, in itself, involve endlessness, but rather, duration, whether through an age or succession of ages, and that it is therefore applied in the New Testament to periods of time that have had both a beginning and ending” – Charles John Ellicott, *Ellicott’s Commentary on the Whole Bible*.

Definition

“the time of life” – Hesychius (A.D. 400-600).

“an interval denoting time” – Theodoret (A.D. 300-400).

“Properly, an age” – James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance Greek Lexicon* (Greek #165).

“Primarily signifies time, in the sense of age, or generation” – *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (page 1010).

“An age” – W.E. Vine, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary*.

“A period of time related to the subject” – Charles J. Wilhelm, *Biblical Dyslexia* (2004), Page 80.

“Any space of time whether longer or shorter, past, present or future, to be determined by the persons or things spoken of, and the scope of the subjects; the life or age of man. Aionios, a definite and long period of time, that is, a long enduring, but still definite period of time.” – John Schleusner, *Novus Thesaurus Philologico-Criticus* (1829).

“The life that hastes away in the breathing of our breath, life as transitory; then the course of life, time of life, and general life in its temporal form, then, the space of human life, an age.” – E.W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance*.

“A period of existence; one’s lifetime; life; an age; a generation; a long space of time. A space of time clearly defined and marked out; an era, epoch, age, period or dispensation. – Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*.

“Time; space of time; life time and life; the ordinary period of man’s life; the age of man; man’s estate; a long period of time” – James Donnegan, *A New Greek and English Lexicon* (1839).

“Aion: A space of time, as a lifetime, generation, period of history, an indefinitely long period” – Abbott-Smith, *Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*.

Our Everyday Usage of the Word “Forever”

It is indeed interesting to see the wide range of time periods that “*for ever*” can cover. It all depends upon the usage of the word – the context in which it is set. Is this not exactly the way we use “*for ever*” in our own daily speech? For example, we might hear someone say,

“I could not believe how many people were at the grocery store. I was in the checkout line forever.”

“I will be thirty next month, and I still have not found a mate. I have been looking for a wife forever.”

“I’ll be able to retire in two years. It won’t come quick enough for me, I have been working here in this factory forever.”

“This bedroom suite has been in our family forever.”

In none of these examples do we convey the meaning of time as being “without end.” In fact, in each of these examples, we may determine by the context of usage an estimate of the duration of time.

In the first example, we may expect that someone could spend 10 to 20 minutes or so in line. That might be the context of the usage of “forever.”

In the second example, one might expect that the young man has been seeking a wife for ten years or so.

In the next example, we might expect that the soon-to-be retiree has worked at the factory for twenty, thirty, or forty years.

Then in our last example, one might expect that forever could refer to a number of generations, maybe even a hundred or two hundred years.

In other words, in each case the usage of “forever” in its context would determine its meaning. We would not expect someone to stand in a checkout line for twenty, thirty, or forty years. Neither would we expect the bedroom suite to have been in the family for 10 to 20 minutes.

Yet by our own daily usage of the word “forever,” we could mean any one of these expansive ranges of meanings. Usage and context always determine meaning.

Forever does not carry a scriptural meaning of “without end.” The only time “*forever*” means “without end” is when it comes to religious language.

Scriptural Usage

In this section we shall see verses where the Greek words *aion* and *aionios* are translated. We have selected verses that clearly demonstrate these Greek words cannot possibly mean “endless” or “unending.”

*“He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this **world** [aion], and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful” (Matthew 13:22).*

*“The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the **world** [aion]; and the reapers are the angels” (Matthew 13:39).*

*“As He spake by the mouth of His holy prophets, which have been since the **world** [aion] began” (Luke 1:70).*

*“And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely: for the children of this **world** [aion] are in their generation wiser than the children of light” (Luke 16:8).*

*“Since the **world** [aion] began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind” (John 9:32).*

*“Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the **world** [aionios] began” (Romans 16:25).*

*“Wherefore, if meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the **world** [aion] standeth, lest I make my brother to offend” (I Corinthians 8:13).*

*“Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the **world** [aion] are come” (I Corinthians 10:11).*

*“That in the **ages** [aion] to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).*

*“Even the mystery which hath been hid from **ages** [aion] and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints” (Colossians 1:26).*

*“Charge them that are rich in this **world** [aion], that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, Who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (I Timothy 6:17).*

*“Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the **world** [aionion] began” (II Timothy 1:9).*

*“In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the **world** [aionion] began” (Titus 1:2).*

*“But unto the Son He saith, Thy throne, O God, is **for ever** [aion] and **ever** [aion]: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of Thy kingdom” (Hebrews 1:8).*

*“For then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the **world** [aion] hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26).*

Sodom and Gomorrha are said to be suffering the vengeance of **eternal (aionious)** fire:

*“Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of **eternal** [aionios] fire” (Jude 1:7).*

Yet we know this “*eternal fire*” is not endless because God has promised their own future restoration, at the time when He restores Israel!

