

The alternatives facing us are starkly clear: eternal destruction—an eternity excluded from the presence of God, or an eternal friendship with Christ that fulfills our deepest longings. Which do you choose for yourself? Why not discover your destiny in Christ today?

Dear Father of mercy, love, and justice: I am so thankful Jesus loves me and gave His life for me. Help me just now to place myself on the side of salvation and life everlasting, and not on the side of eternal death. Prepare me to be one of those who kneel in adoration at the feet of Jesus when He is crowned King of kings and Lord of lords. Please forgive my sins, and make me true to You and obedient to Your Word and to all Your commandments. I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

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DISCOVER

WHAT AND WHERE IS HELL?



In July of 1976 Gary Gilmore walked into a gas-station and shot the attendant, a student at Brigham Young University. The next evening he forced a young motel clerk at gun-point to hand over some cash. Then Gilmore asked his victim to kneel and shot him in the back of the head.

Most Americans thought this was one man who deserved to die for his cold-blooded murders. But when a Utah

judge sentenced him to death by firing squad, the whole nation plunged into controversy. Because of a Supreme Court ruling, no one had been executed in the U.S. for almost a decade. The gas chambers and electric chairs had been idle and the prospect of reactivating them bothered a lot of people.

Right-to-life lawyers tried desperately to find grounds for a stay of Gilmore's execution, even though Gilmore said he wanted to die. Groups against the death penalty protested loudly, calling it an inhumane "paganistic ritual." Others affirmed the value of the death penalty as a deterrent to individuals who might kill in cold blood. A few men actually phoned the Utah state prison warden, asking to join the firing squad.

And so the debate raged on. Was it right for the state to kill Gary Gilmore? Was he beyond redemption? What was the most humane way of executing condemned criminals? Some thought an injection with a lethal drug would be the most painless. Others maintained that life would end more quickly by hanging.

But in all this discussion, in all this passionate debate over the death penalty, there was one option no one considered. No one suggested that Gilmore be tortured to death. The man had a long criminal record. He had cruelly ended two lives. He seemed hopelessly pathological. But still, no one even among the most vocal supporters of the death penalty proposed that Gilmore pay for his crimes with physical agony. No one, for example, insisted he slowly burn to death.

But many sincere Christians 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, a place where the agonies of the damned continue forever.

What a horror it will be to realize that the joy of eternal life with God has slipped through your hands, that you'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 repeatedly pushed Christ away when He came near with overtures of love. In the end they fall to their knees and acknowledge God's justice and His love (Revelation 15:4; 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 favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.' I tell you, NOW is the time of God's favor, NOW is the day of salvation."*—2 Corinthians 6:1-2.**

***"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."*—John 3:17.**

I can think of no greater tragedy than someone wasting the priceless sacrifice of Jesus by choosing to be lost. No wonder Jesus said,

***"I tell you that . . . there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent."*—Luke 15:7.**

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, the Source of Life, 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.

“God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled. . . . This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 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.”—2 Thessalonians 1:6-9.

The wicked are going to miss out. They're going to miss out on eternal life, “shut out from the presence of the Lord.” That's why there is such “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 22:13).

Just what does happen to the wicked in hell? And how does their final fate fit in with God's love and justice? Let's look for biblical answers in this DISCOVER guide.

1. JESUS' FINAL HEARTBREAK

For 6,000 years God has been pleading with men and women to turn toward him and be rescued from sin. The prophet Ezekiel conveys a typical appeal:

“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].)

Jesus continued the same appeal during His ministry on earth:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened [by sin], and I will give you rest.”—Matthew 11:28.

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). Then He

added, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Soon afterward Jesus yielded up His life. Some physicians believe He died of a broken heart (John 19:30 and 34). The cross revealed how much God wants to rescue fallen humanity.

But even with this powerful demonstration of divine love, many individuals will still not turn to Jesus. And those who persist in holding on to sin will eventually be destroyed by fire. That will be a heartbreaking time for Jesus as He sees the fire consuming the ones He died to save.

“The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, NOT WANTING ANYONE TO PERISH, but everyone to come to repentance.”—2 Peter 3:9.

Jesus wants all to be saved and escape the destruction awaiting the sin-polluted earth.

“The day of the Lord will come like a thief. 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 [margin]. . . . But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.”—2 Peter 3:10, 13.

As long as sin rules in this world, it will continue to multiply human misery. So sin has to be completely destroyed. If people refuse to let go of their sins, they will be consumed with them in “the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14-15). Christ’s final heartbreak comes when He must finally cleanse the universe of evil, put an end to sin, and destroy those who hold on to their sin, those for whom He died and longed to save.

consumed; they die; they perish; 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.

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 won’t take the cure. Some insist on clinging to the disease of sin and remain riddled by it. And God will not force

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 certainly sounds like endless suffering. But, again, let’s let Scripture interpret Scripture.

The prophet Isaiah used the same language in speaking of God’s judgment against wicked Edom. He said, “Her land will become blazing pitch! It will not be quenched night and day; its smoke will rise forever” (Isaiah 34:9,10). The land of Edom is not still burning today. The fire went out a long time ago. God was using poetic language to emphasize the thoroughness, the utter destruction, involved in this judgment.

