

FOCUS ON   
**TRUTH** SERIES

THE TRUTH ABOUT  
**HELL  
FIRE**

DANNY SHELTON

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FOCUS ON  
**TRUTH** SERIES

The Focus on Truth series explores important Bible topics that impact our present well-being and our eternal destiny. In a world of disinformation and conflicting opinions, only the Bible stands as a sure beacon of light, hope, and truth.

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# THE TRUTH ABOUT HELL- FIRE

“Help! Somebody, please help me!” You are screaming as loudly as you can; to feel unending pain is the worst nightmare possible! But your screams cannot be heard above those of the millions of others who, like you, are also screaming, wailing, and begging for relief! There is no way out! The only light you see is from the very flames that engulf you. You can’t stand another second, so you scream to your leader, Satan, whom you chose when you were still on earth, to stop the unbelievable pain you feel. Finally, as you get his attention, he only laughs and says, “Welcome to hell! You and I are going to spend eternity here together!” Now you begin to scream to God to save you, but He is nowhere around. He is in a beautiful place called heaven with all His children who accepted Him as Lord and Savior of their lives while on earth. He does not hear you. You can’t think about it much because the eternal flames relentlessly continue to torture you. *How can a God of love be so cruel?* you think.

It’s a fair question, don’t you agree? How can a God of love be so cruel? The purpose of this little book is to find out the truth about hellfire according to the Bible.

Most Christian churches teach there is a real place called hell, and it is in business now, with millions of inhabitants being tortured and no way out through all eternity!

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Do you have a loved one who did not accept Jesus before they died? A brother, sister, father, mother, or maybe even a child who died and did not accept Jesus as Lord and Savior of their life? Are they burning day and night right now in the lake of fire, whose flames are never quenched? Well, I won't keep you in suspense. You would find it too hard to concentrate on the message of this book if you had a loved one who did not die having the security of salvation through Jesus Christ, our Lord. The short answer to the question "Is your loved one burning day and night?" is *no!* No one is burning in hell as we speak! Praise the Lord! Isn't that good news? I will, of course, give scriptures from the Bible to support my claim.

I want to add here that we, as humans, really can't judge anyone's future based on our understanding of their actions while on earth. That is not the purpose of this book. The Bible says,

**But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart** (1 SAMUEL 16:7).

Also, Jesus says, "Judge not, that ye be not judged" (Matthew 7:1). God will judge everyone according to His law of love, the Ten Commandments. He created the human race as free moral agents who have the right to choose their own destiny—eternal life or eternal death.

Understanding the truth about this Bible topic may mean the difference between everlasting life or death! Yes, it is just that important for every Christian to understand the character of God. If we choose God, we will live in a place called heaven. Heaven is described in the Bible as a place of everlasting peace. "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall

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there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

The Bible tells us our human minds cannot imagine how wonderful heaven will be. “As it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him’ ” (1 Corinthians 2:9, NKJV). Yes, heaven is a real place, with the true loving God as its King.

On the other hand, most Christian churches teach that if we do not choose God, we will spend eternity in a place called hell where a being named Satan is in charge. According to them, hell is a place of everlasting punishment! Those who end up there will

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be tortured in the eternal flames of a fire that cannot be quenched through the eons of time!

*Love* is a word that we are all familiar with. God is the originator of the word *love* because love is who God is! The Bible says, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). It tells us, “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

Once we understand God and His character of love, we can make an intelligent decision about spending eternity with Him. Let’s dig a little deeper into His Word for answers.

## GOD’S CHARACTER OF LOVE

The previous two scriptures, 1 John 4:8 and John 3:16, are some of the scriptures most quoted by the Christian church in all of the Bible. Why? As Christians, we want the world to know that God so loved the world that He was willing to give His only Son as an atonement for our sins. In other words, His Son, Jesus, would come down to this earth in the form of human flesh. He would dwell among us and, in the end, give His life as an atonement for the sins of the world. Sin—disobedience—had separated humanity from God in the Garden of Eden. The result: death to the human race.

Because everyone seems to have their own opinion of what sin is, let’s let the Bible define it. The Bible says, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law” (1 John 3:4). Here we see that sin is the transgression, or break-





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ing, of God's Ten Commandment law. Romans 6:23 tells us the wages of sin. "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

I think it's safe to say that nearly 100 percent of Christian churches would agree that this is what we, as Christians, teach: God is love! He could have chosen to eradicate rebellious humanity from the world, but He didn't. Instead, He made the ultimate sacrifice of giving His only Son for the salvation of the world.

We teach our young children that if we give our lives to Jesus by confessing that we are sinners and asking Him to forgive our sins, He will "forgive us our sins, and . . . cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). We teach them that He is coming back in the clouds of glory to take us home with Him to live forever and ever! Heaven is a real place! Isn't this good news?

But many in the Christian world also teach their children that if they don't give their lives to Jesus, this God of love will burn them in hellfire forever and ever! Now, you have to admit that this is hard for Johnny and Jane to understand, right? Immediately the question comes to their young minds: *How can a God who loves me torture me for all eternity and never make a way to escape?* We just saw that the Bible talks about God making a way of escape for all of His children here on earth by sacrificing His Son, yet somehow we believe that this same God is willing to burn people with flames that will never die!

A red flag has to go up in anyone's mind when they see such a distorted view of our Creator God's true nature! Instead of the loving God portrayed in the Scriptures, this erroneous teaching gives Johnny a mental picture of a harsh, cruel master without grace or mercy! What happened to the Bible's "love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13? Consider these verses:

Charity [Love] suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily

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provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth (1 CORINTHIANS 13:4-6).

Certainly, a god who would burn people forever doesn't seem longsuffering and kind. Any god who would devise a plan to torture people in hellfire for eternity would definitely be thinking evil. It doesn't take Johnny long to rebel against this kind of god.

God says He loves us much more than we love our own children (see Isaiah 49:15). I have yet to find an earthly parent who would be cruel enough to punish his or her own flesh-and-blood child by burning them in fire eternally! Nevertheless, this doctrine of eternal damnation punishment seems to be taught by the majority of Christian churches today. It seems to me we should be asking, "Why?" Any Christian should be ashamed to spread such a monstrous view of God. How can God be a God of love and, at the same time, a terrible tyrant who is willing to torment people forever? After hearing a Christian tell him that he would burn forever if he didn't serve God, a non-Christian said, "Why would I want to serve a god who is much meaner than I am?" I think that's a fair question. Let's take a closer look at John 3:16 and do a simple study. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Did you catch the word "but"? According to this verse, there is a great difference between what happens to those who believe in God and those who don't.

