

DISCOVER
BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

23

What and Where Is Hell?





IN 2000, Clayton Lockett was convicted of the brutal murder of Stephanie Neiman, whom Lockett shot twice before burying her alive. On April 29, 2014, the state of Oklahoma executed Lockett by lethal injection.

Lockett's crime and execution would have been similar to others except for the fact that Oklahoma was using a new, untested drug for the execution. The result was a prolonged execution process before Lockett died.

The incident prompted worldwide attention to the death penalty. Many argued that no matter what Lockett had done, he did not deserve to die a protracted, painful death.

Even those who favor the death penalty agree that it should be carried out as swiftly and humanely as possible. No matter how depraved or revolting the crime, no one suggests we should torture the guilty person. No one advocates burning convicted criminals over a fire designed to keep them alive as long as possible in order to bring about maximum agony.

Yet many sincere Christians believe that our Heavenly Father will do worse than that. The wicked, they say, must be tortured

in order to pay for their sins—burned alive in hell, where their agonies continue forever!

Is that true? 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 approximately 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 I live,’ says the Lord God, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live’” (Ezekiel 33:11).

Jesus continued the same appeal during His ministry on earth:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

When Jesus cried out on the cross, in Luke 23:34, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” He laid bare His aching heart.

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, 34). The cross revealed how much God wants to rescue fallen humanity.

However, 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 . . . longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

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

“The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. . . . Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (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 20:15).

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 longs to save.

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 3:10-13).

The wicked don’t somehow plummet into hell at the moment of death. God waits to carry out His sentence until the day of final judgment at the end of the thousand years (Revelation 20:9-15).



Jesus wants everyone to be saved and escape the destruction of this earth

“The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2:9).

He also subjects our planet to the purifying fire.

“The heavens and earth . . . are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition 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 the hold Satan has on them as they cling to their sins, they must finally receive the consequences of their choices.

“Then He [God] will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting 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 reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age [the King James Version uses the word ‘world’ in place of ‘age’ here]. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire” (Matthew 13:39-42).

The tares—evildoers—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.

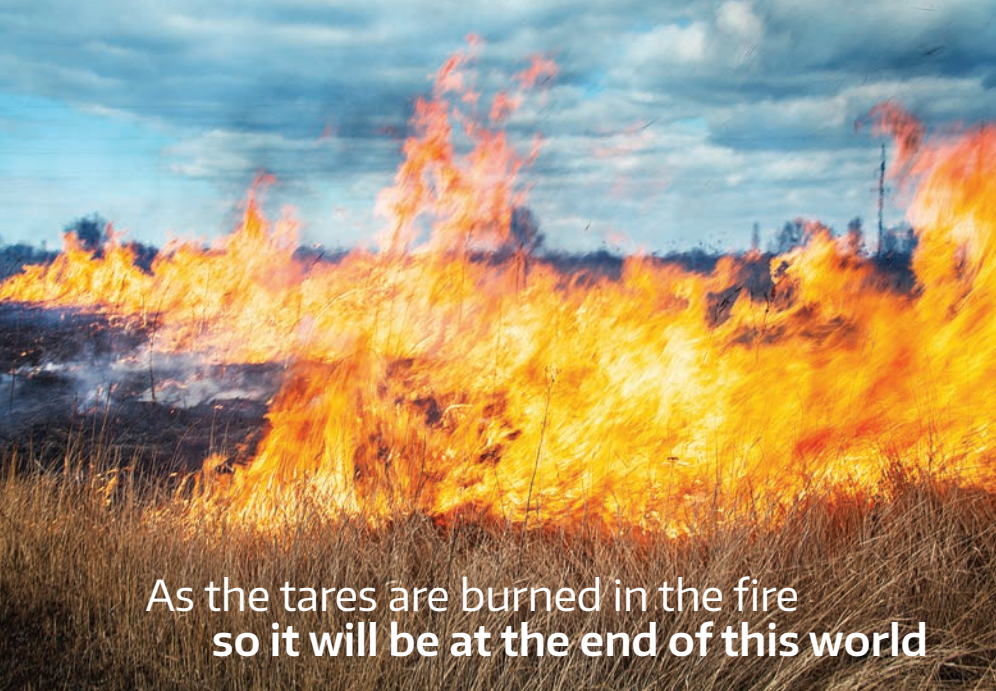
In the great controversy going on between Christ and Satan, Satan has been attempting to prove to the universe that the way of sin is the better way. Jesus has been demonstrating that the way of obedience is the key to a more satisfying life. This demonstration will culminate in the judgment of Satan, his angels, and the wicked “at the end of this age [world].”

At the close of the thousand 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 everyone whose name is “not found written in the Book of Life . . . into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15).

According to the next verse, Revelation 21:1, after God uses fire to cleanse the earth from sin, He will create “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




**As the tares are burned in the fire
so it will be at the end of this world**

once painted by Jonathan Edwards, an 18th-century preacher, in a sermon entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”:

“Natural men are held in the hand of God over the pit of hell; they have deserved the fiery pit, and are already sentenced to it; and God is dreadfully provoked, his anger is as great towards them as to those that are actually suffering the executions of the fierceness of his wrath in hell ‘Tis everlasting wrath. It would be dreadful to suffer this fierceness and wrath of Almighty God one moment; but you must suffer it to all eternity: there will be no end to this exquisite horrible misery.”

