

Jesus Christ said, "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow is the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." Matthew 7:13,14. There are only two ways. One leads to life. The other leads to destruction. What does the Bible say about the destruction of the wicked? What and where is hell?

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WICKED

The fact that the wicked will be completely destroyed is emphatically stated in many Bible verses:

1. **THE WICKED "WILL PERISH"** : "But the wicked will perish." Psalm 37:20. (Also read Psalm 92:9. Compare John 3:16 and Romans 2:12.) To perish is to die, be destroyed, waste away or come to nothing.
2. **THE WICKED "WILL VANISH"** : "The *LORD*'s enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish." Psalm 37:20. "But may sinners vanish from the earth and the wicked be no more." Psalm 104:35. (Also read Isaiah 5:24; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 and 2:8.)
3. **THE WICKED WILL "VANISH LIKE SMOKE"** : "But the wicked will perish... they will vanish - vanish like smoke." Psalm 37:20. (Also read Psalm 68:2.)
4. **THE WICKED "WILL BE CUT OFF"** : "Those the *LORD* blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off." Psalm 37:22. (Also read Psalm 37:28,38 and Proverbs 2:22.) The Hebrew word karath, which is translated "cut off," means to be cut down and destroyed as the wicked were by the waters of the flood. (See Genesis 9:11.)
5. **THE WICKED "WILL BE DESTROYED"** : "But all sinners will be destroyed." Psalm 37:38. "He will repay them for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness; the *LORD* our God will destroy them." Psalm 94:23. "All the wicked he will destroy." Psalm 145:20. (Also read Isaiah 13:9-11; Matthew 10:28 and Revelation 11:18.)
6. **THE WICKED WILL BE CONSUMED BY FIRE**: "The *LORD* reigns... Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side." Psalm 97:1-3. (Compare Psalm 68:2; 112:10; Isaiah 33:14; Hebrews 10:27 and 2 Peter 3:7,10-12.) The wicked "will be consumed like dry stubble" (Nahum 1:10) and "trouble will not come a second time." (Nahum 1:9.) For fire to burn, something must be consumed or devoured. The fire that destroys the wicked will not keep burning after the wicked have been consumed.

Compare these clear statements, by the Psalmist,

with the next three points:

7. **THE WICKED "WILL DIE"** : "The soul who sins is the one who will die." Ezekiel 18:4. (Also read Ezekiel 18:26; Luke 19:27; John 8:21; Romans 6:23 and Revelation 21:8.) "With the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked." Isaiah 11:4. To die means to perish or to cease to live. To suggest that death for the wicked really means some form of eternal life is like calling darkness light.
8. **THE WICKED WILL BE DEVoured** : As the New Jerusalem descends from heaven to earth at the end of the 1,000 years, Satan and the wicked will march to capture it. Fire will then come down and devour them. John records what he was shown in vision, "... fire came down from heaven and devoured them." Revelation 20:9.
9. **THE WICKED "WILL BE ASHES"** : "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the *LORD* Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them... then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,' says the *LORD* Almighty." Malachi 4:1,3. (Also read 2 Peter 2:6.)

The destruction caused by hell-fire will be complete. No wonder Jesus Christ said, "It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." Matthew 5:30. He also said, "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of those who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28 NIV. Jesus Christ made it clear that the fires of hell will totally destroy the whole wicked person.

WHEN WILL THE WICKED BE DESTROYED?

Jesus Christ told the parable of the weeds. (Matthew 13:24-30) Later His disciples came and asked Him to explain the parable. "He answered, 'The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are the angels.'" Matthew 13:37-39.

Christ then explained what would happen to the wicked at "the end of the age." (Matthew 13:39.) He said, "As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." Matthew 13:40-43.

Jesus Christ said that the burning of sinners will take place at "the end of the age." Matthew 13:39. He clearly stated that the wicked are "in their graves" and that they will "rise to be condemned." (John 5:28,29.) From these words of Christ, two points are clear: (1) the *WICKED* who have died *ARE NOT IN HELL-FIRE NOW*, and (2) the *WICKED* who have died *ARE WAITING IN THEIR GRAVES*. Obviously, the teaching that hell is already burning now and that the wicked go there one by one at their death is in contradiction with the clear teachings of Jesus Christ. Such a concept also calls the justice of God into question, for if it were true then millions would burn longer than others, not because they are greater sinners, but because they had the misfortune of being born earlier in history.