On the one hand, Jesus promises eternal life to those who believe in Him. *But* on the other hand, He promises that those who do not believe in Him will "perish" or cease to exist. So according to John 3:16, some people will live eternally, and some people will "perish" eternally. Nowhere in this scripture is there any indication that the wicked (unbelievers) will live forever, either in heaven or somewhere outside of heaven. In fact, it says precisely the opposite: everlasting life (immortality) to the righteous and death to the wicked.



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Now let's look at the word *perish*. *Merriam-Webster* defines *perish* as “to [be] destroyed or ruined: cease to exist.”<sup>1</sup> Let's consider an example. We often read in the newspaper about someone's house that has burned to the ground in a fire. We read that they lost their home and all the perishables that were in it—such as the furniture, photos, clothes, and other personal belongings. What happened to those perishables? Once the house burns, does it continue to exist? Of course not. What about the furniture? Or the person's clothes that were in the home? Do these now exist somewhere else, or are they gone forever? The answer is obvious. If the house and its contents are indeed burned up, then they no longer exist. They have gone up in smoke. Perished.

Question: Why, then, do so many Christians believe that when Jesus says those who refuse to believe in Him will, “perish,” He really means they will go on existing in the fires of hell eternally? Let me ask you, the reader, am I missing something here?

*Merriam-Webster* defines the words *eternal* as “having infinite duration”<sup>2</sup> and *everlasting* as “lasting or enduring, through all time” and “continuing indefinitely . . . : perpetual.”<sup>3</sup>

Did you know the first lie ever told on earth was told by Satan to Eve in the Garden of Eden? And what do you think that lie was? I want to take you back to Genesis 3:1–5:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, nor shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.

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Look at what is happening here. In verse 3, Eve tells the serpent that God said they would surely die if they ate the fruit. But in verse 4, Satan says, “Ye shall not surely die.” He boldly contradicts God! This is very significant. It is the first lie ever told on planet Earth, and it establishes Satan as the father of lies! And just as Satan had Adam

and Eve swallowing his lies back

there in the Garden of Eden,

he still has most Christians

swallowing this same

lie today. Most Chris-

tians believe that sin

doesn't really result

in death but

rather in eter-

nal life in the

fires of hell! They agree

with Satan's lie, “Ye shall not

surely die.”

I'm sure this is new to many of you.

Maybe you have gone to church most of

your life, yet you have never heard this theology. Isn't it amazing that many Christian leaders would rather teach that God is not a God of love but is worse even than Hitler, in that Hitler at least had people killed, thus ending their suffering!

## ETERNAL REWARD: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Let's talk about when God's judgment of humanity takes place. People who take the theological position that there is an eternally burning hellfire usually believe that this hellfire is going on now. In other words, they think that the judgment happens immediately for each of us at death. The dead, they believe, are not really dead. Instead, they are already either enjoying the bliss of heaven or suffering the torture of hellfire—wherever that fire may be located.

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Who is right—God or Satan? Does willful disobedience to God result in death or in an extremely unpleasant form of eternal life? Again, let's see what the Bible has to say about the subject of heaven and hell. Let's look at some verses from God's Word, the Bible, on this subject. Matthew 16:27 says, "For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works." According to this verse, when does each person on earth receive his or her eternal reward? Not at death but at the second coming of Jesus. This verse is clearly speaking about Jesus' coming at the end of the world, and it says that it is only then that He will "reward every man according to his works." So this text shows us two things: (1) no wicked person has yet received his or her eternal punishment, and (2) no righteous person has yet been rewarded with heaven—except for the few particular exceptions of Enoch, Elijah, and Moses.

Now let's look at another verse, 2 Peter 2:9: "The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished." So, let me ask, when is this day of judgment? We just read in Matthew 16:27 that the judgment takes place at the second coming of Jesus. Doesn't it make sense that if the judgment has not yet taken place, then no one has yet been punished in hellfire? And this is what Peter says. He says that God has reserved the punishment of the unjust until the day of judgment. Folks, this is good news! Notice how clear Peter is that no one is punished until the day of judgment. I've had people try to convince me that Peter is talking here only of the wicked who are alive at Jesus' second coming, but that is not what Peter is saying. In fact, he seems to be saying just the opposite. "The Lord knoweth how to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment." Notice also that the word "day" is singular. There is no reference here to endless days of ongoing punishment and continual, never-ending fire.

Let's look at a very earthly comparison. I burn my garbage only

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once a week. And when I say that, no one has trouble understanding that I don't burn my trash continually. They readily accept the fact that although I am collecting garbage all week, I keep it, or "reserve" it, until the day that I burn it. There is no continual trash fire at the Shelton residence, though there is a continual trash buildup. People who can easily understand this sometimes seem to have a great problem seeing with equal clarity what the Bible says. I'm always amazed at the number of people who seem to want to make the Bible say something it really doesn't say.

Let's add more weight to the scales! In explaining His parable of the wheat and the tares (weeds), Jesus pointed out again that we receive our punishment or reward at the end of time. He said, "The enemy that sowed them [the weeds] is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares [weeds] are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world" (Matthew 13:39, 40).

"For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27). No reward has been given yet. The fact that there have been a few exceptions, such as Enoch, Moses, Elijah, and some of the saints who were raised at Jesus' resurrection, doesn't do away with the fact that we receive our reward only at the end of time when Jesus returns. "Behold, I come quickly: and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (Revelation 22:12). Jesus brings the reward with Him—eternal life for the righteous or eternal death for the wicked.

Once again, Jesus is referring to His second coming, and again He declares that He is bringing His reward with Him when He comes. The Lord doesn't give a person his or her reward at death, as many Christians believe. According to what we have read so far, it is clear that Jesus brings each person's reward with Him to give it to that person at the judgment day, which takes place at His second coming.

What does the Bible have to say about this judgment day at Jesus'





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second coming and the events that are connected with it? Let's take a closer look. Jesus' dramatic return to earth from heaven is foretold in Acts 1:9–11:

And when he had spoken these things, while they beheld, he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

Jesus was visibly taken up in a cloud, and He will come back—visibly in a cloud. “Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him” (Revelation 1:7). And in Revelation 6:15–17 we read this sobering description of how some will react when they see Jesus coming in the clouds:

And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men, and every bondman, and every free man, hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sitteth on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb: for the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?

Then, one of the most beautiful scriptures in all the Bible:

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together



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with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord (1 THESSALONIANS 4:16, 17).

What an incredible promise! Can you imagine what a day that will be? Whether we are in the graves sleeping or alive at the Second Coming, the result is the same. Jesus comes as King of kings and Lord of lords, as Victor over death, hell, and the grave!

