

Understanding Hell

One of the most serious subjects in the Bible is hell—and it's one of the least understood. What DOES the Bible really say about hell? Is there a hell? And how long will it burn? This book takes a practical look at a subject that has puzzled millions of people. Discover what God's Word says about hell, and what Jesus Himself said on the subject. It will not only take the mystery out of the subject of hell, but it will help you understand hell Biblically, and in a way that increases your faith in God!

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John Bradshaw

Understanding



Separating
Fact from Fiction



What the Bible Says About Hell

Have you ever met a witch?

I knew she was different the moment I saw her. But I didn't realize right away just how different she was.

I was participating in an outreach project that had me going door-to-door when I met a young woman named Mary Ellen. As she stood at the door of her apartment in a small Southern town, I noticed right away that Mary Ellen was different.

I wasn't exactly sure how, but she was different. I noticed that her hair was different—not weird, not outlandish, just *different*. Her clothes, her makeup, her jewelry, were all a little...different.

As we spoke, I learned that this very pleasant young woman had been raised a Christian. “But now I don't go to church. Although I do, sort of,” she said.

I wondered what she meant by that, so—standing in the humid heat of a Southern summer afternoon—I asked her to explain. She got right to the point. “I was raised in a hellfire

and brimstone-spitting _____ church [she named the denomination], where the preacher would talk about God roasting and toasting and torturing and frying people in hell for all eternity—for as long as time would last. He said again and again that people would burn and burn and burn, and that their burning would never come to an end. Even old people and little babies.”

Mary Ellen still felt strongly about this, adding, “So I decided that if that’s what God was like, I’d be better off without Him. So that’s why I don’t go to church anymore. Although I do, sort of.”

Mary Ellen could see the questions in my eyes, so she spelled things out for me. “I’m now a witch,” she said.

I hadn’t had anyone tell me *that* before! I glanced around to see if there was a broomstick nearby, but all I saw was her little red car parked outside her front door.

“A witch?” I said, trying to act as though people told me that sort of thing every day. “What kind of witch?”

She explained to me that she met with other witches at organized services (which is

why she “sort of” attended church), and told me some of the details of what she did as a real-life, practicing witch.

What struck me as utterly tragic was that a young woman raised in a Christian church was driven away from church—and away from God—because of a Christian minister’s very typical portrayal of God. Like so many other Christian ministers, the God he spoke of was quite prepared to inflict indescribably painful punishment upon His very own children *forever*, without mercy!

I’ve met so many people who struggle with the idea of God that they were presented with when they were young—a God who consigns unbelievers and the wicked to a place of eternal torment.

What Mary Ellen correctly realized was that forever is a *very* long time, and the idea of the God of Heaven—who pastors and teachers had told Mary Ellen was a God of love—causing people to endure indescribable pain forever, without end, eternally, is an idea that seriously challenges the human psyche.

You don’t have to look very far to find people who have struggled with the idea of a

loving Creator God incinerating people for as long as time lasts. In recent times, the subject hit the headlines when a popular young pastor from Michigan turned widely-held views on their head by suggesting that nobody burns in hell forever.

This pastor said in a *TIME* magazine interview that his thinking on the subject was jarred when someone suggested that Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi, the great Indian pacifist/reformer, was burning in hell. The pastor was deeply troubled by the idea of Gandhi burning in hell for eternity, as well as the idea that anyone can say with any certainty that another individual is in hell. Or that anyone would even go to hell.

I can relate to the pastor's conundrum. As a child educated at a parochial elementary school, I was seriously bothered by the teaching that people would burn in hell forever. This was the same idea that so bothered Mary Ellen, to the extent that she entirely rejected the notion of the existence of God.

"God cannot possibly be like that, therefore there is no God," Mary Ellen reasoned. But perhaps the truth is found neither in the view of

the young pastor nor in Mary Ellen's picture of God. Could the truth about hellfire possibly be found in another, less traditional understanding of Scripture? Perhaps the truth about hell makes sense of what has been a confusing and misunderstood subject.

