



IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

Could a loving God like we have been learning about torture people endlessly in the fires of hell throughout all eternity? Would it be loving and fair to burn forever those who refuse to accept Jesus as Saviour simply because they rebel against God a few short years here on this planet? Unfortunately this mistaken idea is what most Christian denominations teach today. The other mistaken idea is that God is so loving and kind that He wouldn't punish anyone — all will be saved in the end.

We can be thankful that the God we serve is reasonable and fair in His treatment of the wicked as we will discover as we proceed with this lesson.

1. What is God's desire for every person born into this world?

2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

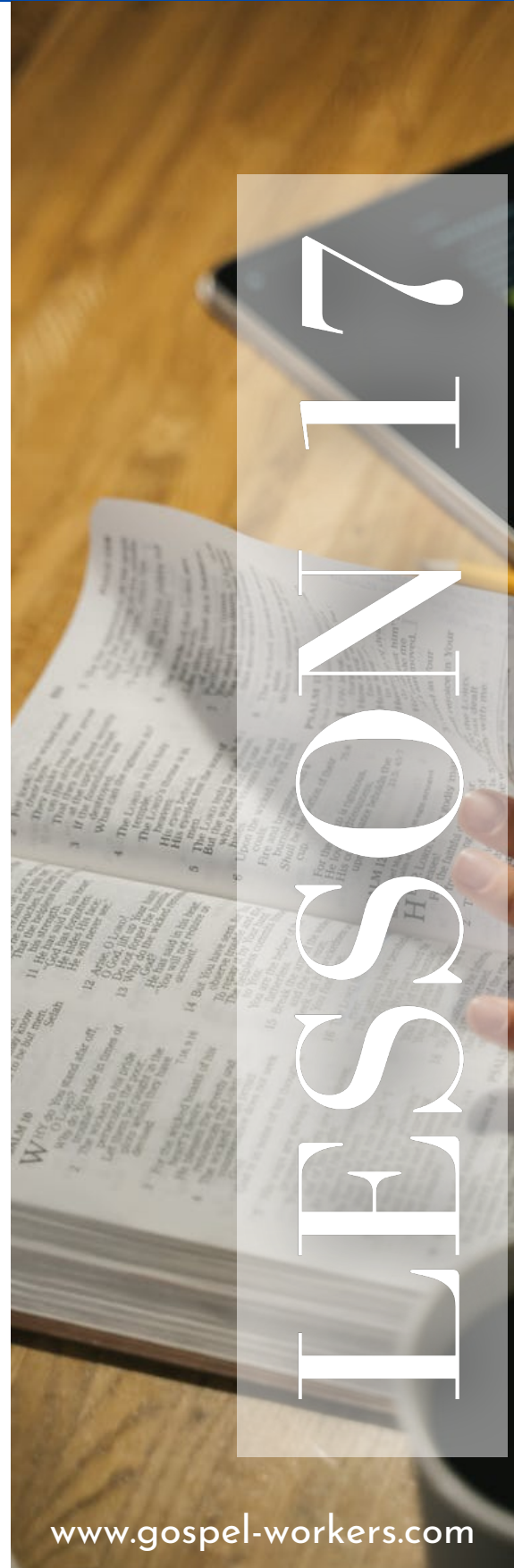
[Further Study]

Ezekiel 33:11 "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"

2. For whom was everlasting fire prepared?

Matthew 25:41, 46: "Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: . . . And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal."

It is well to notice that Jesus did not say that the wicked would suffer "everlasting punishing". He said "everlasting punishment". What is the punishment for sin? "Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord" 2 Thessalonians 1:9. There it is — plainly spelled out. The punishment is destruction, and it is of eternal duration. In other words, it is a destruction which never ends, because there will be no resurrection from that destruction.



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LESSON 17: IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

Paul says, "The wages of sin is death" Romans 6:23. John describes that death as "the second death" in Revelation 21:8. "But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." That death or destruction will be eternal.

3. How did God destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and what did they suffer?

Genesis 19:24-25: "Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground."

Jude 7: "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 fire."

[Further Study]

Revelation 20:9-10 "And they went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And 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."

It is interesting that the Bible says that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the vengeance of "eternal fire", and yet they are not still burning today.

4. What will ultimately happen to those who suffer the vengeance of eternal fire?

Malachi 4:1: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch."

Jesus said, "I am the vine, ye are the branches" (John 15:5). Just as Jesus is the vine and His followers the branches, so in Malachi 4:1, Satan is the root and his followers are the branches.

Psalms 37:20: "But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away."

5. Will the punishment of the wicked be equal, regardless of the magnitude of their sins?

Matthew 16:27: "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works."

Revelation 22:12: "And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as His works shall be."

[Further Study]

Hebrews 2:1-3 "Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; How shall we

LESSON 17: IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him;"

Revelation 20:13 "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works."

In light of these texts it is senseless to think that all the wicked burn together without end; what kind of reward or justice would that be?

6. Most Christians believe that at death one receives their reward — heaven or hell. Are the wicked who have died in the past burning today?

Matthew 13:30, 38-42: "Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers. Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn. . . The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

It would not reflect the truth of God's word for someone to receive punishment before being found guilty. Even if they were found guilty it wouldn't be justice for someone who had died thousands of years ago to burn longer than someone who died today.

2 Peter 2:9: "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished:"

We can see from this text that the wicked are being "reserved" till the day of judgment.

