



 **3ABN** BIBLE STUDY GUIDES
Looking Higher

WHEN HELL BURNS UP



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It's just one word: hell. But for many people, it kindles feelings of bitterness and fear as they imagine an angry, unfeeling dictator who claims to be good while endlessly tormenting people he created. What you are about to read from God's Word changes everything for those who see God in that way. The Cross of Jesus says it all, and reveals the truth about how God deals with sinners. On His Cross, Jesus suffered the agony of sin that we deserve, and He died the death that was to be our penalty. When Jesus' disciples laid His body in the tomb, the agony He suffered for sin in our place had come to an end. By this, we know that the penalty for sin will not continue forever. The fire of hell will burn up, and burn out. When the distorted picture of God as a cosmic torturer burns up to nothing, we will be set free to love God without reservation or fear.

1 What does the Bible say about God's love?

2 Thessalonians 3:5 "Now may the Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ."

Psalm 86:15 "But You, O Lord, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy and truth."

Everything God does is from love, including how He deals with sinners. The truth about hell demonstrates that "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

2 What does the Bible say about God's justice?

Revelation 15:3 "... Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!"

Isaiah 61:8 "For I, the Lord, love justice"

Proverbs 17:15 "He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just, both of them alike are an abomination to the Lord."

God upholds justice and expects the same of us. Punishment should fit the crime—"life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Exodus 21:23–24). Jesus' death on the Cross for our sins is absolute confirmation from God that justice must be done, that the penalty for sin must be paid. The truth about hell demonstrates that "righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne ..." (Psalm 89:14).

3 What is the penalty of sin?

Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Life belongs to God. We receive life from Him (1 Timothy 6:13). Those who reject God's government and rebel against His Law demand a life separate from God. By severing their connection from the Source of their being and existence, unrepentant sinners renounce the gift that God alone gives—*eternal life*; and reluctantly, God reclaims what belongs to Him—*life*. "... The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). This consequence is not God's arbitrary punishment, but the honest, somber reality of what sin does.

4 How do the wicked finally receive death as a consequence of their sins?

Revelation 20:9 "... And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them."

Psalm 97:3 "A fire goes before Him, and burns up His enemies round about."

The wicked will be destroyed by fire that comes from God. "For our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 12:29). It will be God's own righ-

teous character that consumes the wicked, because His righteousness is utterly incompatible with sin. God wants us to enjoy His goodness forever, but His righteous character requires nothing less than selfless love. That would be torture to the selfish human heart that loves sin. So in His mercy, God has veiled His consuming glory while He invites us to experience His love revealed in Jesus: "... He who has seen Me has seen the Father ..." (John 14:9). Jesus offers us His righteous character so that we may live and obey Him as "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). Accepting Jesus' character as our own will leave no sin to be consumed when God's righteous judgment—His perfect character—is fully revealed. (See 1 John 3:2–3 and Romans 2:4–5 for additional study.)

5 Who will be destroyed when sin is consumed forever?

Nahum 1:2 "... The Lord will take vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies."

Revelation 20:10 "The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire"

Revelation 20:15 "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire."

God did not create people for the purpose of destruction. We were all meant to live forever as God's friends! But any person who chooses the side of Satan as an enemy of God will receive the same consequence that Satan will receive. "... 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'" (Matthew 25:41).

6 Why must God end the lives of unrepentant sinners?

Ecclesiastes 10:1 "Dead flies putrefy the perfumer's ointment, and cause it to give off a foul odor; so does a little folly to one respected for wisdom and honor."

Even a slight trace of sin will spread destruction again, just as it spread among the angels in Heaven where it began with Lucifer, and then

spread on Earth (Romans 5:12). Sin must be purged completely if God's new Earth is to be called good. Even if it were isolated in a distant location, one tinge of sin would pollute God's restored Universe.

7 Does God take pleasure in the death of the people He made?

Ezekiel 33:11 "... 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die ...?'"

The destruction of sinners is called God's "unusual act" (Isaiah 28:21). It is unusual because God does not desire even one person, whom He values so highly, to be lost. "For He does not afflict willingly ..." (Lamentations 3:33). God's will is for each person to accept His gift of life through Jesus. In a moment of inexpressible sadness, the final removal of sin will cause both tears and relief—tears because lives will be lost forever, and relief because Satan's rebellion will never ravage the perfection of Creation again.

8 How thorough and complete will be the final destruction of unrepentant sinners?

Psalms 37:9 "For evildoers shall be cut off"

Psalms 37:10 "For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; indeed, you will look carefully for his place, but it shall be no more."

Psalms 37:20 "But the wicked shall perish"

Psalms 145:20 "The Lord preserves all who love Him, but all the wicked He will destroy."

Isaiah 1:28 "The destruction of transgressors and of sinners shall be together, and those who forsake the Lord shall be consumed."