What if there was a God who was a God of justice *and* love—a God whose expressions of justice demonstrated goodness and mercy instead of cruelty and malice?

There's no question that the disquietude experienced by Mary Ellen and so many others is justified. A God of love, willfully inflicting suffering upon His own children? Forever?

It is a widely-held view with a long history in Christianity. But does it have a history in the Bible? Is the doctrine of eternal hellfire biblical? Is it true?

I once asked a man about his belief in an eternal hell, inquiring why God would burn people forever—without end. His response to me was, "God can do whatever He wants!"

And I believe that. God *can* do whatever He wants. But does He want to do *that*? In spite of the difficulty some have with the thought of people being lost and ultimately perishing,

Jesus Himself made it clear that hell is a real place where something seriously real occurs. Jesus said in Matthew 10:28, “And 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.”

To Jesus, hell was real. Not a symbol or a figure, but a real place where real people were really destroyed. In another place, Jesus said, “It is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.” (Mark 9:47)

There are two main reasons why people today believe in a hell that burns forever, and therefore a God who causes people to suffer for eternity. One reason is that the devil wants people to think of God as cruel and hateful. But the Bible says that “God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

John 3:16 says, “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.”

Satan, the original tyrant, would have people believe that God is malicious rather than loving. Think for a moment: If God really did burn people forever and ever and ever and ever,

He'd be a worse criminal than Adolph Hitler or Joseph Stalin. Instead of being a loving Father, He would be guilty of the worst case of child abuse in the history of the universe.

Another reason for the popularity of the doctrine of an eternally burning hell is the existence of Bible verses that seem to indicate that a forever burning hell exists. For example, Revelation 14:10, 11 says of those who receive the mark of the beast, "The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation. And he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever."

Is that evidence that God burns sinners forever and ever? No, it is not. In fact, it is quite the opposite, and the Bible overwhelmingly and categorically teaches that hellfire—as real as it is—does *not* burn forever. Consider just a few of the verses in the Bible that make this clear:

"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. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.” (Malachi 4:1, 3)

Malachi makes it clear that the wicked will be punished, but that the punishment will not go on forever. Instead, the lost who endure hellfire will be reduced to ashes. In other words, the burning will come to an end. It won't go on eternally.

In Revelation 20:9, the wicked are said to be “devoured” by the fire that comes down from Heaven. Not burned forever, but “devoured.” Even Satan will not burn forever.

In Ezekiel 28:18, God says to Satan, “I will bring forth a fire from the midst of thee, it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee.”

Not even Satan will burn in hell forever. Satan will burn and be reduced to ashes.

In fact, Satan is often depicted as being in charge of hell. Somehow, many Christian teachers have come to the place where they

portray Satan as not only not suffering in hell, but as the one in charge of inflicting punishment upon those who are in hell.

Incredibly, Satan has been portrayed as being God's agent, inflicting conscious eternal punishment upon many of God's creatures for as long as time lasts. Let me ask you: Does it even make sense for Satan to be on God's side, carrying out God's punishment on God's behalf?

The Bible actually tells us directly what hell will be like. We're told in 2 Peter 2:6 that if we want to understand hell, all we have to do is look at what God did at Sodom and Gomorrah.

Owing to the great wickedness of the people living in those cities, God decreed that Sodom and Gomorrah—and all their inhabitants—would be destroyed. And Peter wrote that the fires of hell would do the same work as did the fire and brimstone that rained down from Heaven upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodom and Gomorrah definitely didn't burn forever! You can't go to the Middle East and find the remnants of Sodom and Gomorrah still smoldering. Those cities were destroyed—as Peter said, turned into “ashes.” It couldn't

be clearer. And God's character isn't lowered, isn't dragged into the mud, as though God is brutal and vindictive and loves to cause pain and suffering.

What the Bible teaches is that the wicked will ultimately be blotted out of existence. And as harsh as even that might seem, keep in mind that the wicked wouldn't be happy being saved into God's eternal Kingdom.