“When thy sisters, **Sodom and her daughters, shall return to their former estate, and Samaria and her daughters shall return to their former estate, then thou and thy daughters shall return to your former estate**” (Ezekiel 16:55).

THE RELIGIOUS CONCEPT OF “ETERNAL”

Interestingly enough, our English word “*eternal*” comes from the Latin *æternus* which means, literally, “lasting for an age.” – Walter Skeat, *The Concise Dictionary of English Etymology*, 1882. This is confirmed by many etymological sources:

- “lasting for an age” – John Kennedy, *Word Stems: A Dictionary*, 1996 (page 128).
- “age” – Robert K. Barnhart, *Barnhart’s Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, 1995 (page 254).
- “age” – Ernest Weekly, *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*, 1967 (page 526).

Somewhere along the way the meaning of the word “eternal” took on its modern religious concept. “Eternal” has come to mean “endless.” This definition is purely religious, rooted in Greek philosophy.

The Testimony of Others

We are not alone in coming to see the important scriptural meaning of “*for ever*,” “*eternal*,” and “*everlasting*.” Consider the testimony of others concerning the current concept of “endless” as related to “eternity:”

“No, doubt it was right at one time to translate *aion* by *eternal*, and would be right again could we reinstate the original significance of the word: for, strangely enough, the word ‘eternal’ originally meant age-long.” Samuel Cox, *Salvator Mundi, or Is Christ the Saviour of All Men?* 1877 (p. 119).

“Let me say to Bible students that we must be very careful how we use the word ‘eternity.’ We have fallen into great error in our constant use of that word. There is no word in the whole Book of God corresponding with our ‘eternal’ which as commonly used among us means absolutely without end.” – G. Campbell Morgan, *God’s Methods With Men* (p. 185).

“Eternity is not a Biblical theme ... What we have to learn is that the Bible does not speak of eternity. It is not written to tell us of eternity. Such a consideration is entirely outside the scope of revelation.” – Charles H. Welch, *An Alphabetical Analysis* (Vol. 1, p. 279, 52).

“Aion ... is a period of longer or shorter duration, having a beginning and an end, and complete in itself ... The word always carries the notion of time, and not of eternity. It always means a period of time. Otherwise it would be impossible to account for the plural, or for such qualifying expressions as this age, or the age to come. It does not mean something endless or everlasting ... The adjective *aionios* in like manner carries the idea of time. Neither the noun nor the adjective, in themselves, carry the sense of endless or everlasting ... Words which are habitually applied to things temporal or material cannot carry in themselves the sense of endlessness. Even when applied to God, we are not forced to render *aionios* everlasting. Of course the life of God is endless; but the question is whether, in describing God as *aionios*, it was intended to describe the duration of his being, or whether some different and larger idea was not contemplated.” – Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (Vol. IV, p. 59).

“That *aiónion*, does not mean endless or eternal, may appear from considering that no adjective can have a greater force than the noun from which it is derived. If *aión* means age (which none either will or can deny) then *aiónion* must mean age-lasting, or duration through the age or ages to which the thing spoken of relates.” – Nathaniel Scarlett (1798).

“Since *aion* meant ‘age,’ *aionios* means, properly, ‘belonging to an age,’ or ‘age-long,’ and anyone who asserts that it must mean ‘endless’ defends a position which even Augustine practically abandoned twelve centuries ago.” – Frederic William Farrar, *Mercy and Judgment*, (p. 378).

“The Bible hardly speaks of eternity in a philosophical sense of infinite duration without beginning or end. The Hebrew word *olam* ... in contexts where it is traditionally translated ‘forever,’ means, in itself, no more than ‘for an indefinitely long period.’ ... In the New Testament, *aion* is used as the equivalent of *olam*.” – *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Bible*.

“The Old Testament and the New Testament are not acquainted with the conception of eternity as timelessness. The Old Testament has not developed a special term for ‘eternity.’ The word *aion* originally meant ‘vital force,’ ‘life;’ then ‘age,’ ‘lifetime.’ It is, however, also used generally of a (limited or unlimited) long space of time ...” – *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (vol. IV, p. 643).

