

# The Good News About Hell



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*The following notes contain some of the material presented in the series "Is God for Real?"*

The subject of hell has polarised many for centuries. Some say it is eternal torment, others say it is simply a metaphor. Some people today even imagine hell is one big party where all the rock stars go when they die, but what does the Bible say about this mysterious place? Let's approach this topic by asking four important questions: What is hell? When is Hell? Where is Hell? And how long does hell last?

This is an important issue, because it has implications for what we believe about the character of God. What kind of a God do we serve? The popular notion of hell is that God will torture people forever in an everlasting fire with no parole. Is this true? Why would God punish someone for all eternity for the sins of one brief lifetime and how could we reconcile this picture with a God of love. The Bible tells us that God is not willing that any should perish 2Peter 3:9. In John 3:16 we are told that we will either perish or have everlasting life. Those are the two choices. It is not everlasting life in heaven, or everlasting life somewhere else. Yes, there is a cleansing fire that will remove any stain of sin from the earth, but this will be short in duration, for the wages of sin is death, Rom 6:23, not everlasting torment.

If the penalty for sin were everlasting torment, then Jesus could not have paid the price for our sins because He is not in everlasting torment now – He is in heaven with the Father. But if the penalty for sin is death, then Jesus did pay our penalty, because He did die on the cross. Ultimately, hell is separation from God, and Jesus endured this for us on the cross. The wicked, having rejected salvation will ultimately be separated from God permanently at the end of time. This point is also illustrated in John 3:16 where Jesus says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." The two possible options are to perish or have everlasting life with God. Jesus does not say that we will have everlasting life with God or everlasting life somewhere else. It will be life or death.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares Jesus describes the separation of the righteous and the wicked at the harvest, or the end of the world. So then, hell is not burning now – it takes place at the end. This makes sense when we consider that Jesus will reward each person at the second coming – not before, Matt 16:27. Right now we get to choose where we will spend eternity – dead or alive - and God urges us to choose life, Deuteronomy 30:19.

But what about those verses that describe hell? Don't they sound like it will be eternal? For instance, Matt 25:46 says the wicked go to 'everlasting punishment.' What we need to realise is that the punishment is everlasting – they are never coming back – but the punishing is not eternal.

Even the word forever can have different meanings depending on context. For instance, someone might say, 'I waited forever for the train to arrive.' Similarly, in Jonah 2:6 the Bible infers that Jonah was in the great fish forever, when in actual fact it was three days. Again, in 1Sam 22, 28, the boy Samuel is lent to the Lord forever, or as long as he lives. In Jude 1:7 the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are given as an example of what will be the fate of the wicked at the end. These cities were destroyed but are not burning today.

Another example is Mark 9:43 where Jesus speaks about a fire that shall never be quenched. This simply means that no human can put it out till it's work is done. The word used for hell here is actually a place in Jerusalem – the Valley of Hinnom. In the time of Jesus, it was the city garbage dump with refuse and animal carcasses left in the valley. A fire would continually burn to consume the rubbish. I have been to this valley, and today families play and picnic in the area. The fire is not burning now – its work has been done.

In the time of Jeremiah God had warned that the city of Jerusalem itself would be destroyed by 'unquenchable fire' Jer 17:27. This ultimately occurred under the Babylonians, but again, once the fire had done its work it burned out. It was unquenchable in the sense that it could not be prevented by man. Jerusalem has since been rebuilt and is not burning now. Malachi 4:1-3 describes the fire that will destroy the wicked by saying that it will leave them 'neither root nor branch' and that they will be ashes. Clearly the fire comes to an end.

Other verses in the Bible clearly state that the wicked will come to an end. Psalm 37:20 says they will be 'consumed,' whilst Obadiah 1:16 says they will be 'as though they had never been.'

God would much rather the wicked would turn from their evil ways and live, for God takes no pleasure in their death, Ez 18:32. God is more than willing to pardon our sin, but we must choose to repent and confess, forsaking our pride and turning to the Lord for mercy, Isaiah 55:7. But God cannot wait forever. Justice demands that He bring an end to this sorry story of sin and suffering at some point, for it would not be merciful to allow sin to continue forever. Our planet has been polluted on many levels and God will ultimately purify the world with fire like an incinerator before recreating it to be the paradise he originally intended it to be. Sin will be destroyed, and if we cling to it, we will share its fate.

One aspect of the end of sin and sinners that is not often mentioned is that fact that God Himself is described as a 'consuming fire,' Ex 24:17; Heb 12:29. Just as darkness cannot exist in the presence of light, neither can sin exist in the presence of a Holy God. By its very nature sin cannot remain in the presence of God when He reveals His full glory. At the very end there will be a fire that will destroy all traces of sin and rebellion, but it will be short in duration. When its work is complete it will burn out. Then God promises to recreate this world to be the paradise He originally intended. 2Peter 3:13 tells us that, "nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." We are also told in Revelation 21:4 that God will "wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away." That really is good news.

So, let's return to those four questions we asked at the beginning: What is Hell? The end of Sin and Sinners. Where is Hell? It will be here on Earth. When is Hell? At the end of time – Hell is not burning now. How long does it last? Until it's work is done.

The good news about hell is that Jesus has experienced hell – separation from God – so that you could experience heaven – eternal life with God. God will not burn anyone in hell forever, yet He will bring an end to sin and suffering. Jesus said that hell is prepared for the devil and His angels Matthew 25:41, whilst God is preparing a place for you in heaven, John 14:2. God has gone to extraordinary lengths to make salvation available for every one of us. Why would we wait that and follow the devil to destruction? Why not determine now to give your life to God and accept the place in heaven that He is preparing for you?

*If you would like to know more about this subject, or others in the series, 'Is God for Real?' then please contact one of our staff and they will be happy to help you.*