People who have learned to rebel against God wouldn't be happy in a place of obedience to—and in harmony with—God. They'd be miserable there. Having rejected God and everything He stands for, the destruction experienced by the wicked is actually poured out in *mercy* toward the lost. It's not only justice but mercy that leads God to destroy the lost.

The very few verses that talk about “forever and ever” aren't talking about hell burning forever. The fact is, these verses are saying that the *effects* of hellfire will last forever. Something far too few people know is that when the Bible says “forever,” it doesn't always mean *forever*. Let me explain.

The prophet Jonah, the renegade prophet who attempted to escape from doing God's will,

found himself alive and in the belly of a whale, or large fish. He wrote in Jonah 2:6 that when he was enclosed within the digestive system of that great sea creature, “the earth and her bars was about me forever.”

Yet he had already stated—in Jonah 1:17—that he was imprisoned inside that living, breathing submarine for “three days and three nights.”

It probably felt like *forever*, but it wasn’t forever in the classical sense of the word. In the case of Jonah and the whale, “forever” meant “for as long as the time lasted.”

And just as Jonah didn’t mean to suggest that once he was swallowed by the marine mammal, he would be held captive within its digestive tract throughout the unceasing ages of eternity, God doesn’t mean for us to think that hellfire is going to incinerate the lost for as long as time should last.

In fact, consider with me what such a thing would actually mean in practical terms. If you’ve ever cooked meat—or more to the point, if you’ve ever *overcooked* meat—then you know what happens to flesh when it comes in contact with heat. It burns away. Fat melts,

and flesh heats up and smokes and ultimately disappears.

For God to actually burn a person forever and ever and ever and ever, He would have to work several miracles simply for the purpose of inflicting torment. The fire God would use to do this work would need to be modified fire—fire that would somehow burn without consuming. God would then need to work *another* miracle in causing burning flesh to somehow be regenerated so it could then be continually burned.

The more one thinks about this scenario, the less thinkable it becomes. God would do that? *Really?*

Let's think of another "forever" passage found in the Bible. The godly mother Hannah, having had her earnest prayers answered, was blessed by God with a baby boy whom she named Samuel. The Bible tells us that Hannah took her precious child to the temple so he could "abide there forever." (1 Samuel 1:22)

Taken at face value, that simply has to mean that Samuel was taken to the temple so he could be there for as long as time lasted—which in turn would mean he would have to be in the

temple even now, thousands of years later! But that's not what Hannah intended by what she said. In 1 Samuel 1:28, Hannah stated that her son would be in the temple "as long as he lives."

"Forever" meant "as long as the time would last." Samuel wouldn't be in the temple for all eternity—just for as long as he served God in that capacity. In the same way, the "forever" hell doesn't burn lost people *forever* as in "time without end." Hell will burn up and burn out. The "forever" part of hell is the consequence for the wicked. Once destroyed from the presence of God, the lost are forever shut out from God's favor and mercy. They're forever out of existence. They will never see life again.

A common argument being used today in favor of an eternally burning hell runs something like this: "Sin against an infinite God demands infinite punishment." One would imagine that being blotted out of existence forever—with no hope of recreation or readmittance into the presence of God—is about as infinite as punishment could possibly be.

In fact, the Bible states in the plainest of terms that "the wages of sin is death." (Romans

6:23) And in the book of Revelation, in the same passage that talks about certain entities being tormented in the lake of fire “day and night forever and ever,” it describes the lake of fire as causing “the second death.” (Revelation 20:10, 14) Hellfire causes death, not eternal torment!

These words are among the clearest you can find in the entire canon of Scripture. “The wages of sin is death.” Hellfire is “the second death.” And yet Christians the world over have been educated—or miseducated—to believe that God is going to treat those who offend Him in a worse way than Stalin or Hitler treated those who fell foul of their wrath.

As brutal as Stalin, Hitler, and any number of other despots and dictators were, at least it can be said that their unfortunate victims were ultimately put out of their misery. Yet God—who is love—is portrayed as a brutal, unfeeling, callous brute.

