

Study 14: Ash Cities

Church Bible Study 3-24-12

The city of Pompeii was a Roman metropolis very much like the cities of today. They had culture, art galleries, restaurants, theaters, coliseums and also the same kind of pride and self-indulgence. A person's popularity or importance was shown by the size of door that was on their home. The larger the door, the greater you were esteemed. But something changed on August 26th, 79 AD. Suddenly, it mattered not what size one's door was!

You see, on August 26th the nearby volcano, Mt. Vesuvius, exploded and within a short time from 8-10 feet of ashes blanketed Pompeii. Then millions of tons of molten lava came pouring down upon Pompeii at a rate of 60 MPH to completely wipe out all its inhabitants. Was this considered a judgment from God?

During the excavation of the ruins of Pompeii, they found within a house these barely visible charcoal letters inscribed on plaster: "Sodom Gomorrah." This charcoal writing was done sometime after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the person who wrote it thought back on the Biblical account of the destruction of these two cities.

At one time the cities of the lower Jordan valley were beautiful and lush, but they were also very corrupt. Genesis 13:13, *"But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the LORD exceedingly."* It became so bad that God decided to destroy these sinful cities for their abominations, but first He sent two angels to Sodom to rescue His servant Lot and his family.

Before entering Sodom, these angels took on the appearance of two traveling men. Lot saw the two strangers when they first entered the gates, and knowing that the streets of that wicked city were far from safe at night, he urged them to find refuge in his home. But wicked men were watching, and that evening they gathered about Lot's door and insisted that he bring out his guests so they might abuse them.

Lot tried in vain to reason with the perverse mob gathered at his door. Their demonic obsession only intensified, and soon the crowd began to threaten Lot as well!

At this point, the angels could no longer conceal their true identity. They pulled Lot inside the house to safety and struck the maddened mob at the door with blindness.

Early the next morning, the angels said to Lot and his family, *"...Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed "* Genesis 19:17.

Genesis 19:24-26, *"Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; ²⁵ And he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. ²⁶ But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."*

God's Word tells us that in the last days, world conditions will resemble that of Sodom-and so will the punishment! In this lesson we will learn what these two Ash Cities teach about God's final dealing with the wicked?

1. What two cities are given as an example for the destruction of the wicked? *2 Peter 2:6*

2. When will the wicked be destroyed in hellfire? *John 12:48; 2 Peter 2:9; Matthew 13:40-42*

The Bible clearly states that the wicked will be cast into the fire in the day of judgment at the end of the world—not when they die. This obviously means that no one is in hell now. It is only fair that no one should be punished until his case has been decided in the judgment. People are rewarded or punished at the second coming, and not before (Revelation 22:12).

3. If the wicked who have died are not in hell yet, where are they? *John 5:28-29; Job 21:30-32*

4. What is the reward, or punishment, of sin? *Romans 6:23*

The punishment for sin is not everlasting life in hellfire, but the exact opposite—eternal death. We all die the first death (Hebrews 9:27), but the Bible says that the death the wicked will die in hell is the second death (Revelation 21:8). From the first death, all are raised for punishment or reward; but there is no resurrection from the second death. It is final. In addition, if the punishment for sin is everlasting torment in hellfire, then Jesus did not pay the penalty.

5. What are the only two choices for each person? *John 3:16; Deuteronomy 30:15-19*

The concepts of limbo and purgatory are not found in Scripture. The Bible teaches only two choices for us—eternal life or eternal death. And it is a choice!

6. What will happen to the wicked in hellfire? *Psalms 37:10, 20; Malachi 4:1-3*

The LXX (Roman Numerals for 70—meaning ‘the interpretation of the seventy elders’, is the translation from Hebrew to Koine Greek) has a very different reading, rendering the second part of the verse, “*and the enemies of the Lord at the moment of their being honored and exalted have utterly vanished like smoke.*” The wicked in hell will be completely burned up and only ashes will remain.