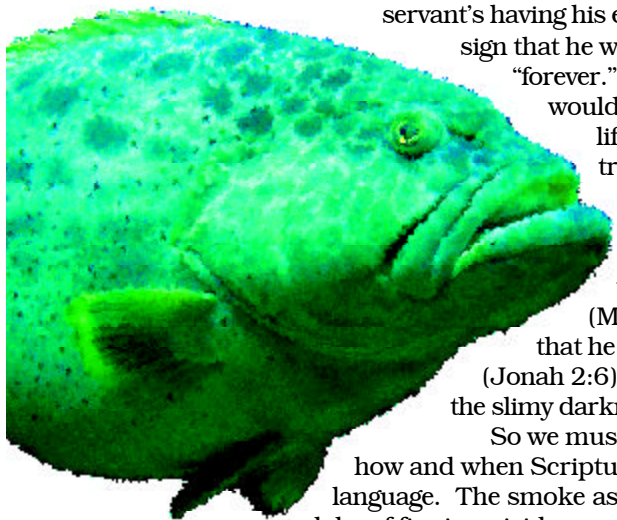
Exodus 21:6 in the KJV speaks of a servant’s having his ear drilled through as a sign that he was to serve his master “forever.” In this case “forever”

would be as long as the servant’s life would last, so the NIV translates the word “forever” as “for life.”

Jonah, who spent 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



2. WHERE AND WHEN WILL HELL BURN?

Contrary to some popular conceptions, God doesn’t have a fire burning now in some place termed “hell” where sinners go at death. Hell happens when this earth is turned into a lake of fire (2 Peter 3:9-13). The wicked don’t somehow plummet into hell at the moment of death. God waits to carry out His sentence on the day of 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 subjects our planet to the 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.

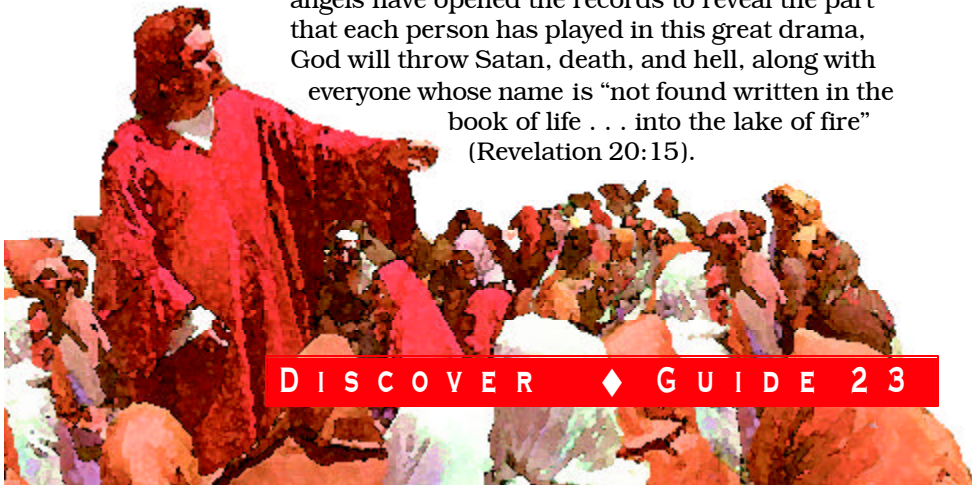
According to Jesus, when will hell burn?

“The harvest is the end of the age,

and the harvesters are angels. 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. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”—Matthew 13:39-43.

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. 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. This demonstration will culminate in the judgment of Satan, his angels, and the wicked "at the end of the world."

At the close of the 1,000 years, after the angels have opened the records to reveal the part that each person has played in this great drama, God will throw Satan, death, and hell, along with everyone whose name is "not found written in the book of life . . . into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:15).



punishment" Jesus speaks of in Matthew 25:46 is not unending burning, but "everlasting destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1:9). The punishment and its effect are indeed "everlasting"—they result in everlasting death.

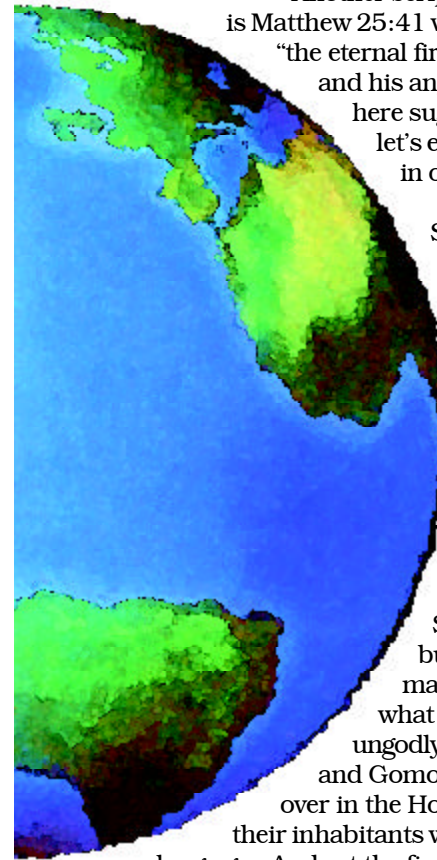
Another scripture that troubles people is Matthew 25:41 where Jesus speaks of "the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Doesn't "eternal"

here suggest hell is forever? Well, let's examine the same phrase in other passages.