WHERE WILL HELL-FIRE BE?

An examination of the events that will take place at "the end of the age" (Matthew 13:39 NIV) reveals that hell-fire will burn on this earth at the end of the 1,000 years.

Summary of End Events in Revelation 19:11-21:5...

1. The second coming of Jesus Christ will mark the beginning of the 1,000 years. (Revelation 19:11-21.)
2. The righteous dead will be resurrected at that time. (Revelation 20:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:17,17.)
3. The righteous living, with the resurrected believers, will be caught up to be with Jesus Christ at that time. (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17.)
4. The living wicked will be destroyed by the glory of Christ's second coming. (2 Thessalonians 1:8-10. Compare Revelation 6:12-17.)
5. The wicked who have died prior to the return of the Lord will remain in their graves until the 1,000 years are over. (Revelation 20:5.)
6. During the 1,000 years the earth will be desolate with no living human on it. Believers will have been caught up and unbelievers will have been destroyed. Satan will be bound with no one to tempt. (Revelation 20:1,2.)
7. At the end of the 1,000 years, God will return to earth with His people and the New Jerusalem. (Revelation 20:9,10; 21:2.)
8. God will raise the wicked to life to face *JUDGEMENT*. (Revelation 20:5,12. Compare John 5:28,29.)
9. God will destroy the wicked and Satan with *FIRE* that falls upon the earth. This is the second death. (Revelation 20:9,10,14; 21:8. Compare 2 Peter 3:7,10-13.)
10. God will then create a new heaven and earth. (Revelation 21:1-5. Compare 2 Peter 3:13.)

The wicked will be punished for their sins after the 1,000 years. (Also see Ezekiel 28:18; Proverbs 11:31 and Malachi 4:1-3.) It will be at "the end of the age" (Matthew 13:39) that Jesus Christ will say to the wicked, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Matthew 25:41. The Bible does not speak of the wicked dropping into some super-heated hell-fire at death. The devil will be in the fire, not in control of the fire. Nor does the Bible mention purgatory or limbo.

WHAT ABOUT THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN & LAZARUS?

Some believe that the figurative parable of the rich man and Lazarus supports the idea of a hell burning right now, receiving its victims one by one at death. However, such a conclusion from this parable would contradict the plain teachings of Jesus Christ in Matthew 13:36-43, John 5:28,29 and Revelation 19:11-21:5.

The story of the wicked rich man and the righteous poor man, Lazarus, is found in Luke 16:19-31. Although the rich man is unnamed in the Bible, he is sometimes called Dives for that is the Latin word for "rich man." (Luke 16:22 Vulgate.) The Lazarus of this parable is not the man Jesus Christ raised from the dead. Consider these questions:



Are we to accept every detail of a figurative parable as reflecting the true teachings of Jesus Christ?

Parables usually focused upon one point of truth being taught. Every detail of the parables did not always reflect the truth that Jesus Christ was teaching. For example, in the story of the shrewd manager, which is in the same chapter as the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the manager is commended for forging some invoices of sale at the expense of his employer who was about to fire him. (See Luke 16:1-15.) This was part of the story Jesus told. However, it should not be concluded that Christ was teaching such dishonesty. Also, with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, every detail does not reflect the teachings of Christ. However, the conclusion and the plain interpretation of the parable reflect the teachings of Christ. The clear teaching of this parable is, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Luke 16:31.



Are we to accept as literal all aspects of a figurative parable?

Many parables have figurative aspects to them that are not necessarily true-to-life when taken literally. Those who wish to understand every aspect of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus as literal are not only faced with a contradiction of the clear words of Jesus Christ in Matthew 13:36-43, John 5:28,29 and Revelation 19:11-21:5, they are also faced with other contradictions as well.

If the parable is understood to teach that at death the wicked go straight to hell and the righteous go straight to heaven then it must be understood that

hell and heaven are so close that the wicked and the righteous can not only see each other, but call out to each other. (See Luke 16:23-31.) Could anyone imagine heaven being heaven if the righteous could see and call out to loved ones and friends who were writhing in the burning flames of hell for having rejected Jesus Christ? Could you imagine enjoying heaven if the anguished cries of the wicked, including former loved ones, could always be heard?