The doctrine of an eternally burning hell is a gross attack on the true nature of the character of God. While hell is a sober reality, the common misrepresentation of God’s character as portrayed by the doctrine of conscious eternal

torment distorts the biblical view of who God really is.

And a tragic result of this is that multitudes are driven away from the true God by a portrayal of a god who simply doesn't exist.

Michael and several of his friends were attending the funeral of a friend when the minister performing the funeral service addressed them directly during his funeral sermon: "Your friend is now burning in hell, and he will burn there forever. As long as time lasts, your sinful friend is going to be suffering excruciating pain in the flames of hell. It's too late for your friend, but it's not too late for you! Repent while you still have time!"

It's no surprise that the remarks uttered by this mistaken minister did not induce Michael and his friends to repent. Instead, Michael made the decision to turn away from God, and before long, he was deeply immersed in the occult. It would be 20 years before Michael would step back into a church.

While not all people exposed to this false teaching are driven to the same extremes as Michael and Mary Ellen, many people who can no longer believe in the god of eternal torment

give up believing in God altogether. The truth about hellfire paints an infinitely better picture of God than the harmful error of an eternally burning hell. While a hell hot enough to reduce sinners to ashes—a hell that blots sinners out of existence—is still a very serious proposition, it is good to know that God is not a tyrant who tortures the lost. He's not the ogre that so many people have believed Him to be.

In 2 Peter 3:9, we learn that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

In Ezekiel 18:32, God says, “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.” It is God's desire that all be saved and none be lost. But God cannot—will not—force anyone's choice in the matter of their salvation. Jesus died on the Cross as a sacrifice for our sins, and as He did so, He revealed what the Father is really like.

God is willing to do whatever He can to draw people to salvation, and as helpful as many preachers have found an eternally burning hell to be in making appeals and altar calls, God prefers to use love as the primary motivator in the plan of salvation.

Speaking of His dealings with Israel, God said, “I drew them with...bands of love.” (Hosea 11:4) If the prospect of total annihilation in hell and forever banishment from God’s presence isn’t awful enough to help a sinner understand the dire results of rejecting God’s love, turning up the heat of hell isn’t likely to genuinely transform that sinner into a saint.

While hell is not going to burn forever, the Bible does not indicate exactly how long it will take for the lake of fire to do its work. Just as there is no biblical reason to suggest hell will burn for as long as time lasts, there is also no biblical reason that suggests the fires of hell will do their work in mere moments. It isn’t known how long hell will burn. Surely it will burn long enough.

I’ve been asked, “So if hell doesn’t burn forever, what incentive is there for a person to be saved? It doesn’t sound so bad.”

I’ve been burned before—just very minor burns—and it wasn’t pleasant. This will not be pleasant. But far worse than any physical punishment a person may endure is the separation that will occur between a sinner and God—between a sinner and life—when

hell consumes the lost. Imagine realizing that you are lost. Forever lost! Never again to draw breath. Never again to see a loved one. Never to experience Heaven and the presence of God. That overwhelming anguish would be the very worst part of the pain of hellfire.

One reason we don't know how long hell is going to burn is that hellfire will destroy more than unrepentant, rebellious sinners. We read in Revelation 20:9 that hell will destroy people who are "on the breadth of the earth."

Attesting to this is what Peter wrote in 2 Peter 3:7. "But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men."

Hellfire isn't only going to destroy sinners. The fire that God sends from Heaven (Revelation 20:9) will cleanse the entire earth before it is finally recreated for God's people to enjoy throughout eternity. (Revelation 21:1)

The evidence of sin so readily seen in this dilapidated world will be obliterated by the consuming fires of hell. Pollution and decay and ugliness—every suggestion of sin will be erased before God recreates the Earth in

heavenly perfection. We can even expect that the evidence of mankind's excursions outside our planet's atmosphere will also be removed: footprints on the moon, space junk, satellites, all eradicated as even the "heavens" are cleansed by fire.