For the saints of God, this is the final triumph over sin. No more sickness, pain, or death to those who accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of their lives! Friend, won't you give Jesus a chance today? All you have to do is ask Him into your heart and life right now. If you are ready to accept Jesus right now, you can turn to the back of the book, where I'm happy to lead you in a sinner's prayer. Then come right back to finish reading the book, of course (smile).

Peter describes the judgment day like this:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up (2 PETER 3:10).

Peter is obviously referring to Christ's second coming. He says that day will come "as a thief"—not because Jesus' return will be secret, but because it will be sudden and unexpected, just as a thief in the night catches one unawares.

These Bible passages picture Jesus coming back to the earth as King of kings, and every eye shall see Him. It's no secret entry this time! Then, those righteous individuals who are alive rise to meet Him in the air. What about the righteous dead? Aren't they already in heaven, as most Christian churches teach? Haven't they already received their reward at death? One of the most beautiful promises in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52:

Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we

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shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.

And earlier in this same chapter, Paul clarifies when this extraordinary change takes place for those who have died in Christ. He says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming” (verses 22, 23). When do these scriptures say that the righteous change from mortal to immortal? At death? No—“at his [Christ’s] coming.” At the last trump. At judgment day when Jesus returns to earth. How many times have you heard a preacher at a funeral refer to 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52? It seems that I’ve heard this scripture at nearly every funeral I’ve ever attended. But, amazingly enough, the preacher who quotes this text has usually been talking during his whole sermon about Brother or Sister So-and-So already being in heaven with Jesus.

One minister told me that the dead person’s spirit had gone to heaven at his death, but at the resurrection, his body would rise to meet the Lord and be reunited with his spirit. I asked him to read 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52 again—along with verses 53 and 54. Here, Paul clearly explains that only at the Second Coming, during the resurrection, do the righteous shed mortality for immortality and corruption for incorruption.

### **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON DIES?**

It may seem that we have moved our focus away from the subject of hellfire and whether sinners burn forever and ever. Instead, we’ve been looking at Bible texts that speak about when we receive our eternal reward and whether a person goes on living in some way after he or she dies. But these subjects are closely related. In order to understand what the Bible says about hell, we

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must first understand what it says happens to us when we die.

This subject is so significant that the Lord had Paul pen the words in 1 Thessalonians 4 to comfort the saints of God. False theology was floating around in Paul's day, even as it is in our day. It's as though Jesus is saying, "I want you to know the truth on this subject of death."

Paul wrote to the Thessalonian Christians,

*But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. Wherefore comfort one another with these words* (1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18).

According to the Bible, when a person dies, they simply go to the grave in a state of sleep, waiting for the resurrection on the day of judgment. If that isn't clear, let's allow the Bible to set the record straight.

The Bible says that when a person dies, "then shall the dust return to earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7). This agrees with the Genesis record of man's creation. "And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). God combined the dust of the earth with His breath, or spirit, to make man a "living soul." God didn't place a

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soul in Adam; Adam became a living soul after God breathed into the clay that He had formed. These are the same two elements—dust and God's breath or spirit—referred to in Ecclesiastes. So we have the formula: dust + God's breath/spirit = a living soul.

For many years I was a carpenter by trade. Nails and wood together make a house. Nails + wood = house. If I take the nails from the wood, what do I have? A house? No. I have nails and wood. Where did the house go? It simply ceased to exist. Others have used a light bulb and electricity to illustrate this truth. A light bulb cannot give light without electricity. The light appears only when the bulb is connected with electricity. Bulb + electricity = light. When the electricity is turned off, the light ceases to exist. It is no more. It doesn't go somewhere else and continue to be light. In the same way, when a person dies, and the spirit goes back to God, it is nothing more than God receiving His spirit back as it was before He breathed it into man. At death, just as the body returns to dust as it was, so the





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spirit returns to the Creator, just as it was before He gave it.

Many Christians believe that this text is saying that at death, a living, conscious spirit goes back to God who made it. But if we understand the scripture in this way, we have to conclude that *everyone* will be saved. Notice that this scripture doesn't say that only the spirits of righteous people return to God at death. It says, "The spirit shall return unto God"—a general statement that includes the spirit of every person who dies.

Remember the Genesis formula: dust or clay + breath or spirit = a living, conscious soul. At death, the reverse takes place: dust or clay – [minus] breath or spirit = a dead soul. Does God's breath die when a person dies? Absolutely not. It merely returns to Him as it was before. You may ask, "How do you know that is true?"

Again, let's allow the Bible to do the talking. Psalm 146:4 says of a dead person, "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish." This text says that in the very day a person dies, his or her thoughts perish, or cease to exist. The spirit of a person who dies cannot go directly to heaven as a conscious entity; otherwise, that person's thoughts wouldn't perish. He or she would have jubilant thoughts, I'm sure.

If you are still in doubt, here's a text too clear to misunderstand: "For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). What does this scripture mean when it says that "the dead know not any thing"? Let's read further and allow verse 6 to interpret for us. "Also their love, and their hatred, and their envy, is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun." If a person were in heaven, he or she would know love, wouldn't they? If that person were in hell, I believe they would know hatred and strife.

If a dead person's spirit were consciously with God in heaven, how could they not know anything? The fact is that in heaven, we'll know more than we've ever known before. The Bible says, "Now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face" (1 Corinthians



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13:12). It also says, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

### **DEATH IS LIKE SLEEP**

We saw that in Eden God created Adam by combining the dust of the earth with His own breath, or life-giving spirit, and man became a “living soul” (Genesis 2:7). And we have seen in Ecclesiastes 12:7 that when a person dies, the formula reverses. The dust returns “to the earth,” and the “spirit,” God’s breath of life, His life-giving power, returns to Him “who gave it.” And what happens to the person, the “living soul”? It simply no longer exists. So when a person dies, he or she is dead, not alive, and unconscious of anything that is happening. That’s why the Bible often calls death a “sleep.”



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That's what Jesus Himself taught His disciples. When word came to the Savior that His good friend Lazarus was sick, He told His disciples,

Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead (JOHN 11:11-14).

Jesus wanted us to know that when we die, we are asleep awaiting the resurrection at His second coming. Notice that Jesus makes no mention of Lazarus going to heaven or anywhere else at his death. He compared death to sleep. Lazarus's body was in the process of decaying back to dust, and according to Ecclesiastes 12:7, his spirit, or breath, had gone back to God, who gave it. Notice, too, that Jesus does not suggest at any time during this ordeal that Lazarus's spirit was a conscious, thinking entity enjoying the bliss of heaven.

