

The story is told of a young man born in New York, the son of a Christian minister. And as a preacher's son, he often found himself in a position of not living up to his father's requirements.

Every time he would do something wrong, his father would sit him down and sharply reprimand him. He threatened, "Robert, if you keep committing these sins, Almighty God is going to put you in hell and burn you forever and ever! "

After years of this, the young man finally had enough. In his desperation one day, he couldn't take it any longer. He retorted, "**Dad, if that's the kind of God you serve, I don't want anything to do with Him.**" and he got up and left home. He soon became known as Mr. Robert Ingersall, the world renowned atheist who hated the Bible and defied God. **All because of this one teaching: hell-fire.**

**The devil has confused and deceived people so much on this subject.**

You may not realise it but a lot of churches are teaching that when you die you go to Heaven or Hell. Think about that a little and you have to conclude that a person who rejected God and died in the great flood has been burning for the past 4000 years or so! Meanwhile Hitler (assuming he is not going to be saved) has only been there for the last 50 years or so.

The other big problem it raises is that throughout the ages a lot of money has been raised and many people have joined the church because of fear – fear of eternal torment in Hellfire, not because of their love for Christ!

So on the onset; let's ask some of the questions that people tend to ask about this subject.

1. How can God really be a loving God if He lets people burn forever?
2. How can we reconcile the love/ mercy of God with the justice of God?
3. Is God in cahoots with the devil? Is the devil God's hired superintendent to keep people roasting and toasting through eternity?

Now this is a very solemn subject, a very important one, for it reveals a lot about the character of God, one that we **have to know** the truth about.

So with that in mind, let us turn to Revelation 1:17

*<sup>17</sup>When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. <sup>18</sup>I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

There are all kinds of ideas and all kinds of theories about the afterlife. What we believe about this subject is crucial to our understanding of God.

The Bible says that Jesus has the keys. What that means is that Jesus has the key to unlock the mystery about this subject.

So, before we begin this lesson, please accept the invitation to **put aside all pre-existing ideas** and concepts about this subject, and allow the Word of God to speak to us.

As we seek the truth about this important subject I want to begin by asking three basic questions: WHEN, WHERE, and HOW LONG will hell-fire burn? We will address them in this order.

In a previous message, we studied that there would be only two groups when Jesus comes--the righteous and the wicked. The first group is saved and taken to heaven, the other group is not.

The Hebrew and Greek words for "hell" appear 54 times in the original text, but as we're going to discover tonight these words have a number of meanings. In the Old Testament and New Testament the word "**Sheol**" or "**Hades**" is used 42 times meaning **the grave**. Then in the New Testament, it is used 12 times, and speaks of the ancient "valley of Hinnom", or "Gehenna", Jerusalem's garbage dump - a **place of burning**. All three of these words can be translated "Hell". So every time you read "hell" it does not always mean "fire." We must look at the context to see if it is referring to "the grave," or "the place of fire."

Let's begin with our first question. **WHEN WILL HELL-FIRE BURN?**

In studying the Bible, we must be careful to understand that Jesus often spoke in parables. What are parables? Parables are simply stories that convey a spiritual truth. Parables are stories with a point .

We must be careful when studying parables, not to take them literally. Instead we must determine the point of the story, the reason Jesus told it. This may seem a trivial point, but I can assure you it makes a big difference when trying to distinguish truth from error. Let's take an example. In Matthew 13 Jesus told a parable about a man who found a pearl of great price.

Matthew 13:44 <sup>44</sup>*"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. <sup>45</sup>Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. <sup>46</sup>When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

Is Jesus telling us that salvation is something you can buy? Isn't that what these two parables say? Of course not, eternal life is God's gift to you. The point of the parables is simply that the kingdom of God is worth more than anything you could possibly own.

With that understood, let us look at a parable recorded in vs 36. In Matthew 13:24, Jesus gives the parable of the tares. The reason we are safe at looking at this one, is that Jesus himself gives us the interpretation.

<sup>24</sup>Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup>But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup>When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. <sup>27</sup>"The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' <sup>28</sup>" 'An enemy did this,' he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' <sup>29</sup>" 'No,' he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup>Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.' "

Apparently the disciples didn't understand the parable, so they asked.

