



#18

God's Strange Act

Sometimes it's hard to tell fact from fantasy, especially when centuries of paganism and superstition pile up on the truth. This is particularly true when it comes to the subject of hell. For example, one of the most popular caricatures of the devil portrays him wearing a red jumpsuit and carrying a pitchfork—yet this description is *not* in the Bible!

Many popular descriptions of hell describe it as a place somewhere deep in the bowels of the earth, where the devil and his angels work hard day and night to torture the wicked (as if the devil and his angels work for God!) But is this popular concept found in the Bible? Not at all. If you cut through the superstition and the stories, and simply let the Bible speak for itself, you get quite a different picture:

Revelation 20:15 tells us that hellfire is *very* real. It is the fate of all those who freely reject God's offer of salvation. (God isn't going to force anyone into heaven against their will!) Yet in Matthew 25:41, Jesus reveals that hellfire wasn't originally intended for human beings. It was never God's plan for *people* to end up in hell. It was created for fallen angels; however, those of us who insist on following the devil will end up in the same place—and it will be *our* choice that puts us there!

In Matthew 13:24-42, Jesus tells the parable of the wheat and the tares. He makes it clear that this story is a description of last-day events: At the harvest at the end of the world, the wicked will be gathered and burned. Hellfire doesn't start burning until after the Second Coming! This parable also seems to suggest that hellfire will burn right here on planet earth.

Revelation 20:7-9 and 2 Peter 3:7 confirm this. Fire falls on the wicked while they are on the "breadth," or surface of the earth. This fire destroys the earth and its surrounding atmosphere (the "heavens"). Why does God do this? To get rid of sin and suffering for good! Revelation 21:4 shows us that God's intention is to remove suffering forever.

What does it mean that fire "devours" the wicked? Does it mean that they will be tormented without end forever and ever? Not at all. When something is "devoured," it is consumed. The Bible teaches that hellfire will eventually burn out once it is finished destroying every last trace of sin. In Malachi 4:1-3, we learn that the wicked will burn like stubble and then the fire goes out. They will become ashes under the soles of our feet! Many other passages—like Psalm 21:9, Psalm 37:20, and Psalm 145:20—confirm this. Isaiah 47:14 says that not only will the fire go out, but it will also cool down!

Those who reject Christ *perish*—they are not tortured without end. The wages of sin is *death*, according to the Bible—not unceasing torment (John 3:16, Romans 6:23). God's plan is to eliminate sin and suffering forever. Even the devil himself will eventually be destroyed once enough time has passed for him to prove to the whole universe that he is a murderer and a liar (Ezekiel 28:18-19). His reign of terror *will* come to an end!

God will not enjoy the final destruction of the wicked. Isaiah 28:21 suggests that it will be a "strange act"—out of character for God. Those who will eventually be destroyed are God's children, after all. He's loath to let it happen. 2 Peter 3:9, 10 says that God is hesitant to do it. He's "longsuffering, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." Eventually, however, if God is going to eliminate suffering forever, He's going to have to

do it. Out of love for His universe, He's going to eliminate sin and pain.

He is not going to delight in it—Ezekiel 33:11 teaches us that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. It is going to be one of the hardest things God has ever had to do! But would a God of love let people hurt themselves forever?

There are several things the Bible teaches very clearly about hellfire:

- It is real.
- It was originally intended for the devil and his angels, not human beings. People will be there only because they freely chose sin over God.
- It will not start burning until the end of the world.
- It will eventually burn out, once sin and its terrible consequences have been destroyed.

So where does the confusion come in? Largely from the adoption of pagan beliefs into Christianity over the years. Around the year 188 A.D., a church father by the name of Athenagoras was the first Christian to use the term “immortal soul,” even though the Bible doesn't use it. He borrowed it from Greek philosophers. Later, Tertullian developed the idea further, reasoning that if “souls” are immortal, then their punishment must be, too. Later on, Augustine endorsed it and it became the predominant teaching of the Middle Ages. It is still with us today—even though the Bible doesn't teach it!

In the Bible, there are essentially three words that have been translated as “hell”:

SHEOL—this is simply a reference to the grave. Jacob expected to go to “sheol” (Genesis 37:35) and Job actually *wished* he could go there (Job 3:11-19).

GEHENNA—this was a reference to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem where the bodies of dead criminals and garbage were burned. It was a place of total destruction by fire.

HADES—like “sheol,” this is a reference to the grave, but in the Greek language. Peter preached that Jesus did not remain in “hades,” or the grave, in Acts 2:27.

A misunderstanding of these words has led to some confusion over some texts. For example, in Mark 9:43, 44 Jesus speaks of the fire “that shall never be quenched.” This is a reference to *gehenna*—the valley where garbage was burned. This fire was considered “unquenchable” even though it no longer burns today. Why? Because “unquenchable” means that *people* couldn't quench it—it would only go out when it burned out!

