

Discover Bible Studies

#23: What and Where Is Hell?

A senseless shooting occurred when a student marched into his school and killed several of his classmates. A disgruntled man who had been fired from his job, entered the place of his former employment and shot his superior. A mother pushed her car into a lake with her two children inside and drowned them.

On at least two continents many thousands have been slaughtered in ethnic cleansing. Centuries old feuds between two or more ethnic groups are the reason. Men, women, children, and even babies have been shot, cut up, beat up, and raped.

Punishing these barbaric crimes with the death penalty, even for cold-blooded murderers, is condemned by many. Groups against the death penalty protest loudly, calling it an inhumane "paganistic ritual." They ask, are these killers beyond redemption?

What is the most humane way of executing condemned criminals? The electric chair? Some think an injection with a lethal drug would be the most painless. Others maintain that life would end more quickly by hanging.

But in all this passionate debate over the death penalty, there is one option no one considers. No one suggests that cold-blooded killers, who have cruelly ended another's life, pay with physical agony by being tortured to death. No one, for example, has suggested that these murderers slowly burn to death.

But many sincere Christians do assume that our heavenly Father will do worse than that. The wicked, they say, must be tortured in order to pay for their sins. And what's more, they picture God's execution grounds as a place of endless torment.

Just what does happen to the wicked? How does their fate fit in with God's love and justice? Let's look for the Bible answer.

1. JESUS' FINAL HEARTBREAK

For 6,000 years God has been pleading with men and women:

"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." -Ezekiel 33:11. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)

The cross revealed how much God wants to rescue fallen humanity. When Jesus cried out on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," He laid bare His aching heart (Luke 23:34). Soon afterward Jesus yielded up His life and, some believe, died of a broken heart (John 19:30, 34).

But even with this powerful demonstration of divine love, many individuals will still not turn to Jesus. And as long as sin rules in this world, it will continue to multiply human misery. So sin has to be destroyed. How does God plan to put an end to sin?

"The day of the Lord will come. . . . The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the EARTH AND EVERYTHING IN IT WILL BE BURNED UP." -2 Peter 3:10, margin.

God must finally cleanse the universe of evil and put an end to sin. Those who persist in holding on to sin will eventually be destroyed by this fire that is prepared to destroy the Devil, his angels, and sin from our world. What a heart-breaking time for Jesus as He sees the fire consume the ones He died to save.

2. WHERE AND WHEN WILL HELL BURN?

Contrary to some popular conceptions, God doesn't have a fire burning now in a place termed "hell" where sinners go at death. Hell happens when this earth is turned into a lake of fire. God waits to carry out the sentence on the wicked until the final judgment at the end of the 1,000 years (Revelation 20:9-15).

"The Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for punishment until THE DAY OF JUDGMENT." -2 Peter 2:9, margin.

He also cleanses our world with this purifying fire.

"The present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for THE DAY OF JUDGMENT and destruction of ungodly men." -2 Peter 3:7.

God never planned for any human being to end his or her life in the fires of hell. But when people refuse to break with Satan and hold on to their sins, they must finally receive the consequences of their choices.

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire PREPARED FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS ANGELS.'" -Matthew 25:41.

According to Jesus, when will hell burn?

"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be AT THE END OF THE AGE [WORLD, KJV]. The Son of Man will send out his ANGELS, and they will WEED OUT of his kingdom EVERYTHING THAT CAUSES SIN AND ALL WHO DO EVIL. THEY

WILL THROW THEM INTO THE FIERY FURNACE, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." -Matthew 13:40-42.

The weeds, the evil-doers, aren't burned until the end of the world. Before this sentence is carried out, the whole universe must be assured that God has been fair in his dealings with every human being. As detailed in Guide 22, in the great controversy going on between Christ and Satan, Satan has been attempting to prove to the universe that the way of sin is the better way; Jesus has been demonstrating that the way of obedience is the key to a more satisfying life.

At the close of the 1,000 years, this demonstration will culminate in the judgment of Satan, his angels, and the wicked. After the record books are opened which reveal the part that each person has played in this great drama, God will throw Satan, death, and the grave, along with everyone whose name "was not found written in the book of life . . . into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15). According to the next verse, Revelation 21:1, after God cleanses the earth from sin with fire, He creates "a new heaven and a new earth."

3. HOW LONG WILL HELL BURN?

Many believers accept the idea that the fires of hell last forever, resulting in eternal torment. Let's look carefully at texts which describe God's treatment of sin and sinners.

"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be PUNISHED WITH EVERLASTING DESTRUCTION and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." -2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9.

Please note that "everlasting destruction" is not the same as "everlasting torment." It simply means, a destruction that lasts forever. The effect is everlasting death. Peter spoke of the Day of Judgment and "destruction of ungodly men" (2 Peter 3:7).

According to Jesus, both "soul and body" are destroyed in hell (Matthew 10:28). In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about the narrow gate "that leads to life," and the broad road "that leads to destruction" (Matthew 7:13, 14). In John 3:16 Jesus explains that God "gave His one and only Son," that those who believe might not "perish, but have eternal life." Jesus contrasts two fates: everlasting life or perishing-not eternal burning. We must conclude that hell definitely has an ending; it results in the death and destruction of the wicked.