Matthew 13: 36 <sup>36</sup>Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field." <sup>37</sup>He answered, "The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. <sup>38</sup>The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, <sup>39</sup>and the enemy who sows them is the devil. **The harvest is the end of the age**, and the harvesters are angels. <sup>40</sup>"As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup>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. <sup>42</sup>They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup>Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

He says the harvest is at the end of the age/ end of the world. The Bible never contradicts itself. Remember that in our last lesson on "What happens when we die?", we studied that the dead sleep in their graves until Jesus comes? That's in perfect harmony. Now notice verses 49-50,

<sup>49</sup>This is how it will be **at the end of the age**. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous <sup>50</sup>and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.."

Let's get another text, 2 Peter 2:9, <sup>9</sup>if this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to **hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment**, while continuing their punishment.

(NOTE: NIV Footnote says "to hold the unrighteous for punishment until the day of judgment"). God reserves the wicked until the day of judgment. Okay, that should raise an important question for us.

How many people are in hell today? *Not one*. This verse says that God will "reserve" or "hold" the unjust until when?--the Day of Judgment.

When is this Day of Judgment?

Revelation 20: (Speaking of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming of Christ) <sup>6</sup> *Blessed and holy are those who have part in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years.* <sup>7</sup> **When the thousand years are over, Satan will be released from his prison** <sup>8</sup> *and will go out to deceive the nations in the four corners of the earth—Gog and Magog—to gather them for battle. In number they are like the sand on the seashore.* <sup>9</sup> *They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. **But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.***

(we'll deal with verse 10 in a moment – but come to verse 11) speaking of the judgment of the unrighteous:

<sup>11</sup> *Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. Earth and sky fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.* <sup>12</sup> *And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. **The dead were judged** according to what they had done as recorded in the books.* <sup>13</sup> *The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.* <sup>14</sup> **Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. **The lake of fire is the second death.**** <sup>15</sup> *If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire*

In the next study in this series we will look further at the details of this in “1000 years of peace”, but according to these verses the judgment will occur after the 1000 years (the millennium). It is then that God will pronounce judgment and the fire will devour the wicked.

So it is clear that:

1. **The unrighteous are destroyed by fire from heaven – also called the Lake of Fire or the second death.**
2. **This does not take place when a person dies – rather it takes place after the 1000 years – and we'll look more at this 1000 year period tomorrow night in some detail.**

Alright, now let's look at our second question: **WHERE IS HELL?**

Look again at Revelation 20:9, It said they “*marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people*” when fire comes down from God. Hell will be right here. Hell will burn over this whole earth.

2 Peter 3:7, <sup>7</sup> *By the same word **the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.***

The heavens and earth are *reserved* unto fire!

Verse 10, <sup>10</sup>*But 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 laid bare.***

The elements will melt with heat. All will be burned up!

Verses 11- 13, <sup>11</sup>*Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives* <sup>12</sup>*as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat.* <sup>13</sup>*But in keeping with his promise **we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.***

Then God can create a new heaven and earth!

Revelation 21:1, <sup>1</sup>*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, **for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.***

There will be a new heavens and a new earth, the first is passed away.

Hell-fire is God's way of putting an eternal end to sin, to death, to suffering and to the devil himself; cleansing the universe of sin once and for all – and after that God will make all things *new!*

There is only one way to thoroughly destroy something. That is by fire! God will purify this earth with fire and sin will never exist again! Praise the Lord!

Okay, let's continue with our next question: **HOW LONG WILL HELL-FIRE BURN?**

Here is where most people stumble. Here too is where the devil has distorted a few verses to cause many people to reject God as inconsistent, a cruel tyrant masquerading as a God of Love.

First let's follow the Bible rule and get a complete picture by going through many verses on the subject. Then we will deal with a few of the seemingly difficult texts. Though the Bible does not give the exact length of time, we do know it will *not* be through all eternity.

Here are three reasons why:

1. If God says hell is going to burn on earth, and then says He will recreate a new heavens and a new earth here, how could He make a new earth if hell was burning throughout eternity?

