



# DISCOVERING REVELATION

## 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?