Malachi 4:1, 3 "'For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up,' says the Lord of hosts, 'That will leave them neither root nor branch. ... for they shall be ashes'"

The Bible uses unmistakable words to describe the end of unrepentant sinners: "cut off," "be no more," "perish," "destroy," and "consumed," leaving nothing but ashes upon the earth. The wicked are not immortal; God alone has immortality (1 Timothy 6:14–16). Their destruction will be complete in what God's Word describes as "the lake of fire," which is "the second death" (Revelation 20:14). No consciousness or physical body continues in a tortured state because "the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). "... And they shall be as though they had never been" (Obadiah 1:16).



"God's will is for each person to accept His gift of life through Jesus."



“The destruction of the wicked will be a global event ...”

9 Where does the destruction of the wicked take place?

2 Peter 3:10 “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”

Psalms 37:34 “Wait on the Lord, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you shall see it.”

God has not created a mysterious location for the purpose of destruction. The destruction of the wicked will be a global event that begins and ends on this Earth, when the wicked will be consumed. “If the righteous will be recompensed on the earth, how much more the ungodly and the sinner” (Proverbs 11:31).

10 How long will the destruction of the wicked last?

Isaiah 59:18 “According to their deeds, accordingly He will repay, fury to His adversaries, recompense to His enemies ...”

The consequence will match the magnitude of the sin (Luke 12:42–48), “for there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11). By rejecting Jesus’ perfect character and His death to pay for their sin, the wicked choose to bear their full penalty alone and will experience the suffering of destruction “according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Revelation 20:12). Even God’s justice is merciful, continuing only until it has completed its purpose, and no longer. God loves each person He has made; He is not an eternal torturer.

11 What is “eternal fire” or “unquenchable fire?”

Jude 1:7 “As Sodom and Gomorrah ... having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”

The fire that consumed these two wicked cities to ashes is no longer burning, but left them as uninhabited ruins (2 Peter 2:6; Zeph. 2:9; Genesis 19). Jesus confirmed this by saying, “on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:29). The example of eternal fire in Sodom and Gomorrah shows that the wicked will be *completely consumed*, with nothing remaining.

Mark 9:43 “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched.”

Jesus is not encouraging self-mutilation, because no part of the body can *cause* us to sin. Instead, Jesus is teaching that we should do everything in our power to avoid sin, as God’s destroying fire that incinerates sin will be unquenchable. This means it will be neither interrupted nor extinguished until sinners, who refused to let go of their sins, are no more. Like every fire that humans cannot quench, it will finally burn out when its fuel is consumed.

12 What is “everlasting punishment” and “everlasting destruction?”

Matthew 25:46 “And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

2 Thessalonians 1:9 “These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

Everlasting destruction and punishment is not everlasting *destroying* and *punishing*. The punishment is everlasting because its effect will last forever, with no possibility of resurrection. The consequence will be final and will never be undone. The process of destroying will come to a conclusion when sin is eliminated. “... the wicked ... shall be destroyed for ever” (Psalm 92:7, KJV).

“The example of eternal fire in Sodom and Gomorrah shows that the wicked will be completely consumed ...”



13 If the wicked are completely destroyed, why do a few Bible texts say that torment will last forever?

Revelation 20:10 "... And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever."

Revelation 14:11 "And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night ..."

The English word "forever" is translated from Greek and Hebrew words that do not always mean "without an end." We see the end of torment in Revelation 20:9, which says, "And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them." Verse 14 calls the destruction of the wicked "the second death." Several Bible examples explain how the word "forever" is understood. Samuel's mother dedicated him to God by bringing him to the house of the Lord, "that he may appear before the Lord and remain there forever" (1 Samuel 1:22). In other words, he would serve God continuously for the rest of his life. 1 Samuel 1:28 confirms this: "as long as he lives he shall be lent to the Lord." (See Exodus 21:6 and Philemon 1:15 for similar examples of the word "forever" indicating "as long as life lasts.") We use the same expression when we say, "I will treasure this forever," meaning "as long as I live."

The Greek and Hebrew words for "forever" apply over 50 times in the Bible to things that have already come to an end. The smoke rising forever in Revelation 14 is a reference to Isaiah 34, which describes God's destruction of the idolatrous city of Bozrah. Isaiah 34:9–10 says, "its land shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night or day; its smoke shall ascend forever." The image of Bozrah's smoke rising forever indicates that the flames continued to destroy without interruption until nothing was left but the smoke. The biblical understanding of "forever and ever" means "continuously, until it is complete."

14 Are people being destroyed right now?

Job 21:30 "For the wicked are reserved for the day of doom; they shall be brought out on the day of wrath."

2 Peter 3:7 "But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men."

John 12:48 "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him—the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day."

The destruction of the wicked is "reserved" or waiting until the appointed time. The end of all unrepentant sinners will be fair, as they will be destroyed together, at one time (Psalm 37:38). "Upon the wicked He

"Hades is the Greek equivalent of Sheol, and also means the grave."



will rain coals" (Psalm 11:6). The unsaved who have died are waiting in their graves until the day when they will be raised in "the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28–29). At that time, when they see Jesus, they will still be opposed to Him as much as they were in their lives. After God's holy city comes down to Earth from Heaven (Revelation 21:2), the wicked from throughout history will surround it, attacking the city and God's people who have been saved (Revelation 20:9). Their works will confirm God's righteous judgment, and they will then be destroyed by the fire of God's consuming glory (Revelation 20:12–15).