Hopefully, it is becoming clear as to what happens to us when we die. The "spirit" that goes back to God's keeping at death is not what many Christians think of as a "soul"—some part of a person that goes on living after death and that is aware of what is going on.

Have you ever been "put to sleep" for a surgery? I have. I believe this is precisely like what happens to us when we die. I had open-heart surgery some time ago. The last thing I remember was going into the surgical room, and the next second, which was actually six to eight hours later, I woke up. I had no idea that I had been asleep that long. There is no conception of time during surgery when under full anesthesia. That's the way it is when we die. We simply go to sleep, and whether we sleep for a day or a thousand years, it will seem that we had just shut our eyes in death, as we see Jesus coming back in the clouds of glory to redeem His children from this sin-sick world!

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The “spirit” that returns to God when we die is God’s life-giving breath, the power that keeps us alive. At Creation, God breathed His life-giving power into Adam’s body made of the dust of the ground, and Adam became alive. At death, that life-giving power from God returns to His keeping until the resurrection at the end of time.

Jesus said, “Our friend Lazarus sleepeth” (John 11:11). Wouldn’t this have been an excellent opportunity for Jesus to set the record straight for the next 2,000 years about what happens to a person when they die? Instead of weeping with Martha, He could have said, “Martha, your brother Lazarus’s spirit is enjoying the bliss of eternal life. He’s having the time of his life. It would be selfish of us to bring him back to this old, sin-sick world.” But Jesus didn’t say any such thing. Instead, He said, “Lazarus sleepeth.”

And I believe that when He said that, Jesus *did* set the record straight about what happens at death. God withdraws His life-giving spirit from us, and we decay back to dust. We sleep in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection—either the resurrection to eternal life at the second coming of Jesus or the resurrection to eternal death a thousand years later (see John 5:28, 29; 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17; Revelation 20:5).

If Lazarus had gone to heaven when he died, can’t you imagine how upset he would have been when Jesus called him back to life? According to the way most Christians believe, Lazarus had been dead for several days enjoying eternal life with God the Father, the Holy Spirit, and all the dear saints, friends, and family that had gone to heaven before him. He was in a place of no more pain, no more sorrow, no more death—then oops! He hears Jesus calling him back to this life! “I have to do what, Lord?” I can hear Lazarus saying, almost in a panic. “But Lord, that’s not fair! Why do I have to go back to my old, sin-sick body just to end up getting sick and dying all over again? Can’t You use someone else as an example of Your power?”

Lazarus continues, “But Lord, everyone else up here has already

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gained the victory over sin and the devil. What if I go back to earth, die again, and end up in hell next time? It seems that I should get to stay here in heaven with everyone else.” You know, if I believed Lazarus was in heaven after his death, I don’t think I could blame him for talking that way!

But Jesus knew that Lazarus had been sleeping ever since he had died three days earlier. His thoughts had perished. His pain had ceased, also his sorrow, hatred, and even love. He had simply been asleep in Jesus, waiting for the resurrection.

Some have suggested that if Jesus hadn’t specifically said “*Lazarus, come forth,*” limiting His command to just that one person, every grave within the sound of His voice would have burst open. Today, those who have died in Jesus are sleeping in their graves, but very soon, the call from the Master will be to all the sleeping saints, and they will come forth to new life!

Even Martha, Lazarus’s sister, knew that he was asleep in the grave. “Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again. Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (John 11:23, 24). To me, these are significant statements. Martha, the sister of Lazarus, a woman who had sat at the feet of Jesus, the Master of the universe, never wavered or stumbled in her answer. “I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day” (verse 24). If it were really true that Lazarus went to heaven when he died, Jesus should have straightened out Martha’s faulty thinking. He should have said, “Martha, you don’t understand. We don’t have to wait until the resurrection at the last day. Your brother is alive right now in heaven.” But there is no record of Jesus telling Martha any such thing, because He agreed with her that the resurrection to life takes place at the “last day.”

Let’s look at another essential passage in John’s Gospel concerning the resurrection. Jesus says,

**Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come**

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forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation (JOHN 5:28, 29).

Notice that this is Jesus Himself, the Creator of all life, who is speaking. Jesus explains that all those who are in the graves shall hear His voice. He doesn't say that all the saints in heaven, or all the lost in hell, will hear His voice. He says *all who are in the graves* shall hear His voice. If the saints were already in heaven, they would hear His voice from heaven, not from their graves. If the lost were already suffering in hell, they would hear His voice from hell, not from their graves. It's clear that the dead, both righteous and wicked, sleep in the grave until the resurrection!

Let's add some more weight to the scales and look again at 1 Thessalonians 4:16, 17. It says,

For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.

This passage helps us to fully understand what happens in the resurrection on judgment day. It again establishes the fact that the dead in Christ are raised from their graves to be caught up in the air to meet the Lord. It totally does away with the theory that at His coming Jesus brings down to earth the live spirits of the saints who are already in heaven.

Instead, He brings them up from the earth to heaven! Notice, too, it says that "the Lord himself" shall descend from heaven. It says nothing about any "spirits" descending with Him to earth.

There are many more scriptures concerning this subject that

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could add to the weight of evidence, but I believe that you now have enough proof to establish the Bible truth that when a person dies, they merely return to dust to await the second coming of Christ. And when we prove that fact, we also confirm the fact that there cannot be an eternally burning hellfire already in progress somewhere in the universe!

## HOW HOT IS HELL?

What do I mean by asking, “How hot is hell?” As I’ve talked to people about this matter of hellfire and the punishment of the wicked, a lot of them think I don’t believe in hell at all. So I tell them that I believe in a hotter hell than they do! And that’s true. They believe in a hell that is hot enough to burn sinners and keep on burning throughout eternity. But I believe in a hell so hot that it will totally consume sinners and burn itself out so that eventually it will not be burning at all.

Their idea of hell is a fire that never dies. And in all fairness, there are a few Bible texts that seem to say that very thing at first glance. We’ll look at them later. Right now, let’s see what the Bible says will happen to the wicked at the end of time.

**For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch (MALACHI 4:1).**

According to Malachi, a day is coming when the wicked will be burned up; consumed, if you will. The Bible says,

**The LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy (PSALM 145:20).**



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But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away (PSALM 37:20).

For as ye have drunk upon my holy mountain, so shall all the heathen drink continually, yea, they shall drink, and they shall swallow down, and they shall be as though they had not been (OBADIAH 16).

All of these scriptures have something in common. They all foretell an end to the wicked. Nowhere is there even a hint in these scriptures that the wicked will continue to live eternally, burning in the fires of hell.