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. 2 Peter 2:6 clearly points out that the Eternal 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 over in the Holy Land. The cities and their inhabitants were reduced to ashes

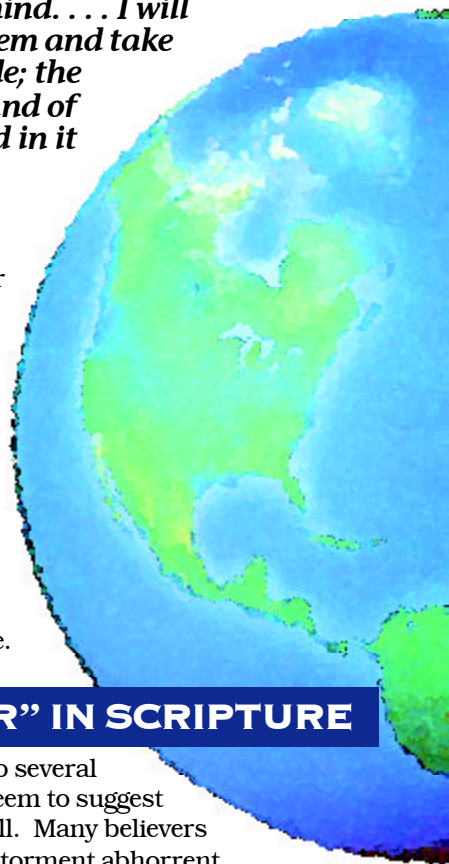
long ago. And yet the fire that burned them is "eternal" in its consequences—permanent destruction. Remember the distinction: eternal means permanent punishment, not punishing.



“The past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. ‘Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. . . . I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people; 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 “the former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” Our happiness will be complete, and Jesus’ heart can again expand with joy over His people.



4. “FOREVER” IN SCRIPTURE

Now let’s turn to several texts which, to some, seem to suggest an eternally-burning hell. Many believers find the idea of endless torment abhorrent, but see no way around it because of the way certain texts have been interpreted.

We have already seen that the “eternal

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 have assumed that the fires of hell last forever, resulting in eternal torment. Take, for example, the picture of hell once painted by Jonathan Edwards:

“Hell is now a place of torment where Almighty God blows the flames of fire through you forever. You cry for mercy and jingle the chains of your misery, but God sits defiant, grim and wrathful upon His throne, His jaw set, enjoying the torture of the damned.”

Few believers today take much comfort in this gruesome depiction of a wrathful God. But many still accept the idea of an eternal hell because they’ve been told that’s what the Bible teaches. 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, an eternal death. The effect of everlasting destruction is everlasting death. Look at what Jesus Himself said about hell:

“Do not be afraid of those who kill

the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell.”—Matthew 10:28.

According to Jesus, both soul and body are killed, destroyed in hell. In His Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus talked about the fate of humanity at the end of the age, He spoke of the *narrow gate* “that leads to life,” and the *broad road* “that leads to destruction” (Matthew 7:13,14).

In the most well-known text in the Bible, John 3:16, Jesus explains that God “gave His one and only Son,” that those who believe might not “perish, but have everlasting life.” Two fates are contrasted: everlasting life and perishing.

From these passages of Scripture, we must conclude that hell results in the death of the wicked. That is, in fact, what clear statements throughout Scripture tell us. “The wicked will be cut off” (Psalm 37:28), they “will perish” (2 Peter 2:12), “they will vanish—vanish like smoke” (Psalm 37:20), they “will be completely cut off from among his people” (Acts 3:23).

The apostle Peter spoke of the day of judgment and the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Peter 3:7). The apostle Paul said of those who’d become enemies of Christ: “Their destiny is destruction” (Philippians 3:19). Scholars tell us that the Greek word translated “destruction,” is the strongest word that could be used to mean utter loss of existence.

The purpose of the final punishment, the lake of fire, 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. The Bible assures us that hell definitely has an ending:

“Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and EVERY EVILDOER will be stubble, and that day that is coming WILL SET THEM ON FIRE, . . . THEY WILL BE ASHES UNDER THE SOLES OF YOUR FEET.”—Malachi 4:1, 3.

The wicked will not burn throughout eternity. The fire will reduce them to ashes, resulting in eternal separation from God. “The wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23), not eternal life in hell-fire.

At the end of the 1,000 years, every sinner, inspired by the devil, makes one last determined effort to defeat God and capture the New Jerusalem (Revelation 20:7-10). It’s then that God rains fire down from the skies and eliminates Satan, sin, and those who persist in holding on to their sins.

“Fire came down from heaven and DEVoured them.”—Revelation 20:9.

The point is utter, complete destruction. 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, a purified new earth will emerge as the home of the saved: