

The Truth About Hell

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | September 2, 2021



Perhaps no doctrine has done more to turn people away from God than the teaching of an eternally burning hell. The idea that God is love but if you don't love Him, He will torture you for all eternity in fire has turned millions against our loving Creator.

The Anglican church officially rejected the doctrine of an eternally burning hell last century. And many evangelical Christians have joined theologian Edward Fudge, who has also rejected an eternally burning hell. In his book *The Fire that Consumes*, he takes the view that the fires burn up and annihilate the wicked rather than torment them for all eternity.

Seventh-day Adventists also teach the ultimate annihilation of the wicked, that the fires burn only long enough to consume sinners and then they go out.

Have you ever struggled with the question of hell? How could a God who is love create a place of torture and torment for those we are told He loves? Well, the good news is that God is love and that nothing in Scripture contradicts this. We don't need to reject the Bible to believe God is love; in fact, rightly understood, the texts about consuming fire are an amazing affirmation of God's love.

The Consuming Fire

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah describes this eternal fire:

“The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: ‘Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burning?’” (Isaiah 33:14).

What is being described? Doesn’t it sound like hellfire?

But the question Isaiah poses is: Who can live in this fire? Who will spend eternity in the flames? And the prophet gives a shocking answer:

“He who walks righteously and speaks what is right, who rejects gain from extortion and keeps his hand from accepting bribes, who stops his ears against plots of murder and shuts his eyes against contemplating evil!” (v. 15).

What? It is the righteous who will live forever in this fire—and not the wicked? If this doesn’t make sense to you, don’t worry; when I first read this passage, it didn’t compute for me either, not until I searched the entire Bible, allowing the evidence I uncovered within its pages to form my conclusions.

And what does Scripture reveal?

- When God spoke to Moses from within the bush, the bush burned but did not get consumed (Exodus 3:2-4, Acts 7:30-36).
- When God came to Mt. Sinai, His presence was described as a “consuming fire,” but the elements did not melt (Exodus 24:17).
- When Solomon’s Temple was dedicated, the priests couldn’t enter because the brightness of God’s fiery glory was too great, but the temple did not burn down (2 Chronicles 5:14, 7:1-3).
- Before his fall, Lucifer walked among the “fiery stones” of God’s presence (Ezekiel 28:14, 16).
- God takes His throne and “rivers of fire” come out from Him, yet billions stand in this fire without any harm (Daniel 7:9, 10).
- Prior to his crucifixion, in a body still subject to death, Jesus was bathed in heavenly fire, yet no harm came to Him. His clothes didn’t even get scorched (Matthew 17:2).

Hebrews plainly tells us that “our God is a consuming fire” (12:29). The Song of Solomon states: “Love is as strong as death, its jealousy unyielding as the grave. It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame. Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away” (8:6, 7).

The Big Deception

What does this mean? The lie that Satan has foisted upon us is this: The place you don’t want to go, the place you don’t want to be, is the place of eternal burning and consuming fire. But, as amazing as it may

seem, *that place is God's very presence!* The righteous will spend eternity bathed in the flames of God's fiery presence. But the wicked will be consumed in that same eternal fire.

When Christ returns, He doesn't come veiling His glory but in the full splendor of His holy, loving, righteous self—brighter than the sun! Rivers of blazing love surging out from Him, the earth will be bathed in His glory (Isaiah 6:3). The righteous will be transformed by the life-giving fires of His love, just as Moses was transformed after being in God's presence. Remember, he came down off the mountain with his face radiating heavenly fire. But Moses wasn't in pain. He didn't have third-degree burns. His whiskers weren't even singed!

But when the children of Israel—unrepentant, still filled with sin and selfishness—saw Moses' face, they shrank back and begged him to wear a veil. They couldn't stand the heavenly light (Exodus 34:33-35).

The fire of infinite love is painful only when the mind is not healed; the guilty conscience, the unregenerate heart that prefers lies and selfishness, cannot tolerate the light of love and truth. "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

This is why the Bible describes the wicked as being destroyed by the brightness of Christ's coming (2 Thessalonians 2:8). But how could this be? How can a fire that doesn't burn up bushes or buildings or faces consume the wicked in the end? What kind of fire does this?

This is the fire of love and truth that glorifies God's people while it cleanses the earth of sin.

A fire that consumes sin? What is that? It is not the fire of combustion, which burns material substances—things made out of molecules, like our homes, furniture, and books—for sin is not made of physical matter. Sin is made of ideas, thoughts, concepts, attitudes, beliefs. At its core, sin is composed of two elements: lies (Satan is the "father of lies," John 8:44) and selfishness. Fires of combustion don't destroy ideas. Fires that burn material substances don't consume lies and selfishness.

The Burning Truth

So, what does consume a lie? The truth! And what does consume selfishness? Love! And the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of both truth and love. Amazingly, when the Spirit fell at Pentecost, they all witnessed two streams of fire over each person (Acts 2:3), yet no one got burned. The building didn't burn down. Their clothes didn't ignite. It was their hearts and minds that were cleansed by that fire—the fire of love and truth. Distortions about God were removed from their minds; envy, strife, and selfishness were burned out of their hearts. Love blazed in them again! Just as was promised, they were baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire—the fire of love and truth (Matthew 3:11).

But if the fires are the fires of truth and love, why do the wicked suffer and die when these fires burn freely? "They perish because they refused to *love the truth* and so be saved" (2 Thessalonians 2:10).

What happens in the mind of those who reject truth and cling to falsehood when the truth of God comes shining through? They suffer torment of mind, anguish of heart, and suffering of psyche. And what happens to those whose hearts are filled with selfishness when the pure, undiluted love of God comes blazing through? "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink [love him]. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Proverbs 25:21, 22; Romans 12:20). What

happens in the mind of the unhealed when they meet pure love and truth face to face? The terrible suffering that unremedied sin causes.

We can never avoid the truth. We can only delay the day we deal with it. We can deal with the truth about ourselves, our histories, our characters, our mistakes here and now, under God's grace, and experience forgiveness, healing, restoration, regeneration, and ultimately eternal life. Or we can delay dealing with the truth—put it off, deny, externalize, project, blame, and scapegoat others. But if we don't deal with the truth now, one day when Christ returns, such people will come face to face with ultimate truth.

On that day, what will it be like for that abusive mother, for that sexually deviant father, to look into the mirror of undiluted truth and see their own selves as they really are—no self-distortion, no lies—just the plain truth? What will it be like for such a person to have full awareness of what their actions did to their child? What will it be like to have this truth sear through their mind in front of the entire universe?

Yes, there will be terrible suffering in the flames of God's love, but it will not be inflicted as an external penalty. That suffering will not be the torture of melting flesh but the unavoidable torture of the soul that unremedied sin inflicts. Just as Moses came out from God's presence with love and favor in his heart, yet the people shrank back seeking to hide from his face, so too, when Christ arrives, He returns with love and favor, but those solidified in the lies about God cannot stand the light of love and truth, so they run to hide from His face (Revelation 6:15, 16).

Nadab and Abihu: Picture of the End

The Bible confirms that the fire of God's presence consumes sin, not material substances. God has also plainly demonstrated that the "consuming fire" that destroys the wicked is not a fire that burns elements. In Leviticus, we read about Aaron's sons, who as priests brought unauthorized fire before the Lord:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ... Moses summoned Mishael and Elzaphan, sons of Aaron's uncle Uzziel, and said to them, "Come here; carry your cousins outside the camp, away from the front of the sanctuary." So they came and carried them, **still in their tunics**, outside the camp, as Moses ordered (Leviticus 10:1-5, emphasis mine).

The fire of the Lord "consumed" them—yet their bodies weren't charred and their tunics were still intact.

This is what happens to the wicked in the end. They are "tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb" (Revelation 14:10). Notice, it is in Jesus' presence where they suffer. What about the term "burning sulfur"? It comes from the Greek *thion* and means the divine fire—or the fire of God's presence.

Eventually, after all the wicked have been consumed but their physical bodies are not destroyed, as it

was with Nadab and Abihu, when only dead bodies of the unrepentant remain, then the fires of combustion commence—spoken of by Peter, in which the elements melt in the terrible heat, consuming all that remains. Then the earth is recreated free from all sin—a new earth, the home of the righteous (2 Peter 3:12, 13).

But Revelation also tells us:

And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever (14:11).

Smoke is what is left *after* something is burned. This “smoke” symbolizes the memory, the lessons learned of what unremedied sin does to sinners—it torments and destroys. This lesson will never be forgotten by the universe. The righteous will remember for all eternity that the wicked suffered and died, not at God’s hand, but because of their condition and because they refused to allow God to heal them. The righteous will remember for all eternity that every person who is eternally lost is lost only because they prefer non-existence to living in a universe of love and truth.

What incredibly good news that God is not the source of suffering and death! The Bible is proved true that it is sin that causes death (Romans 6:23; James 1:15; Galatians 6:8). What incredibly good news that because these truths are revealed and will never be forgotten, sin will never arise again and God’s universe and every saved individual will live in eternal peace, health, happiness, and security, living and thriving in the consuming fires and eternal burnings of God’s very presence!