God cleansed the Earth once before. In the days of Noah, He cleansed it with water. (Genesis 7:11) But even though almost the entire population of the Earth was eliminated, sin managed to again rear its ugly head, and before long, the planet was again plunged into the depths of sin.

But after hell has done its work, "affliction shall not rise up the second time." (Nahum 1:9) The world will be purified—finally and forever—and the very last trace of sin will be gone.

And if you've ever been concerned that someone you know could be in hell right now, you'll be glad to discover that *nobody* is burning in hell at this moment. Jesus taught that hellfire doesn't occur until "the end of the world." (Matthew 13:39)

Explaining the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus said, "As therefore the tares are

gathered and burned in the fire, so shall it be in the end of this world.” (Matthew 13:40)

Just a few verses later, Jesus stated, “So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:49, 50)

The Bible is unambiguous on this subject. John 5:28, 29 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 forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

The resurrection of life takes place when Jesus returns. (1 Thessalonians 4:16) The second resurrection, or the “resurrection of damnation,” occurs at the end of Revelation’s 1,000 years. (Revelation 20:5) It’s simply not possible for anyone to be suffering in hell right now.

God is not a maniac. God is not a viciously cruel despot. God is love. God loves you. God loves the worst sinner who ever lived, and He has no part in the awful idea that teaches He

will burn people in torment for as long as time lasts.

This idea is an invention of the devil, made popular by a church that borrowed unbiblical teachings, and by preachers trying to scare people into Heaven. Sadly, the false doctrine of an eternally burning hell has frightened multitudes away from God and into the arms of the enemy of souls.

The best news of all is that no one needs to experience hellfire and eternal separation from God. In 1 John 5:12, it says, “He that hath the Son hath life, and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.”

If by faith you possess Jesus in your heart, you can know that you have life. Why would we not choose an offer like that? What in this world could be so attractive that it would lead us to release our hold on Jesus and relinquish everlasting life?

Far better to honor God, to trust His Son, to have faith in Jesus as the Savior from sin, and to live in the joy and peace that come from knowing salvation is secure.

A young woman just 18 years of age was driving home late one night after spending time

with her boyfriend. For unknown reasons, she lost control of her car on the freeway, and the resulting accident trapped her in her vehicle. She was conscious, she was not drunk, she was not high on drugs and she was not injured. But she was trapped. And the vehicle was on fire.

Desperate rescuers did everything they could to free the young woman, but the heat of the fire drove them back. At one stage, she grabbed the arm of one of her would-be rescuers and said, “Don’t leave me! I’m going to die here!”

But they could not free her. One man tried so hard to save her that he lost some of the flesh on his hand due to the intense heat. In spite of their heroic efforts, those who tried to save the young woman were defeated because her feet were trapped in the wrecked vehicle and she could not be freed.

Long ago, there was a wreck in the Garden of Eden. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, ate forbidden fruit in an act of disobedience toward God. As a result, sin entered the world, and the human family was trapped and doomed to die.

But with a heart full of love for His wayward children, Jesus volunteered to die on

an old rugged Cross so that we might live. He lost more than a part of His hand. Jesus gave His *life*. And He did it for you, so that you might live with Him forever.

Will you respond to God's great love today? You will be responding to a God of love, not a God of spite and malice. A God who wants you to be saved—not lost. A God who was willing to pay the ultimate price so that you could be rescued and be set free.

The liberating truth about hell paints an accurate picture of God. He is just, but not tyrannical. Firm, but not hateful. Pure, and not unreasonable. And willing to do all He could to give you the gift of everlasting life. I hope you'll trust in that God of love today!

But What About...?

The Bible presents a very clear picture of hell, demonstrating that the fires of hell do not burn forever but instead reduce sinners to ashes while cleansing and purifying the Earth in preparation for it being recreated.

Yet as clear as the Bible is on the subject, it isn't uncommon for someone to read clear biblical statements and say, "But what about...?"

Let's consider together some of the "what abouts."

What about the people who have claimed to have visited hell?

My wife and I were traveling across the United States when we found a number of pink-colored tracts jammed into every crack and small opening inside a telephone booth in Northern Idaho.