15 Where did the word "hell" originate?

The English word "hell" is associated with ancient pagan ideas of an underworld, dedicated to eternal punishing. The lie that the soul is immortal and that God tortures people forever did not originate from the Bible; it was invented by Satan to attack and slander God's loving character (see Lesson #11 for more information on the soul). The Greek and Hebrew words in the Bible that some versions translate as "hell," give a clear biblical understanding:

The Hebrew word *Sheol* is used 66 times in the Bible. While it is occasionally translated as "hell" or "the pit," it is most often translated as "the grave," where even the righteous go when they die (Genesis 37:35; Job 17:13). Only Jesus is not abandoned in Sheol, because He rose from the grave (Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:27).

Hades is the Greek equivalent of Sheol, and also means "the grave." Hades itself comes to an end and does not last forever (Revelation 20:14).

Tartarus is used one time in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:4), and means "a place of darkness."

Gehenna is used 12 times in the New Testament (Matthew 5:30; Mark 9:43). Gehenna was a valley outside Jerusalem where garbage, dead animals, and unclaimed bodies of the dead were burned. The fire burned continually because there was constantly new supplies of fuel. However, it no longer burns today. Jesus used Gehenna as an illustration of judg-

ment that was familiar to His hearers because it represented complete destruction. Nowhere in the definitions of any of these words do we find the concepts of endless time or ruthless torture.

16 Does God choose who will be destroyed in hell?

Deuteronomy 30:19 “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life”

God honors *our* choice. Through the life and death of Jesus, God pleads with each person to choose to accept Him. He will not violate our free will and force anyone to love Him and receive His love, nor will He compel them to remain in His presence, where they would hate His goodness. God gives ample opportunity for each person to demonstrate what they choose. Will we choose life, which comes from God, or will we rather choose to die? “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (John 3:19).

17 What good comes from the destruction of the wicked?

Revelation 20:14 “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”

When sin is destroyed, death, itself, will be permanently eliminated. There will be no lingering effects of sin that God does not remove. This is excellent news for all who are weary of the pain and destruction caused by sin, and who long for the day when death is no more. “... He will make an utter end of it. Affliction will not rise up a second time” (Nahum 1:9).

18 What has God done to prevent people from being destroyed?

John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”
Jeremiah 35:15 “I have also sent to you all My servants the prophets, rising up early and sending them, saying, “Turn now everyone from his evil way, amend your doings”

There are only two destinies: to perish or receive eternal life. God “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). The irreversible loss of even one life will cause God and His saints great sadness because that person is of immeasurable worth and cannot be replaced. What is a person’s worth? We are worth the infinite value of the life of Jesus, because that is what He willingly sacrificed to give us life. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his

thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon” (Isaiah 55:7).

19 What will happen to this Earth after the wicked are destroyed with fire?

Revelation 21:1 “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away...”

Revelation 21:4 “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

God cares about our pain and our tears, and He promises complete healing. God will make all things new, with no trace of sin remaining. No continuing torment hidden in a remote part of God’s Universe or a lower part of the Earth will raise questions about God’s love and justice. God’s victory over sin will be complete. The conflict will be settled. His love will be proved. His restored Earth will be safe. “... in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Psalm 16:11).

“Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away ...”
Revelation 21:1



WHAT IS THE GOOD NEWS FOR ME IN THE ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION OF SIN?



1. God takes no pleasure in suffering or death. “The Lord ... is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

2. God is fair. “... I will do to them according to their way, and according to what they deserve I will judge them ...” (Ezekiel 7:27). God says, “you shall know that I have done nothing without cause” (Ezekiel 14:23).

3. No one will die for the sin of another person. “... The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son ...” (Ezekiel 18:20).

4. God mercifully allows us to feel some of the consequences of sin now, so we will cling to Him for eternal life. “For His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning” (Psalm 30:5).

5. God’s judgment is true, because He sees what man cannot see. “... For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

6. We do not need to be afraid of God; we can serve Him from love. “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

7. We are offered Christ’s righteousness as a sure protection against death and destruction. “Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death” (Proverbs 11:4).

8. With sin gone forever, we can return to God’s plan for us and enjoy His endless blessings. “...we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve Him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before Him all the days of our life” (Luke 1:74–75).

LESSON SUMMARY

1. God’s character of love and justice is seen in how He deals with sin and sinners.

2. After every person’s choice has been settled in Satan’s rebellion, then God will eradicate every trace of sin from His Universe.

3. Only God has life in Himself to give. Sin separates us from God, and the final consequence will be the second death.

4. Satan, his angels, and unrepentant sinners will be destroyed together because they will no longer be shielded from God’s consuming glory. Their punishment will be according to their works.

5. Hell will not last forever. However, its effect will be eternal because it will not be reversed.

6. God created people to enjoy eternal life by remaining connected with Him. The loss of one person will bring sadness to God.

7. When the Earth is cleansed of sin, God will restore this planet in beauty and perfection.

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