If every aspect of the parable is to be understood literally then the body of the wicked goes straight to hell and the body of the righteous goes straight to heaven at death. In the parable the wicked rich man calls out to Abraham. "Have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire." Luke 16:24. Some attempt to solve this contradiction by disregarding this detail of the story and suggesting that only the spirit, not the body, of the rich man was in hell. However, the story speaks of the body of the wicked and the righteous and Jesus said, "A spirit hath not flesh and bones." Luke 24:39 KJV. We know from observation that the body of the person who dies is not in hell or heaven, but is in the grave and returns to the dust. We are faced with contradictions if we try to understand every detail of a figurative parable in a literal sense.



Are we to understand this parable to teach ideas, if taken literally that contradict the plain teachings of Jesus Christ?

Jesus Christ taught that every person will receive their reward at "the end of the age." Matthew 13:39. (Compare Matthew 16:27.) Christ said, "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." John 5:28,29. The wicked are not now in hell-fire. They are waiting in their graves until they are resurrected to be condemned. Every detail of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus should not be taken literally.



What is the purpose of the parable?

Christ used this parable, which was apparently also a story that was being told by other people at the time, to illustrate one main point. (See the writings of Josephus, Discourse to the Greeks Concerning Hades, written shortly after the

crucifixion of Jesus Christ, for evidence that the story was one being told by the Jews of the day.) Jesus Christ did not tell the story to teach about death and hell-fire. He told the story to illustrate that the Word of God, in the writings of Moses and the Prophets, is truth. If a person refuses to be guided by Scripture there is no hope. (See Luke 16:29,31.) The writings of the Bible tell us about death and human destiny. To take every detail of the parable literally would be to make the parable contradict the teachings of the Word of God that is being upheld by the parable.

HOW LONG WILL HELL-FIRE BURN?

A careful reading of Revelation 20:14-21:5 reveals that when hell-fire has cleansed the earth of Satan, his angels, sin and sinners, then God will recreate this earth for His people and Himself. We can compare these words with those recorded in the prophecy of Malachi, "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evil-doer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the *LORD* Almighty. 'Not a root or a branch will be left to them. But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,' says the *LORD* Almighty." Malachi 4:1-3.

Clearly, hell-fire will be on this earth until wickedness is eradicated, and then the earth will be made new. Consider what the Bible says about hell-fire:

1. It will be "*ETERNAL FIRE*" (Matthew 25:41):
God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah with

"eternal fire." (Jude 5-7.) Peter declares that the fire burned those cities "to ashes, and made them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly." 2 Peter 2:6. So eternal or everlasting fire turns things to ashes and then goes out. It is eternal in its *EFFECT* and not its *DURATION*.

2. It will be "*UNQUENCHABLE FIRE*" (Matthew 3:12. Compare Luke 3:17): God destroyed the city of Jerusalem, when Babylon attacked, with "unquenchable fire." (Jeremiah 17:27.) In 2 Chronicles 36:19-21 we learn that Jerusalem was burnt as was prophesied. "Unquenchable fire" cannot be put out by humans, but it goes out when everything is burned up. Jerusalem is not still burning.
3. It will bring "*ETERNAL PUNISHMENT*" (Matthew 25:46): Note that it is not everlasting *PUNISHING* but rather "everlasting *PUNISHMENT*." The destruction will be everlasting. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:9.) There will be no resurrection from the second death. (See Revelation 20:1-15.)
4. It will "*TORMENT . . . FOR EVER AND EVER*" (Revelation 14:11. Compare Revelation 20:10): The terms "for ever and ever" and "for ever" are used in different ways in the Bible. In Psalm 21:4 "for ever and ever" refers to a lifetime and in Jonah 2:6 "for ever" refers to a period of three days. The context of Revelation 20:10 reveals that hell-fire will burn until Satan and evil are consumed. Then "a new heaven and a new earth" will be created. (See Revelation 21:1.)

THE "STRANGE WORK" OF GOD

God takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked." Ezekiel 33:11. To Him it is "strange work" and an "alien task." Isaiah 28:21. On the cross, Jesus Christ suffered the pains of hell for us so that we can have eternal life. He does not want "any to perish." 2 Peter 3:9. Eternal life is offered as a gift to believers in Jesus Christ. (See John 3:16.)