Some kind soul had evidently been doing his or her missionary duty. Not wanting anyone to endure the horrors of an eternally burning hell, he or she had distributed a number of these tracts with the apparent intention of convincing people to turn to Jesus.

The tracts recounted the experience of someone who claimed to have visited hell. In fact, this individual had been given a guided tour of hell by Jesus Himself! There's a temptation to think that if the person in question actually

went to hell, and saw hell, and felt the heat of its flames, and was escorted around hell by Jesus, then there absolutely must be a hot place called hell. After all, someone went there. So what about that?

There are several things to consider. First, it would seem unlikely that Jesus is going to take people on a guided tour of hell. However, a student of the Bible isn't going to be satisfied with "seems unlikely." We want to know what the Bible says.

The tracts my wife and I found claimed that Satan and his army of demons cause the lost to suffer in hell—inflicting great pain and agonizing torture. The tracts stated that hell is populated by rats and snakes, and that people there are wearing clothes, screaming in pain, talking, and enduring the most grotesque forms of suffering. Can any of this be true?

Firstly, let's keep in mind that *nowhere at all* does the Bible suggest that Satan and his demons will be torturing people in hell. In fact, the Bible categorically states that this is an impossibility.

As we noted earlier, Ezekiel 28:18 says, "I will bring forth a fire from the midst of thee,

it shall devour thee, and I will bring thee to ashes upon the earth in the sight of all them that behold thee.”

Satan and the other fallen angels will themselves suffer the punishment of the fires of hell. They will not be inflicting pain and misery upon the lost.

Second, there will be no rats and snakes in the fires of hell. At least, rats and snakes are included in that which is going to be completely destroyed by the flames of hell. Remember 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.”

Snakes and rats aren’t going to somehow be spared from the destruction that will come upon the world.

Which brings us to another point. The tracts I found presented hell as being in the center of the Earth. Jesus was guiding the missionary on a tour of a subterranean hell, located deep in the heart of our planet.

Is hell in the center of the Earth? Absolutely not! Revelation 20:9 identifies our entire planet as being subjected to the cleansing fires of hell.

The lost are depicted as being on the “breadth of the Earth,” not deep in the heart of the Earth.

Additionally, clothes aren’t going to survive the flames of hell, the lost aren’t going to be carrying on conversations in hell, and God isn’t going to stand idly by while his children—albeit His lost children—are mercilessly tortured for as long as time lasts.

This picture of hell does not originate with the Bible, but was created by Satan himself, for the purpose of projecting his own hateful character on to God, and bringing human beings to view a loving Heavenly Father as being as cruel as Satan.

So what should we make of people who claim they’ve been taken to hell? Kindly, we might recognize that few people are always right, and that those who claim to have visited an actual hell in the heart of the Earth—though they may be sincere—are mistaken.

What about the rich man and Lazarus?

The story of the rich man and Lazarus has perplexed many people. Here, Jesus teaches that a wealthy Jewish man was consigned to a

hot hell, while a beggar named Lazarus enjoyed the blessings of Heaven that Jesus' hearers no doubt expected the rich man to experience. The story of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable, and was not shared as a definitive exposition on the afterlife. In fact, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus *has* to be a parable, unless we're willing to accept that saved people find heavenly rest and comfort in Abraham's bosom; that saved people and lost people are able to communicate, even though some are in Heaven and some are in hell; and that a person in hell would truly find relief from their sufferings by receiving the moisture carried to them on a dampened fingertip.

As we read this story found in Luke 16:19-31, we realize that rather than teaching about the afterlife, Jesus was talking about salvation in *this* life. Jesus made several key points in this parable, in the hope that His Jewish listeners would be led to repentance:

1. Jesus was teaching His hearers that just as wealth was not necessarily evidence of divine favor, so was a lack of wealth not evidence of divine disfavor.