Clear statements throughout Scripture tell us the wicked will be destroyed. "The wicked will be cut off" (Psalm 37:28), they "will perish" (2 Peter 2:12), "they will vanish like smoke" (Psalm 37:20). The fire will reduce them to ashes (Malachi 4:1-3. "The wages of sin is death," not eternal life in hellfire; "the gift of God is eternal life" (Romans 6:23).

The purpose of the final punishment in hellfire is to rid the universe of sin, not to preserve sin forever. It is extremely hard to imagine that the Christ who wept over the fate of

stubborn Jerusalem and who forgave those who put Him to death, would be able to spend eternity watching over the agonies of the damned.

Hell definitely has an ending. At the close of the 1,000 years, God rains fire down from the skies and eliminates the Devil, his angels, and the wicked who persist in holding on to their sins. "Fire" comes "down from heaven" and devours them (Revelation 20:9).

According to Jesus, this fire is "unquenchable" (Matthew 3:12). No fire brigade will be able to put it out until it has done its work of complete destruction.

God promises that, out of this cleansing fire, He will create "a new earth," in which the "the past troubles will be forgotten;" and "the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more" (Isaiah 65:16-19).

What a day that will be! Every cause for heartache will have vanished. God will erase the wounds of sin from every heart, and our happiness will be complete.

4. **"FOREVER" IN SCRIPTURE**

In Matthew 25:41 Jesus speaks of "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Does "eternal" here suggest hell is forever? Jude 7 presents Sodom and Gomorrah "as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire." Obviously those cities aren't still burning. But the fire WAS eternal in the sense that it resulted in permanent destruction.

In 2 Peter 2:6 once more we read of eternal fire. But this scripture also clearly points out that God "condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly." The ungodly of Sodom and Gomorrah are not still in agony; they were reduced to ashes long ago. And yet the fire that burned them is "eternal" in its consequences-permanent destruction. Eternal means permanent punishment, not punishing.

Because the book of Revelation uses such vivid, symbolic language, some of its passages have been misunderstood. For example, Revelation 14:11 says of the lost, "the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever." This sounds like endless suffering. But, again, let's let Scripture interpret Scripture.

Exodus 21:6 in the KJV speaks of a servant's having his ear drilled through as a sign that he was to serve his master "forever." In this case "forever" would be as long as the servant's life would last. Jonah, who spent only three days and three nights in the belly of the whale (Matthew 12:40), reports that he was there "forever" (Jonah 2:6). No doubt three days in the slimy darkness did seem like forever.

So we must be careful to understand how and when Scripture uses symbolic, poetic language. The smoke ascending forever from the lake of fire is a vivid way of expressing eternal destruction. Revelation 21:8 tells us plainly that the lake which burns with fire and

brimstone "is the second death." Hell has an ending. The wicked are consumed; they are destroyed.

5. WHY MUST THERE BE A HELL AT ALL?

In the beginning God created a perfect world. But sin came in and brought disaster, decay, and death. If you returned home some evening and found your house ransacked and wrecked, would you leave it that way forever? Of course not. You would sweep out the dirt and rubbish, clean the place from top to bottom, and throw away furniture ruined beyond repair. God will do the same. He will take care of the wreckage and pollution of sin once and for all, creating a new earth in its place. God's purpose for having this world purified by fire is to prepare the way for a perfect world for the saved to live in.

But God faces a serious problem because sin not only wrecked the physical world, it also infected people. Sin damaged our relationship with Him and with each other. Humanity continues to be plagued by child abuse, terrorism, pornography, and a thousand other cancers of the soul. God must someday destroy sin, because sin is destroying people. God's dilemma is this: how to eliminate the deadly virus of sin from the world and yet not destroy all the people infected by it? His solution was to take on the virus in His own body; He allowed the cancer of sin to destroy Him at the cross. As a result:

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and PURIFY US FROM ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS." -1 John 1:9.

God offers His solution to the sin problem freely to everyone. But the sad fact is, some insist on clinging to the disease of sin. And God will not force people to choose His way of eternal life. Those who reject His solution will finally be consumed by the disease. The real reason for hell is this:

"For I called but you did not answer, I spoke but you did not listen. You did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me." -Isaiah 65:12.

Cut off from Jesus by their own choices, the wicked will discover that the only alternative is eternal death.

6. WHAT WILL IT COST TO BE LOST?

Even though the Scriptures do not teach that the fire of hell results in endless suffering, it does give us a glimpse of what a terrible experience it is to be lost. The wicked are going to miss out on eternal life. What a horror it will be to realize that the joy of eternal life with God has slipped through their hands, that they'll never, ever experience the bliss of perfect, loving relationships throughout the ages.

When Christ hung on the cross with the world's sins separating Him from the Father, He must have felt the agony of the eternally lost. As the wicked look into the black void ahead of them, they see only eternal destruction. They must die with no hope of a second

resurrection. At the same time they see how they pushed Christ away time after time when He came near with overtures of love. In the end they fall to their knees and acknowledge God's justice and His love (Philippians 2:10, 11). No wonder Bible writers urgently press on us the weight of our choices and the claims of Christ.

"We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, 'In the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, NOW is the time of God's favour, NOW is the day of salvation." -2 Corinthians 6:1-2.

I can think of no greater tragedy than someone wasting the priceless sacrifice of Jesus by choosing to be lost. The alternatives facing us are starkly clear: eternal destruction-an eternity excluded from the presence of God, or an eternal friendship with Christ that fulfils our deepest longings. Which do you choose for yourself? Why not discover your destiny in Christ today?

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