But it isn't only the Old Testament that speaks about the total destruction of the wicked. In the New Testament, Jesus Himself says, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28). Earlier, we saw that dust + God's breath = a living soul. Most Christian churches preach that the soul never dies. But here, Jesus confirms that the soul of the unrighteous surely can die. And Ezekiel 18:4 declares, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die." Brothers and sisters, I don't believe God can state it any more clearly than that.

Some time ago, I attended the funeral of a friend who was not a Christian as far as I know. The pastor preached what I thought was a very good sermon, until near the end. Then he told the congregation that someday they, too, would spend eternity in heaven or hell because the soul never dies. I had to admit that was a pretty sobering thought, although it wasn't a biblical one.

Later that day, I looked up the pastor's phone number and called him. I told him that I appreciated his sermon, but I had a question about something he had said. I asked if he would mind explaining it to me. He agreed, so I asked him why he had told those people attending the funeral that the soul lives forever either in heaven

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or hell. Of course, he said to me that he had made that statement because he believed that it was, in fact, true. So I asked him to look up Ezekiel 18:4 in his Bible and read it. He looked up the text and began reading it to me over the phone: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.”

I asked him if he would explain to me how this text might affect his theology of the soul, and to my surprise, he said that it wouldn’t affect it at all.

As kindly as possible, I reminded him that his statement was in direct opposition to the Word of God. He said he didn’t see it that way. So I asked him if we could read Ezekiel 18:4 one more time, and he agreed. This time I read it. “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” I asked him if he agreed with this text. And I was surprised again when he said that he didn’t understand it to be literally true. I asked him why. “Because,” he said, “if I believed that Ezekiel 18:4 is literally true, then I would have to believe that there is no eternally burning hellfire, and everybody knows there is.”

I told him I knew at least one person (me) who didn’t believe in an eternally burning hellfire. Now it was his turn to be surprised. It appeared that the long tradition of his church’s theology on eternally burning hellfire had blinded his eyes to what the Bible is really saying.

### **HOW LONG DOES HELL BURN?**

Now, there are some texts in the Bible that seem to say that hell will burn forever. These texts appear to contradict those scriptures we’ve been looking at about hell completely burning up sinners and then going out. We need to look at these “problem” texts to see how they fit into the “weight of evidence” we’ve been accumulating.

Let’s start with Jude 7, “Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.” At first

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glance, this text does seem to say that Sodom and Gomorrah burn forever with “eternal fire.” But let me ask you a question: Are Sodom and Gomorrah burning today? And the answer, of course, is no. These cities are no longer burning and haven’t been burning for centuries and centuries. How, then, are we to understand this text? Is the Bible contradicting itself?

A closer look at the text reveals the answer. The Bible is not contradicting itself; it is telling us that the consequences of the fire that burned Sodom and Gomorrah are eternal. Those two cities are burned up (consumed) forever. Nothing can ever bring them back into existence as they once were! Someone could even rebuild two cities in the same spot and name them “Sodom” and “Gomorrah,” but they still would not be the two cities that suffered the “eternal” fire.

Those people and those buildings are eternally gone. They suffered the vengeance of eternal fire in the sense that the punishment that came upon these cities and its effect on them was forever.

Let’s look at another passage of scripture:

**But if ye will not hearken unto me to hallow the sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched (JEREMIAH 17:27).**

This almost sounds as if there is no end to the fire that will come upon Jerusalem as a result of the people’s sins. Again, let’s look a little closer. Jeremiah 52:12, 13 records the unquenchable fire that Jerusalem suffered:

**Now in the fifth month, in the tenth day of the month, which was the nineteenth year of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon, came Nebuzaradan, captain of the guard, which served the king of Babylon, into Jerusalem, and burned**

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the house of the LORD, and the king's house; and all the houses of Jerusalem, and all the houses of the great men, burned he with fire.

We see that the prophecy of Jeremiah 17 is fulfilled in Jeremiah 52. But we can also see that Jerusalem is not still burning today. A fire that cannot be “quenched” is not the same as a fire that burns forever. If my house begins to burn, I will call the fire department. But by the time the fire truck gets there, the fire may be so intense that the fire fighters can't do anything to put it out. The fire can't be quenched; but it will go out when it has finished burning my house.

Now let's look at two texts, back to back, that seem to contradict each other directly. In fact, they appear in the Bible one following right after the other:

And they [Satan and his followers] went up on the breadth of the earth, and compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city: and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them (REVELATION 20:9).

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever (REVELATION 20:10).

Verse 9 says that Satan and his followers were “devoured” by fire from God. *Merriam-Webster* defines *devour* as “to destroy, . . . consume, . . . or waste.”<sup>4</sup> This verse clearly shows a God who eradicates sin and sinners—not a God who tortures sinners throughout eternity because they lived wickedly for a few years while on planet Earth.

Verse 10, on the other hand, says that Satan and his followers are tormented in the lake of fire “for ever and ever.” Can we resolve this apparent contradiction? Verse 9 tells us that the fire “devours,” or

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consumes. Verse 10 says it burns “day and night for ever and ever.” Which text is correct? Or are they both correct?

When I come across something in the Bible that seems confusing, I usually begin “troubleshooting,” much like a mechanic does when working on a car. A mechanic will check this part and try that and see how one affects the other. We can do the same with Scripture. We look at this text and check that one. We observe the weight of evidence on the subject from the entire Bible and how our “problem” text might fit that overall evidence.

In this case, the weight of evidence from all my previous studies on this subject heavily favors the view that the fires of hell consume the wicked and burn them up completely. So the first thing I do is focus on verse 10, which seems to go against the “weight” of evidence that I have already gathered. Then I compare it with the original wording in Greek. (If my problem text were in the Old Testament, I’d compare it with the original Hebrew wording.)

“Wait a minute,” you protest. “I don’t know Greek or Hebrew. How can I compare any English Bible with the languages in which the Bible was first written?”

You don’t have to be a Greek or Hebrew scholar to investigate the original Bible languages. You need a *Strong’s Concordance*. When you look up a word in this concordance, you will find a number following it. This number refers to a Greek and Hebrew dictionary that also appears in the concordance. You can go to that number, either in the Greek lexicon for the New Testament or the Hebrew dictionary for the Old Testament, and there you can read the meanings of that original Greek or Hebrew word.