2. Jesus taught in this parable that salvation does not come by inheritance. A thought often discussed in the New Testament is that Jews felt as though their family tree somehow earned them favor with God (see Matthew 3:9; Matthew 8:11; John 8:33 and Galatians 3:9, 29). In this parable, the rich man is called from the midst of his difficulty to “Father Abraham.” (Luke 16:24) One might have expected him to call to God instead.

3. Through this parable, Jesus was urging his listeners to exercise faith in the writings of Moses, who “wrote of Me.” (John 5:46)

The rich man claimed that his brothers would repent if Lazarus returned from the dead and testified to them. The response to this plea is instructive. “Abraham” stated that if the man’s brothers didn’t hear Moses and the prophets, then they wouldn’t even be persuaded by a visitor from the dead.

In saying this, Jesus was predicting two events. One was the resurrection of another Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Jesus would raise Lazarus from the dead not long after He taught this parable, and as a result—far

from believing in Jesus due to this incredible miracle—the chief priests actually plotted to have Lazarus murdered! (John 12:10) The other event Jesus was forecasting was His own resurrection. Even the resurrection of Jesus could not convince hard-hearted men and women to embrace the true Messiah of prophecy, of whom Moses Himself had prophesied (Deuteronomy 18:15; Acts 3:22 and Acts 7:37).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus was told for very important reasons. To teach about the nature of the afterlife was not one of them. People listening to Jesus' story—of two men communicating while one was in Heaven and one was in hell—knew that the language Jesus was using was so exaggerated that He was obviously speaking in symbols and shadows.

But what about where the Bible talks about everlasting punishment?

That would be Matthew 25:46. But notice as you read the verse that it talks about everlasting *punishment*, not everlasting *punishing*. The punishment and its effects would certainly be everlasting. The punishing would not.

What about the fact that there are some things about God we can't understand, but we just have to accept?

That's fine when you're talking about the virgin birth or changing water into wine. But hell is something we *can* understand much about. We know that God is love. We know that God is not a tyrant or a torturer. And we know that because God is love, even hell has to be a manifestation of His love.

Causing torment and agony for as long as time should last is not a manifestation of the love of God. Ridding the universe of sin—blotting the impenitent out of existence and returning the Earth to its Edenic splendor—is a manifestation of the love of God.

Certainly, if God were to burn sinners forever, that would be His prerogative and His children would simply have to agree that God must know best. But it has never been in God's plan to reserve a portion of the universe as an eternal torture chamber. It wouldn't be possible to have a perfect universe if there were a cesspool filled with misery and agony and despair—forever.

What would God have to gain from hellfire that never stops burning? Nothing at all. In fact, such a place would vindicate the devil.

In Heaven long ago, Satan rebelled against God. (Revelation 12:7) As soon as he got to Earth, Satan misrepresented God and lied about His character. (Genesis 3:1-5)

A hell that burns eternally is simply another one of Satan's lies designed to misrepresent the character of God. It is calculated to present the character of God as being no better than the character of Satan.

What you choose to believe about hell is what you choose to believe about the character of God. What is God really like? Is He really like *that*?

Many people have rejected God based on what they've been told about hell. In so many cases, people simply have not been told the truth. The God rejected by many people is a God I can't blame them for rejecting, because such a God doesn't exist!

John got it right when he wrote in 1 John 1:4—twice—that “God is love.” (1 John 4:8, 16) Correctly understood, hellfire reveals that!



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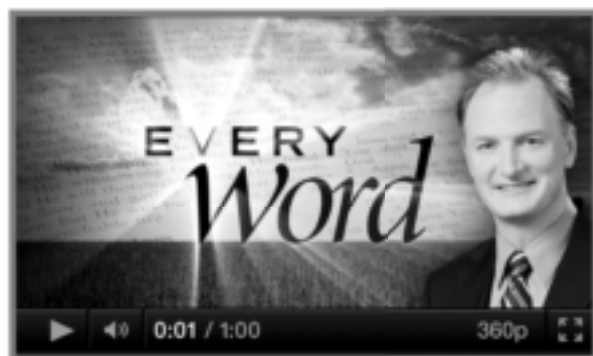
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