2. God is just and fair. Let's say that Cain who killed one man was sent to hell 6,000 years ago, and then Hitler who killed millions joined him. Would it be fair for Cain to burn 6,000 years longer than Hitler? Absolutely not! Would it make any sense of justice for a short life of sins to be punished for eternity?

3. We studied that man is not immortal, and only those who love Jesus will be given immortality, when He comes (**1 Corinthians 15:51**)! But if the wicked burned through all eternity, would they not also have eternal life? To be tormented forever, you must live forever.

You see, reason alone tells us hell will not burn through eternity. But let's go to the Word now and see.

Romans 6:23, <sup>23</sup>*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

**The wages of sin is...what? DEATH.** Let me ask a simple question...can you be alive in hell and be dead?

Another text – the most famous text in all of Scripture;  
John 3:16, <sup>16</sup>*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not **perish** but have **eternal life**.*

Jesus said Himself in Matthew 7:13. <sup>13</sup>*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that **leads to destruction**, and many enter through it.*

David way back in the Old Testament said it the same way.  
Psalms 37:9- 11, <sup>9</sup> *For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.* <sup>10</sup> *A little while, and the **wicked will be no more**; though you look for them, they will not be found.* <sup>11</sup> *But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.*

"The wicked will be no more," but the meek shall inherit the land / the earth.

Then read verse 20, <sup>20</sup> *But the wicked will **perish**:The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will **vanish**—vanish like smoke.*

The wicked perish, they will vanish like smoke.

Let's get another one, Malachi 4:1- 3,  
Malachi 4:1-3 <sup>1</sup> *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," says the LORD Almighty. **"Not a root or a branch will be left to them.** <sup>2</sup> *But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall.* <sup>3</sup> *Then you will trample down the wicked; **they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,**" says the LORD Almighty.**

The wicked will be stubble, turned to ashes. And after God rains fire down to cleanse the earth, we can go out, and the wicked will be reduced to ashes. That's not pretty, but it's clear!

Psalm 92:6-7 <sup>6</sup>*The senseless man does not know, fools do not understand,* <sup>7</sup> *that though the wicked spring up like grass and all evildoers flourish, they will be forever destroyed.*

Let's go back to Revelation 20:9,

<sup>9</sup>*They marched across the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of God's people, the city he loves. **But fire came down from heaven and devoured them.***

As they try to capture the city of God's people, God puts an end to it.

Verse 14 says this is the *second death*. <sup>14</sup>*Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. **The lake of fire is the second death.***

And chapter 21 goes right on as God then creates a new heaven and earth. The first is passed away.

Revelation 21 Verse 4, *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, **for the old order of things has passed away.***"

There will be no pain or crying. If hell were burning through eternity, there would be plenty of crying and pain don't you think?! But no, God makes all things new.

Revelation 21 Verse 5 <sup>5</sup>*He who was seated on the throne said, "**I am making everything new!**" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

Do you see it now? Understanding what the Bible says about the Hellfire actually helps us make a lot of sense of things! And despite the solemn fact that many will perish in the Lake of Fire, there is good news too. This earth is going to be made new. Never again will there be sin, sorrow, pain, tears and suffering, or death.

And friends, far from the devil being God's overseer of the flames of Hell, the Bible makes it clear just what is going to come of him.

Let's read it...

Ezekiel 28:18-19 <sup>18</sup>*By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I **reduced you to ashes on the ground** in the sight of all who were watching. <sup>19</sup> **All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.'** "*

He will never be anymore! And that my friends is good news! You see, the real issue in hell is not the "fire." The fire is the quickest, most merciful way God can destroy sin and all sinners who love sin more than righteousness.

The real "hell" is going to be when those who are lost come to the realization that they have missed out on eternity, and that they are about to die and remain dead forever. All because they counted the pleasures of sin more important than eternal life.

God will make an end of sin and all who cherish sin forever. Never again will we have to know sin, for all things will be new. And the good news is that sin and all of it's affects will never arise again. It will be over once and for all!