So when I begin to explore what Revelation 20:10 might mean, I find in *Strong’s Concordance* that the word “ever” in that verse has the number 165 following it. Number 165 takes me to the Greek word *aion* in the Greek Dictionary of the New Testament in the back of the concordance. The dictionary tells me that this word, in its original form, refers to an age—a past, present, or future period. So it denotes duration or continuance of time, but one with great variety.<sup>5</sup>

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Now, when I look at Revelation 20:10 in this light, a clear understanding develops. Now I understand how it can harmonize with verse 9, which says the fire “devours” Satan and his followers. Verse 10 says that this consuming fire will last day and night (continually) for a period of time until the wicked are destroyed forever. The fire has eternal consequences, but it does not burn throughout eternity.

## HOW LONG IS FOREVER?

But doesn't “forever” really mean forever—eternally, without end? Let's look at some more examples of how the Bible uses this term “forever.” The first is in 1 Samuel 1:22. “But Hannah went not up [to Shiloh]; for she said unto her husband, I will not go up until the child be weaned, and then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD, and there abide for ever.” How long is “for ever” in this case? For eternity? Without end? No. Verses 27, 28 tell us what Hannah meant. “For this child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I asked of him: Therefore also I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD” (verses 27, 28). So “for ever” in verse 22 means “as long as he liveth.”

We don't have trouble understanding this. We use the term “forever” the same way ourselves in everyday speech. We tell our husband or wife, “I will love you forever.” And our husband or wife knows that we mean, “I will love you as long



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as I live,” not, “I will love you eternally, for time without end.”

Let’s look at another example in the Bible. Moses gave regulations about servants who did not want to go free when their time of servitude was completed. He said, “Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever” (Exodus 21:6). We can be sure that this servant is not still serving his master today. In this case, “for ever” obviously could not mean “for eternity.” Clearly, it means “for as long as the servant lives.”

So when the Bible speaks about the lost being burned “for ever and ever” in the fires of hell, we have to place those verses alongside the many clear statements in the Bible that the wicked are burned up, consumed, and destroyed totally and completely. It’s clear that “forever” doesn’t always mean “eternally.”

## **SOME DIFFICULT BIBLE TEXTS**

Now, it’s only fair to say that some texts in the Bible can be confusing. At first glance, they seem to contradict each other on this topic. But as we dig deeper, comparing scripture with scripture and finding out what the text is really saying, we learn that the Bible doesn’t contradict itself. As we study the Bible on any topic, we should look at the weight of evidence. This is similar to what happens in a court of law. The members of the jury look at all the evidence gathered regarding the case. They look to see on which side the weight of evidence comes down, and they make their decision accordingly. Sometimes there may be a piece of evidence that doesn’t seem to fit. But still the weight of evidence is clearly on one side or the other.

Likewise, as we study the Bible there may be an occasional text that we aren’t sure just how to explain. But as we look at everything the Bible has to say about a topic, the weight of evidence will become clear. And we will usually know just how to harmonize this “problem” text with the weight of clear evidence in all the rest of



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the Bible. There are some of these “problem” texts when we come to the subject of hellfire. At times it seems as if the Bible contradicts itself, but you will see as you continue with this study that the Bible is consistent and clear on this subject.

*The thief on the cross*—One Bible text that people seem to quote to prove that people go to heaven immediately when they die is Luke 23:42, 43. It refers to the thief who was crucified with Jesus. “And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” It seems, at first glance, that Jesus is telling this repentant sinner that he will be in heaven with his Savior that very day, immediately after death. But can this be true? Let’s look a little deeper.

Jesus did, indeed, die that same day, as verses 44–46 of the same chapter make clear. But did the two men crucified with Him die that day? From the Bible record, we can’t be sure. John records in his Gospel, “Then came the soldiers, and brake the legs of the first, and of the other which was crucified with him [Jesus]. But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs” (John 19:32, 33). Obviously, the two men crucified with Jesus were still alive as that terrible Friday was coming to a close. But even if the repentant thief died that day, he could not have been with Jesus in heaven that same day. Why not?

Because Jesus Himself did not go to heaven that very day when He died on the cross! Two days later, on Resurrection Sunday, Mary came to the tomb in the morning and discovered Jesus had risen from the dead. When she reached out to embrace Him in her joy, “Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father” (John 20:17). Sunday morning, Jesus had not yet gone back to heaven to receive His Father’s official approval of His successful mission on earth. So clearly, Jesus and the repentant thief were not together in heaven on Friday when Jesus died.

How then do we explain what Jesus said to the thief as they hung

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on crosses together? Jesus told him, “Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” This text has confused a lot of people because it seems to make the Bible contradict itself. It even makes Jesus appear to have not told the truth. But since Jesus is truth, He couldn’t have told a lie. The answer to this dilemma is really quite simple. If we just move the comma in the text and place it after the word “Today,” we will solve the problem. Then it reads: “Verily I say unto thee Today, shalt thou be with me in paradise.” In other words, “Today” refers to when the promise is *made*, not to when the promise will be fulfilled. The very day that the thief repented, the same day that the future looked so bleak for Jesus, He promised the thief eternal life in Paradise with Him. And that promise will be fulfilled when Jesus returns in glory at the end of time. Now the text is in harmony with the rest of what the Bible says on this subject.

But is it legitimate to move a comma in the Bible? Isn’t that tampering with God’s Word? Actually, the early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament didn’t contain any punctuation at all. In fact, documents of that time were usually written in all capital letters and without any spaces between words! So punctuation and lowercase letters were supplied later as the Greek manuscripts were translated into other languages. God inspired the Bible; He impressed holy men of old to write His message for the world. But the translators and copyists were not inspired. And, as they inserted punctuation and translated the original languages, these kinds of minor mistakes (misplaced commas, for example) could creep in.

We should note one other thing about this exchange between Jesus and the repentant thief. The thief did not even ask Jesus to take him to Paradise that day. He said, “Lord, remember me *when thou comest into thy kingdom*” (Luke 23:42; emphasis supplied). And do you know what? That’s precisely what Jesus will do. Very soon, He will come back to earth to claim His everlasting kingdom as King of kings and Lord of lords. And when He does, this thief

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will be one of those raised from the grave to be caught up together with the Lord in the air.

*The rich man and Lazarus*—Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is another passage that is sometimes used as evidence that individuals go to heaven or hell as soon as they die. Verses 22, 23 state: “And it came to pass, that the beggar [Lazarus] died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

The first thing we need to remember is that this is a parable, a story designed to make a point. Jesus often used parables to reach His listening audience. When dealing with very legalistic listeners, it is often difficult to get through to them. Why? Because their minds are already made up about certain issues. So Jesus often used parables, or stories, to get His point across—to plant a seed, if you will.