7. Many agree that the body is destroyed in the fires of hell, but the soul suffers endless punishment. What does the Bible say?

Matthew 10:28: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell."

8. What about the phrase "for ever and ever" in connection with the punishment of the wicked?

Revelation 14:11: "And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name."

The word "forever" does not necessarily mean "without end". In fact the Bible uses the word 56 times in connection with things which have already ended. In Exodus 21:1-6 the Hebrew servant was to serve his master "forever", but it was obviously only as long as he lived. Hannah took her son Samuel to God's

LESSON 17: IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

house to abide "forever" (1 Samuel 1:22) but she plainly limited that time to "as long as he liveth" (verse 28).

Exodus 21:1-6 "Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them. If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing. If he came in by himself, he shall go out by himself: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: 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 awl; and he shall serve him for ever."

1 Samuel 1:22, 28 "But Hannah went not up; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD, and there abide for ever. . . . Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD. And he worshipped the LORD there."

The term is clearly defined in Psalms 48:14, "For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death." The desolation of Edom was to continue "forever and ever" Isaiah 34:10. "It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever." Christ is called "a priest forever" (Hebrews 5:6), yet after sin is blotted out Christ's work as a priest will end.

Hebrews 5:6 "As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec."

According to these definitions of the word "forever" the wicked will suffer as long as they continue to live in the fire. Then, as the Bible states: "The wicked... shall be destroyed forever." Psalms 92:7.

9. The God of the Bible, our Creator, is a God of love and justice, perfectly blended in Jesus Christ, One who allows us to choose our own destiny. In the end what two events take place and in which one will you be found?

2 Peter 3:10, 13: "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. . . . Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness."

This earth is where the fire will take place. If you are left here when Jesus comes you will be destroyed with it. Our admonition and prayer for you is that 2 Peter 3:14 will be the desire of your heart: "Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless."

The word HELL appears 54 times in the Bible. 31 times in the Old Testament it is the Hebrew word Sheol meaning the grave. It appears 23 times in the New Testament and has three different meanings. 10

LESSON 17: IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

times it is the Greek word Hades meaning the grave. One time it is the Greek word Tartarus which refers to the place to which the evil angels are restricted until the day of judgment.

2 Peter 2:4 "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;"

Jude 6 "And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day."

12 times it is the Greek word gehenna meaning a place of everlasting punishment. It refers to a place just outside Jerusalem called the "Valley of Hinnom". It was here that the heathen practice of burning children as a sacrifice to the god Molech was conducted. Because Israel allowed and practiced this sin it became known as the "valley of slaughter" where the dead bodies of the Israelites were buried till there was no more place for them and the remaining corpses were food for the birds of the air.

Jeremiah 7:32-33 "Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place. And the carcasses of this people shall be meat for the fowls of the heaven, and for the beasts of the earth; and none shall fray them away."

Finally in Jesus' day it had become the city dump where was the continual burning of carcasses and rubbish, and it was this that Jesus referred to in Mark 9:43-44. "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

"How repugnant to every emotion of love and mercy, and even to our sense of justice, is the doctrine that the wicked dead are tormented with fire and brimstone in an eternally burning hell; that for the sins of a brief earthly life they are to suffer torture as long as God shall live. Yet this doctrine has been widely taught and is still embodied in many of the creeds of Christendom. . . .

"Where, in the pages of God's word, is such teaching to be found? Will the redeemed in heaven be lost to all emotions of pity and compassion, and even to feelings of common humanity? Are these to be exchanged for the indifference of the stoic or the cruelty of the savage? No, no; such is not the teaching of the book of God.

"What would be gained to God should we admit that He delights in witnessing unceasing tortures; that He is regaled with the groans and shrieks and imprecations of the suffering creatures whom He holds in the flames of hell? Can these horrid sounds be music in the ear of infinite love? It is urged that the infliction of endless misery upon the wicked would show God's hatred of sin as an evil which is ruinous to the peace and order of the universe. Oh, dreadful blasphemy! As if God's hatred of sin is the reason why it is perpetuated. For, according to the teachings of these theologians, continued torture without hope of mercy maddens its wretched victims, and as they

LESSON 17: IS HELL BURNING TODAY?

pour out their rage in curses and blasphemy, they are forever augmenting their load of guilt. God's glory is not enhanced by thus perpetuating continually increasing sin through ceaseless ages.

"It is beyond the power of the human mind to estimate the evil which has been wrought by the heresy of eternal torment. The religion of the Bible, full of love and goodness, and abounding in compassion, is darkened by superstition and clothed with terror. When we consider in what false colors Satan has painted the character of God, can we wonder that our merciful Creator is feared, dreaded, and even hated? The appalling views of God which have spread over the world from the teachings of the pulpit have made thousands, yes, millions, of skeptics and infidels. . . .

"A large class to whom the doctrine of eternal torment is revolting are driven to the opposite error. They see that the Scriptures represent God as a being of love and compassion, and they cannot believe that He will consign His creatures to the fires of an eternally burning hell. But holding that the soul is naturally immortal, they see no alternative but to conclude that all mankind will finally be saved. Many regard the threatenings of the Bible as designed merely to frighten men into obedience, and not to be literally fulfilled. Thus the sinner can live in selfish pleasure, disregarding the requirements of God, and yet expect to be finally received into His favor. Such a doctrine, presuming upon God's mercy, but ignoring His justice, pleases the carnal heart and emboldens the wicked in their iniquity."

The Great Controversy, pages 535-537.