Sin shall not arise a second time! Let's all choose to be in that group that will live forever and never again know what sickness is, or anything that has to do with sin. We can all be in that group if we so choose.

Hell isn't for people. (Matthew 25:41 says) God has prepared it for the devil and his angels. God wants to save you.

Ezekiel 33:11 ***11** Say to them, '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. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'*

Thank God, we can look forward with great joy to spending a sinless eternity with Him. What a God of love! You see friends the punishment is eternal, not the punishing. Some have wondered how the doctrine of the immortality of the soul and the doctrine of the eternal torment of the wicked ever became a part of the Christian Church. Especially in view of all that the Bible teaches concerning the sleep of the dead, and the utter destruction of the wicked.

Actually this lie is nothing new in fact it's been around almost as long as mankind has. The first time we find this idea/ this lie, that mankind is immortal is in the garden of Eden – in fact it was the very first lie recorded in the Bible. Let's read it again together Genesis 3:1

Genesis 3:1 ***1** Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" **2** The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, **3** but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" **4** "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. **5** "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*

Thus, the testimony of Scripture is clear as to who the originator of this doctrine of man's immortality is. It is none other than that great deceiver, the devil himself. This

alone should make us very cautious about accepting a doctrine originated by the deceiver.

Now I want to take just a few minutes and cover a few more texts that some have misunderstood. Let's begin with Revelation 20:10

Revelation 20:10 <sup>10</sup>*And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.*

How do we reconcile this verse with the dozens of others that we have already read? But to refresh your memory, let's read just one...

Ezekiel 28:18-19, <sup>18</sup>*By your many sins and dishonest trade you have desecrated your sanctuaries. So I made a fire come out from you, and it consumed you, and I reduced you to ashes on the ground in the sight of all who were watching. <sup>19</sup> All the nations who knew you are appalled at you; you have come to a horrible end and will be no more.' "*

There has to be a way to reconcile these and it is really quite simple. FOREVER in the Bible is a period of time, limited or unlimited, depending upon what is being described. The word FOREVER in the Bible is like the word TALL. Tall has different meanings depending on what is being described, such as a dog, or house, or a mountain. Let me shock you...

I counted this myself – did you know that the word FOREVER is used more than 50 times in the Old Testament in connection with things already ended.

In the case of man, the Bible teaches that FOREVER means MAN'S LIFETIME or AS LONG AS A MAN LIVES. Notice how this word forever is used in Exodus 21. Also - Elisha speaking to Gehazi following Gehazi's dishonesty – leprosy to cling to Gehazi's family forever, and God speaking to David through the prophet Nathan

#### **WHAT ABOUT UNQUENCHABLE FIRE ?**

Luke 3:17 <sup>17</sup>*His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.*

#### **What does the Bible mean when it uses the term unquenchable fire?**

Jeremiah 17:27 <sup>27</sup>*But if you do not obey me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying any load as you come through the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, then I will **kindle an unquenchable fire** in the gates of Jerusalem that will consume her fortresses*

2 Chronicles 36:19, 21

<sup>19</sup>*They set fire to God's temple and broke down the wall of Jerusalem; they burned all the palaces and destroyed everything of value there.*

<sup>21</sup> *The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.*

Jerusalem was destroyed with unquenchable fire, but let me ask you, is Jerusalem still burning today? Unquenchable fire cannot be PUT out, but it GOES out when everything is burned up.

#### WHAT ABOUT EVERLASTING OR ETERNAL FIRE?

Matthew 25:41 <sup>41</sup>*"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:*

To help us understand this, let's go to Jude 7

<sup>7</sup>*In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire.*

2 Peter 2:6 <sup>6</sup>*if he 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*

So eternal or everlasting fire turns things into ashes and then goes out. It is everlasting in its EFFECT and not its DURATION. **The Bible is clear. The fire will do its work, and then it will go out.** And then God is going to do something spectacular.

2 Peter 3:13 <sup>13</sup>*But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.*

May God bless you as you resolve to accept His invitation to accept eternal life, and avoid the Second death. We'll cover how in lesson 12 "When my Past No Longer Matters"

Next Lesson #11 – "The Thousand Years of Peace".