This is one such story. Let’s examine it. Whom did the rich man represent? Obviously, the Jews. Jesus’ listeners. How do we know? Because only a Jew would pray to “Father Abraham” (Luke 16:24). Whom did the beggar symbolize? The beggar represented the Gentiles. The Jews believed that Gentiles were unworthy to receive the truth. It is interesting that Jesus named the poor beggar in this parable “Lazarus.” Do you remember the name of Jesus’ close friend who died and was raised to life? That’s right, Lazarus (see John 11).

Let’s look at the details of Jesus’ parable. In His story, the angels took Lazarus, a beggar who had died, to “Abraham’s bosom,” the dwelling place of the righteous. We have already seen that the Bible clearly states in several texts that the angels gather the saints together—but only at the second coming of Jesus, not at a person’s death. For example, Matthew 24:30, 31 says, “And they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great

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glory. And he shall send his angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.” There is no mention here of angels gathering the saints at death. Instead, they collect them at the Second Coming.

Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus also describes heaven and hell as separated by a “great gulf” (Luke 16:26), yet people could communicate back and forth across it. In fact, the story says that the rich man in hell saw the beggar, Lazarus, in heaven (verse 23). If it’s literally true that those in hell can see those in heaven and that those in heaven can see and talk with those in hell, then I don’t believe anyone would be truly happy in heaven. Could you be happy in heaven if you were constantly reminded of your lost loved ones, hearing their cries and screams for millions and millions of years? I don’t think so.

Many people point to this parable to prove that when a person dies, he or she either goes straight to heaven or goes directly to hell. Yet, interestingly, these same people believe that it is a person’s spirit, not the body, that lives forever in heaven or forever in hell. However, this parable clearly describes a body burning in hell, not a spirit. It says that the rich man had eyes, a tongue, et cetera. In other words, a physical body (verses 23, 24). The rich man asked for Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in the water and come and cool his tongue. Of course, this request itself is not very realistic. If one were immersed in the flames of hell, a drop or two of water, even if it could be applied from the tip of someone’s finger, wouldn’t do much to cool the tongue or the whole body, would it? And if Lazarus were sent from heaven to hell to try to cool the rich man, wouldn’t he be likely to burn too? The whole scenario is very unrealistic. The point is that Jesus is telling a parable, a story. It isn’t intended to be taken literally as a factual account of real events that are actually taking place as described. So what was Jesus trying to get across to His listeners in the parable?

He was trying to help them see that truth goes beyond religious

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and cultural boundaries and must be given to the whole world. He wanted them to see that if people's opinions have been hardened, if they are not looking for truth, they won't change their minds even if someone were raised from the dead to speak to them.

I believe Jesus knew that if He told the Jews and their leaders the truth "straight out," they would try to kill Him before the appointed time. That's why He counseled His disciples to be "wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

*The worm that does not die*—Jesus also had this to say about hell and its flames: "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43, 44).

Let's focus first on the phrase "where their worm dieth not." What does this mean? Many people understand this phrase to mean that the human spirit never dies. But the text doesn't say anything about the human spirit or the spirit of a human, does it? It says, "where their worm dieth not." If we take this verse literally, we need to explain what is meant by the "worm."

As far as I know, I don't have any worms in me—especially one that will never die! My Bible says that we are made of the dust of the ground and God's breath, or spirit. It doesn't say anything about human beings—saved or lost—having a worm that lives forever in us! So what was Jesus really trying to say?

In these verses, the word "hell" is translated from the Greek word *Gehenna*, another name for Hinton's valley, located just outside of Jerusalem. Gehenna was a dumpsite for dead animals and all kinds of garbage. For His listeners then, Jesus couldn't have used a better illustration of the total annihilation of the wicked, because Gehenna was a constant reminder to them of what will happen to sinners and their final destruction. The dumpsite of Gehenna was kept burning almost continually in order to get rid of all the garbage. At least the smoke kept rising continually. Some-

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times when the fire didn't completely burn up the dead bodies, maggots (worms) would eat them.

Nothing seemed to escape Gehenna. It appeared that the worms never died because they always found something to feed on. Even so, Gehenna is not still burning outside the city of Jerusalem today, and any worms that were alive when Jesus made His statement are not living today. They have been destroyed for 2,000 years. The Aramaic translation (the language Jesus spoke) says, "Where the embers die not." The "embers," of course, refer to the fires of Gehenna outside Jerusalem.

The second phrase in these verses that we need to examine is "the fire that shall never be quenched." Such references to unquenchable fire are found several times in the Bible. Strong's Greek dictionary defines this Greek word as meaning "not put out," or "not quenched." This simply means that the fire will not be put out or quenched until it devours its prey. The fire that destroys the wicked at the end of time will not be put out until the wicked are entirely eliminated. I really believe that this is consistent with a merciful and loving God. Hellfire is not designed to torture people; rather,



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it is intended to cleanse the earth of sin forever. Remember, God hates sin, but He loves the sinner.

*Absent from the body; present with the Lord*—Another commonly misunderstood text concerning what happens at death is 2 Corinthians 5:6–8. Paul wrote, “Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord . . . We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.” Some have understood this verse to be saying that when we die, we are freed (“absent”) from our mortal body and find ourselves in the presence of the Lord. Is that what Paul is saying? Is he stating that when a person dies, he or she changes from mortality to immortality?

The answer is no. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:52, 53 that we change from mortal to immortal at the “last trump” on judgment day, when “the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (verse 52). So we don’t make this change at death but, rather, at Jesus’ second coming. If this is true, what did Paul mean when he said he would rather be “absent from the body” and be “present with the Lord”?

He’s merely saying that he can hardly wait for the second coming of Jesus so that he might leave this earthly “house,” or body (2 Corinthians 5:1). Paul didn’t want to be left “naked” in the grave (verse 3), but he longed to put on the immortality that God will give him at the resurrection! It’s my prayer that we all should be as eager for Jesus to come as Paul was!

*Preaching to the spirits in prison*—Let’s look at one final text that is commonly misunderstood:

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which

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sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water (1 PETER 3:18–20).

When does Peter say that Christ preached to these spirits in prison? Verse 20 says, “while the ark was a preparing”—in other words, while the ark was being built. A simple way to understand these verses is that they are saying that Christ, through the Holy Spirit, was present during the 120 years that Noah was preaching to men and women that they would be lost if they did not choose to come into the safety of the ark. During all this time, Jesus was preaching to these lost individuals. Isn’t this a beautiful illustration of God’s love and redemptive power even before Jesus’ death at Calvary?

Some have seen in these verses evidence that individuals continue as spirits after their death and that some, at least, have another opportunity to respond to the gospel.