“There is no word either in the Old Testament Hebrew or in the New Testament Greek to express the abstract idea of eternity. (Vol. III, p. 369): Eternal, everlasting-nonetheless ‘eternal’ is misleading, inasmuch as it has come in the English to connote the idea of ‘endlessly existing,’ and thus to be practically a synonym for ‘everlasting.’ But this is not an adequate rendering of *aionios* which varies in meaning with the variations of the noun *aion* from which it comes.” – *Hasting’s Dictionary of the New Testament* (p. 370).

“The word by itself, whether adjective or substantive, never means endless.” – Frederic William Farrar, *The Wider Hope* (1890).

“The conception of eternity, in the Semitic languages, is that of a long duration and series of ages.” – J.S. Blunt, *Dictionary of Theology*.

“The word aion is never used in Scripture, or anywhere else, in the sense of endlessness (vulgarly called eternity, it always meant, both in Scripture and out, a period of time); else how could it have a plural -- how could you talk of the aeons and aeons of aeons as the Scripture does?” – Charles Kingsley (1857), *Endless Torments Unscriptural*.

“Aion means ‘an age,’ a limited period, whether long or short, though often of indefinite length; and the adjective aionios means ‘of the age,’ ‘age-long,’ ‘aeonian,’ and never ‘everlasting’ (of its own proper force), it is true that it may be applied as an epithet to things that are endless, but the idea of endlessness in all such cases comes not from the epithet, but only because it is inherent in the object to which the epithet is applied, as in the case of God.” – Thomas Allin, *Christ Triumphant*.

Age

The single most commonly used English word that represents the meaning of *aion* is “age.” Twice the *King James Version* translators used the word “ages” to translate *aion* (Ephesians 2:7; Colossians 1:26).

“That in the **ages** [*aion*] to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

“Even the mystery which hath been hid from **ages** [*aion*] and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints” (Colossians 1:26).

Etymologically, the words “age” and “eternal” are from the same source. This can be verified by checking any dictionary on word origins. As an example, Eric Partridge in his work, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1983) has the following listed under “Eternal” – “See Age.”

Our English word “age” best represents the concept of the word *aion* in the Divine plan. When God uses *aion* in reference to His workings, He communicates the idea of “age” (or “eon”). Or, in the case of *aionios* it would be “age-lasting,” but once again the “age” in reference must be qualified by usage within the context.

WHAT THE SCRIPTURES ACTUALLY TEACH US ABOUT THE AGES (AIONS) OF GOD

The Ages (aions) Have a Beginning:

“Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the **worlds** [*aion*]” (Hebrews 1:2).

*“But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the **world** [aion] unto our glory” (I Corinthians 2:7).*

*“Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the **world** [aionios] began” (II Timothy 1:9).*

The Ages (aions) Have an End, Individually and Collectively:

*“For then must He often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the **world** [aion] hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26).*

*“Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the **world** [aion] are come” (I Corinthians 10:11).*

*“And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the **world** [aion]?” (Matthew 24:3).*

HOW MANY AGES (AIONS) ARE THERE?

We can acquire a basic grasp of the number of ages related to God’s dealings with man by considering the three basic categories of time: past, present, and future. Let’s consider three verses that will help us in these three areas of time.

In the Past: *“Even the mystery which hath been hid from **ages** [aion] and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints” (Colossians 1:26).*

In the Present: *“Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil **world** [aion], according to the will of God and our Father” (Galatians 1:4).*

In the Future: *“That in the **ages** [aion] to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).*

In these three verses we have a *minimum* of five ages indicated:

- In Colossians 1:26 we have “ages” in the plural form, speaking in the past tense, indicating at least two former ages.
- In Galatians 1:4 we have “world” in the singular form, a reference to the present age.

- In Ephesians 2:7, again we have “ages” in the plural form, speaking in the future tense, indicating at least two upcoming ages.

This is a *minimum* total of five.

CONCLUSION

In the Scriptures, “*for ever*,” “*eternal*,” and “*everlasting*” cannot possibly convey the meaning of “endless.”

(1) If so, how could *aion* ever be in the plural?

(2) If so, how could *aion* ever be spoken of as having an end?

The basic concept of *aion* does not convey the religious system’s imposed definition of “without end.” A clear understanding of biblical words, defined by the Scriptures themselves, is always the best remedy to the traditional bondage of the mind by the doctrines of men.

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