Few believers today take comfort in this gruesome depiction of a wrathful God, but many still accept the idea of an eternal hell because they’ve been told it’s what the Bible teaches. Let’s look carefully at some texts that describe God’s treatment of sin and sinners.



The purpose of the final punishment
is to **rid the universe of sin,**
not to preserve it forever

“When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels . . . those who do not obey the gospel. . . shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

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, not unending torment. Look at what Jesus Himself said about hell:

“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

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

The contrast is between “life” and “destruction” (non-life)—not eternal torment.

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

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 shall be cut off” (Psalm 37:28); they “will utterly perish” (2 Peter 2:12); “into smoke they shall vanish away” (Psalm 37:20); they “shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:23). The Apostle Paul said of those who had become enemies of Christ that their “end is destruction” (Philippians 3:19).

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 forgave those who put Him to death

would be able to spend eternity watching the agonies of the damned. The Bible assures us that hell definitely has an end:

“Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up. . . . They shall 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 hellfire.

At the end of the thousand 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 is then that God rains down fire from the skies and eliminates Satan, sin, and those who persist in holding on to their sins.

“Fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them” (Revelation 20:9).

The point is that this is utter, complete destruction. According to Jesus, this fire is “unquenchable” (Matthew 3:12). No fire department will be able to put it out until it has done its work of complete destruction. However, “unquenchable” does not mean “unending.”

God promises that a new purified earth will emerge out of this cleansing fire as the home of the saved:

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. . . . I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and joy in My people; the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (Isaiah 65:17-19).

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] shall not
be remembered or come to mind.”
Our happiness will be complete,
and Jesus’ heart will 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 they see no way around it because of the way certain texts have been interpreted.

One verse that troubles people is Matthew 25:41, where Jesus speaks of “the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Does the word *everlasting* suggest that hell is forever? Well, just a few verses later, in Matthew 25:46, Jesus refers to this fire as “everlasting punishment.” The punishment and its effect are indeed “everlasting”—they result in everlasting death or destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

Let’s examine the same phrase—“everlasting fire” or “eternal fire”—in other Bible passages.

Jude 7 presents Sodom and Gomorrah “as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” Obviously, those cities aren’t still burning, but the fire *was* eternal in the sense that it resulted in permanent destruction. Peter clearly points out that God turned “the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, [and] condemned them to destruction, making them an example to those who afterward would live ungodly” (2 Peter 2:6).



*The area around
Sodom and
Gomorrah today*

The ungodly residents 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. Yet the fire that burned them is “eternal” in its consequences—permanent destruction. Remember the distinction: “eternal” *punishment* is not the same as “eternal” *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 ascends forever 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, “Its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever” (Isaiah 34:9, 10).

Yet the land of Edom is not still burning today. The fire went out a long time ago. God was using descriptive language to emphasize the thorough, complete, and utter destruction involved in this judgment.

Exodus 21:6 speaks of piercing a servant’s ear 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 three days and three nights in the belly of a whale (Matthew 12:40), reported that he was there “forever” (Jonah 2:6). No doubt, three days in the slimy darkness probably did seem like forever!

So we must be careful when it comes to understanding 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 die and never live again.

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 one 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 trash, 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.

However, God faces a serious problem, because sin not only wrecked the physical world—it also infected people. Sin damaged our relationship with Him and 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 was 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, so 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 to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

God offers His solution to the sin problem freely to everyone, but the sad fact is that some won't take the cure. Some insist on clinging to the disease of sin and thus remain infected by it. 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:

“When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before My eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight” (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?**

No wonder Bible writers urgently press upon us the eternal weight of our choices and the claims of Christ.

“We . . . plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain. For He says: ‘In an acceptable time I have heard you, and in the day of salvation I have helped you.’ Behold . . . 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 that the world through Him might be saved” (John 3:17).

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WordSearch

If you want to go deeper into this study topic, complete this section.

1. Right now, where are all of the sinners who have died in years past? (Job 21:30, 32)

2. How completely will sinners be destroyed in hell? (Psalm 21:9; 37:20)

3. Will the fires of hell finally burn out? (Isaiah 47:13, 14; Revelation 21:1, 4)

4. What does the Bible say is the fate of sinners? (Ezekiel 18:20)

5. What will be Satan's final end? (Ezekiel 28:17-19)



There is no greater tragedy than someone wasting the priceless sacrifice of Jesus by choosing to be lost. Jesus said:

“I say to you that . . . there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance” (Luke 15:7).

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?

My Decision

- I have previously accepted Jesus as my Savior from sin and choose to reaffirm my decision. I want to live with Him forever and experience His unending love.
- I have never accepted Jesus as my Savior from sin and choose to accept Him today. I want to live with Him forever and experience His unending love.

My Prayer

Dear Father of mercy, love, and justice, help me—right now—to place myself on the side of salvation and everlasting life, and not on the side of eternal death. Please forgive my sins and help me to be obedient to Your Word and to all Your commandments. I pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.



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