Those “in prison” refers to the lost. In Psalm 142:7, David prays, “Bring my soul out of prison.” And Paul refers to “captivity to the law of sin” (Romans 7:23). We are all born into a “prison” of circumstances controlled by Satan, the prince of this earth, until we respond to the pleading of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and make Jesus the Lord of our lives. In Noah’s day, the ark represented coming into the safety of salvation in Jesus. Today, we do the same by accepting Jesus, confessing our sins, and then keeping all of His commandments by God’s grace. Through His death on the cross of Calvary, Jesus is now our ark of safety from the consequences of sin and the devil.

We need to understand that there is nothing in this text that would suggest that Jesus went somewhere “below the earth” to preach to the lost in hell or anywhere else. What purpose would it serve? The Bible nowhere teaches that those who are lost have another opportunity after death to accept the gospel invitation.

To summarize, then, 1 Peter 3:18–20 tells us three main things:

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1. Jesus preached by the Holy Spirit.
2. This preaching by the Holy Spirit was done during the time the ark was being built.
3. Jesus' message was an opportunity for those bound in the prison house of sin to break the chains of death and accept the free gift of eternal life, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

In other words, the people of Noah's day had the same opportunity to be saved as we do today, by heeding the Holy Spirit.

## **GOD'S LOVE GIVES US A CHOICE**

We have been talking a lot about hellfire. But I want to assure you that God is a God of love. It isn't His choice that sinners be destroyed. If God were to have His way, everyone would be saved; He doesn't want anyone to be lost. It breaks His great heart of love to see even one sinner lose his or her way (see Luke 15:7; 2 Peter 3:9). But this choice isn't God's to make.

If a person chooses not to accept Jesus Christ as his or her Savior, if a person decides to remain in sin, God Himself will not change that decision. In the end, we each determine our



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own spiritual destiny. Those who are destroyed in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15) will have chosen not to be saved despite all that God has done to bring them to Himself in love.

And even the destruction that befalls sinners is not a vengeful act on God's part. Light and darkness do not mix. There is either light or darkness. Sinful human beings cannot stand before a sinless, perfect God without the protection of Christ's righteousness. So when we refuse His righteousness, we reject our protection against destruction. In a sense, we are actually destroying ourselves. In order for God to restore His perfect world, He must destroy sin. And without God in our lives, all we are is sin. God indeed loves the sinner but hates sin. Sin does have consequences. "The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

Again, this Scripture confirms the two destinies that lie before each of us: eternal life through Jesus for those who accept His gracious gift, or eternal death, ceasing to exist, for those who reject Him. It also tells me that God loves me enough to allow me to choose my own destiny. He will not force anyone to live with Him in heaven who doesn't want to be there. To do otherwise, in my opinion, would breed only discontent and rebellion.

We are promised that sin will not rise the second time in heaven. "What do you imagine against the LORD? he will make an utter end: affliction shall not rise up the second time" (Nahum 1:9). Praise God! And the only way that can happen is for God to allow each person to make his or her own decision to love and serve Him, or to reject Him and serve self. Sin will not rise up again, because each of the redeemed will have seen its terrible consequences so clearly—and will have chosen to follow Jesus so decisively—that no one will ever rebel against God's love again.

The purpose of this little book is not to talk just about hellfire—how hot it is or how long it lasts. It's not about God killing people because they don't serve Him or see eye to eye with Him. This book intends to remind us that God is love and life and that

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there is no life outside of God. As the Bible so eloquently puts it, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

The Bible has much more to say on the subject of hell and what happens to a person when he or she dies. There are not enough pages in this little book to answer all the questions on this subject. But my intention and hope are that each reader will study further and find from Scripture that God is love. We’ve simply tried to mount the evidence on both sides of the scales and see which way they tip. And clearly, the scales tip on the side of love. I believe that anyone earnestly seeking the truth about God’s character will find it. But one has to do more than skim the surface of the Bible. We need to put together all that the Bible has to say on the subject and let the Bible speak for itself. In doing so, we will find that when a person dies, he or she does not go to either heaven or hell. Rather that person sleeps—unconscious—until the resurrection. He or she is not aware of anything that is going on. At the resurrection of the righteous, they will receive their reward of eternal life. And at the resurrection of the wicked, they will receive their reward of eternal death. The Bible is clear that God does not torture the lost in never-ending hellfire. Indeed, God is guilty only of loving us so much that He was willing to give us His own Son to rescue us from the death we deserve and to provide us with life everlasting in heaven.

Does God love sinners forever? Indeed He does! But He cannot take them to heaven if they are living in rebellion towards Him. Although apart from Him, He will love them forever. I believe that throughout eternity, there will be an empty spot in God’s heart for each person who has turned away from Him and chosen to be lost. So He will do for them the best that He can, given their choice. They will be dead forever. Unconscious. As if they had not been. God is love, and His love is never-ending and never-failing, even for sinners.

That’s why He places before us two destinies—eternal life or eternal death. The choice is ours. Let’s make our decision

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to stand on the side of eternal life with Jesus today! Revelation 21:4 gives us great hope: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.”

I wrote a song entitled “Calvary Says Love to Me.” As Christians, I believe that we should point people to the cross of Calvary when introducing them to Jesus. Scare tactics about an eternally burning hell will not make people surrender their lives to Jesus. It is the love of God that draws the sinner to Him.

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1. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “perish (v.),” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/collegiate/perish>.

2. *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “eternal (adj.),” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/collegiate/eternal>.

3. *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “everlasting (adj.),” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/collegiate/everlasting>.

4. *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “devour (v.),” accessed February 9, 2021, <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/devour>.

5. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (New York: Abdington Press, 1890), s.v. “ever.”

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## What do you know about hell?

- ◆ Is it a real place or a fictional torture chamber?
- ◆ Are its flames burning right now?
- ◆ Why is there confusion about the *what, where, and when* of hell?
- ◆ What does the Bible say about it?
- ◆ Could it be that most Christian churches have a distorted view of hell and God?
- ◆ Do the answers to these questions really make a difference?

The last question is the easiest, but these questions matter a great deal. God's reputation is at stake. Is He a loving God or a cruel torturer? *The Truth About Hellfire* will give you a deeper look into the true character of God, and it will clear up the misrepresentation of His character from a biblical perspective.

The Bible paints a clear picture of hell, and Danny Shelton takes you verse by verse, with an easy-to-understand, commonsense approach to Scripture. He shows how a loving God has provided a place of eternal joy and happiness for those who choose to be with Him. What about those who don't choose God? Danny explains their fate, which is consistent with a God of love.

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