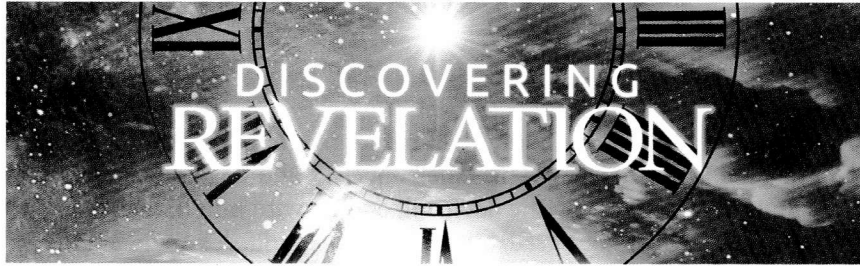
In Jeremiah 17:27, God warned that the Babylonians were going to burn Jerusalem with fire that “shall not be quenched.” It happened (see Jeremiah 52:12, 13), but today Jerusalem is no longer burning! It was unquenchable because the Israelites couldn't put it out—it burned until it ran out of fuel.

Another passage that some find confusing is found in Matthew 25:41, where Jesus speaks of “everlasting” fire. This does not mean that people are suffering eternally, however—it is a reference to the fact that the *results* of the fire are permanent and everlasting. For example, in Jude 1:7 we read that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by “eternal fire,” yet in 2 Peter 2:6 we read that those cities are now ashes. The flames weren't everlasting—the results were!

A third passage that sometimes creates confusion is found in Revelation 20:10, where we are told that the beast and false prophet will be tormented “forever and ever.” This is the only place in the Bible where this expression is used in connection with hellfire. It is a relative term—its duration depends on what you're talking about. For example, in 1 Samuel 1:22, Hannah promises that Samuel will work in the temple “forever.” 1 Samuel 1:28 makes it clear that this meant *until Samuel died*. In Jonah 2:6, Jonah said he was in the belly of the fish “forever,” which meant *until the ordeal was over*.

Hellfire works the same way. It will be forever because the *results* are permanent and unchangeable. It will burn until its work is done—but then it goes out.

“What do you imagine against the Lord?” the Bible says in Nahum 1:9, “He will make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time.” God's plan? To get rid of pain and suffering forever. He wants to put things back the way they were before we sinned (Revelation 21:4, 5). It turns out that even in the subject of hellfire, God is still love! Is there any reason not to trust Him with your life today?



#18

God's Strange Act

Hell and the devil are real. But they differ markedly from the popular notions many of us have in our heads. The devil is often portrayed with horns and a tail, dressed in a red jumpsuit. Hell is supposedly a fiery place deep in the bowels of the earth where the devil tortures the wicked day and night, roasting them over the flames.

Centuries of superstition and paganism have piled up different ideas on the topic, but if we let the Bible speak, we get an entirely different picture.

GOD'S ATTITUDE TOWARD THOSE WHO REJECT HIM

1. Does God take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? (Ezekiel 33:11)

2. What is God's desire for every person on earth? (2 Peter 3:9)

God loves us so much that He gave His only Son, Jesus, so that no one need perish because of sin. God wants everyone to be saved. (John 3:16)

3. How does the Bible describe God's act in destroying the wicked? (Isaiah 28:21)

To destroy anyone is a strange, unusual act for God. He is calling everyone, everywhere, to accept His invitation of salvation and to live forever with Him in heaven.

WHERE IS HELL AND IS IT BURNING TODAY?

4. What is the fate of everyone who rejects God's salvation? (Revelation 20:15)

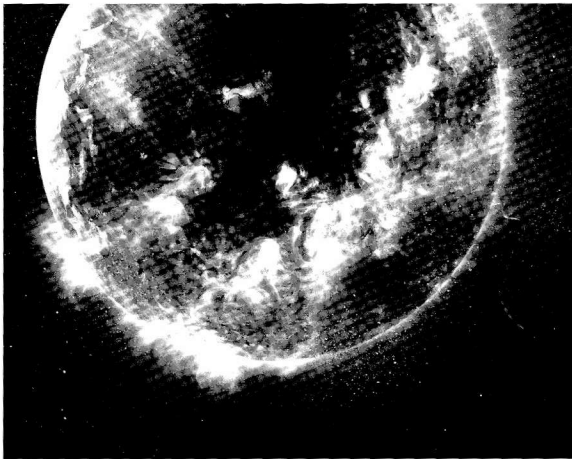
-
5. For whom did God originally prepare the fires of hell?
(Matthew 25:41)

It was never God's plan for human beings to end up in hell. Hell was prepared for the devil and his fallen angels. But men and women who insist on following the devil will end up with him in hell. God wants everyone to be saved, but He isn't going to force anyone into heaven against their will. If we end up in hell, it will be our choice that puts us there.

6. When will the wicked be destroyed by fire? (2 Peter 2:9; 3:7)

Many believe that the wicked go to hell as soon as they die. But the Bible is clear that the reward of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked occur at the end of time. (Matthew 13:38-43; 25:31-46) No one is burning today in the fires of hell.

7. Where is hell located? (Revelation 20:7-9)



Common belief is that hell is a special place of torment located somewhere in the universe or in the bowels of the earth. But the Bible says that hell will take place right here on earth. The fire falls on the wicked while they are on the "breadth," or surface of the earth. (Revelation 20:9)

Peter confirms that the fire which destroys the wicked will also burn up the earth and everything in it, after which God will create "new heavens and a new earth." (2 Peter 3:7, 10-13)

Why does God do this? To get rid of sin and suffering for good!

HOW LONG DOES HELL BURN?

8. Will sinners continue to burn in hell throughout eternity? (Malachi 4:1, 3)

Psalm 37:20 tells us that sinners shall vanish away into smoke. After the fires of hell have “devoured” the wicked (Revelation 20:9), the fire will go out until there is not a coal to be warmed by. (Isaiah 47:14)

Those who reject Christ perish—they do not live on to be tortured eternally. The wages of sin is death, not unending torment in hell. (Psalm 145:20; Romans 6:23) God’s plan is to end sin and suffering forever, once and for all. Even the devil will eventually be destroyed. (Ezekiel 28:17-19)

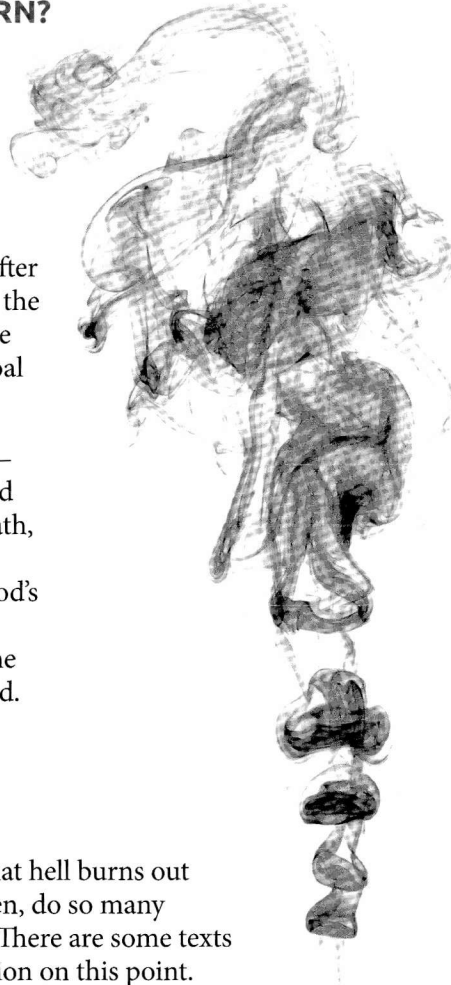
HOW LONG IS FOREVER?

As we have seen, the Bible is clear that hell burns out after sinners are destroyed. Why, then, do so many people believe that hell never ends? There are some texts in the Bible that have caused confusion on this point.

9. Doesn’t the Bible say that sinners will be tormented in hell “forever”? (Revelation 14:11; 20:10)

These texts have confused people who also see that the Bible clearly teaches the fires of hell will go out after the wicked are burned up. But when we let Scripture explain itself, we see that “forever” often means “as long as something is possible.”

For example, Exodus 21:6 outlines a ceremony to be conducted, after which a servant shall serve his master “forever.” Samuel’s mother promised to give her son to the temple “forever.” (1 Samuel 1:22) In these cases, “forever” lasted only as long as the person lived.



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 the eternal destruction of the wicked. But the Bible is clear that hell has an end.

10. Doesn't Jesus talk about the unquenchable fires of hell?
(Mark 9:43, 44)

An "unquenchable" fire will still go out when it has burned everything there is to burn. In Jeremiah 17:27, God warned that the Babylonians would burn Jerusalem with fire that "shall not be quenched." Babylon did burn Jerusalem (Jeremiah 52:12, 13), but that fire is not still burning today. It couldn't be quenched, but it eventually burned out.

God asks us to trust that He is a loving God who will make a complete end of sin so that it will never rise again. (Nahum 1:9) After hell has done its work, there will never again be death, sorrow or tears. (Revelation 21:4, 5) God must destroy sin and those who refuse to separate themselves from it. But He will not torture them endlessly in the fires of hell.

MY DECISION

- I trust God to be a God of love, and I want to be in His kingdom when sin is destroyed and He makes all things new.

MY PRAYER

Father, thank You for showing me the truth about hell and Your great love even for those who refuse to follow You. I invite You to live in my life and guide me each day. In Jesus' name, Amen.