7. Where will hellfire be located? *Revelation 20:9; 2 Peter 3:10*

8. Will the devil be in charge of hellfire? Revelation 20:10; Ezekiel 28:18-19

No! Far from being in charge of hellfire, the devil will be cast into the fire. It will finally turn him to ashes upon the earth. Perhaps the most easily misconstrued text about hell is the expression *"for ever and ever."* For those who are unfamiliar with other uses of this phrase in the Bible, it can be very confusing indeed. But a comparison of verses in both Old and New Testaments reveal that the words "for ever" are used 57 times in the Bible in reference to something that has already come to an end. In other words, "for ever" does not always mean "without end." For example, in Exodus 21, the conditions are laid down concerning the law of servitude. If a slave chose to continue serving the master he loved rather than his freedom when it came due, then his ear was to be pierced with an awl and the Scripture declares, *"He shall serve him for ever."* Verse 6. But how long would that slave serve his human master? Only as long as he lived, of course. So the words "for ever" did not mean without end. Hannah took her son Samuel to God's temple, where he would *"there abide for ever."* 1 Samuel 1:22. Yet in verse 28 we are plainly told, *"As long as he liveth he shall be lent to the Lord."* The original meaning of the term *"for ever"* indicates an indefinite period of time.

9. Will the fires of hell ever go out? Isaiah 47:14

After sin, sinners, and everything on earth is destroyed, the fire will go out. It will not burn throughout the ages. An eternal hell of torment would make it impossible to ever get rid of sin. God's plan is to isolate sin and destroy it, not perpetuate it. Revelation 21:5 says, *"Behold, I make all things new."*

10. Are both soul and body destroyed in hell? Matthew 10:28

Many misunderstand the word 'soul' to mean a conscious entity that is able to survive the death of the body and hence be immortal. But twice God says, *"The soul that sinneth, it shall die."* Ezekiel 18:4, 20. The word for 'soul' in this instance is better translated as 'breath' or 'life.' So according to Scripture, the wicked will be destroyed in hellfire—the life will be snuffed out for eternity and the body will be annihilated in the flames.

11. For whom will hellfire be kindled? Matthew 25:41

The purpose of the fire is to destroy Satan, his evil angels, and sin. If I refuse to turn loose of the plague of sin, I will have to be destroyed with it, because if sin is not destroyed, it would again contaminate the universe.

12. How does the Bible refer to God's destruction of the wicked? Isaiah 28:21; 2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 33:11; Romans 14:11

Destroying people is so foreign to God's ways that hellfire is called His "strange act." God leaves nothing out in His desire to save people. Before they are destroyed, every wicked person will admit that God has been fair and just. God is, by nature, merciful, gracious, and long-suffering. It is alien to His character to inflict pain and suffering, punishment and death, upon His creatures. But at the same time He will *"by no means clear the guilty"* (Ex. 34:7).

13. Doesn't the Bible phrase "unquenchable fire" indicate that the fire never goes out?
Matthew 3:12

No! Unquenchable fire cannot be put out but burns until there is nothing left but ashes. Obviously the "everlasting fire" that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah burned for a time and then went out as they are not still burning today. The Scriptures refer to the fires of the last day as "unquenchable", meaning that they will not be extinguished until they have burned up the last vestiges of sin and sinners

14. Does the phrase "everlasting fire" mean "unending"? *Jude 1:7*

We must let the Bible explain itself. We can see in this verse that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed with everlasting fire as an example of hell, but those cities are not still burning. They were turned into ashes (2 Peter 2:6), which is what eternal fire does. It is eternal in its consequences.

15. When Revelation 20:10 states that the wicked will be tormented "for ever and ever," doesn't that indicate endless time? *Revelation 20:10; Jonah 2:6*

No. Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days and three nights (Jonah 1:17), yet he said *"for ever."* I'm sure that it felt like forever! The Greek word translated *"for ever"* in Revelation 20:10 is "aion," from which we get our word "eon." It often represents an unspecified period of time, limited or unlimited. As previously stated, the words "for ever" are used 57 times in the Bible referring to something already ended. In one instance, "for ever" means 10 generations (Deuteronomy 23:3). With man, "for ever" often means "as long as he liveth" (1 Samuel 1:22, 28).

16. But what about that worm which dieth not and the fire not quenched mentioned by Jesus. Doesn't this prove that the wicked burn in hell forever? *Mark 9:45-46*

Some have interpreted the worm to be the soul. Is that what Jesus meant? Nowhere in the Bible is there any allusion to the soul as a worm. In this instance Jesus used the word "Gehenna" for the word "hell." It so happened that Gehenna was an actual place of burning just outside the walls of Jerusalem. Christ's listeners could see the smoke curling up from the Valley of Gehenna, where dead bodies and garbage were constantly being burned. If anything fell outside the flames, maggots or worms quickly consumed it. With the vivid scenes before their eyes, Jesus used the Gehenna fire as an example of the complete destruction of hell-fire. The fire was never quenched, and the worms were constantly at work upon the bodies—it was a picture of total destruction. Is this fire still burning today? No.

17. After sin and sinners are destroyed, what will Jesus do for His people? 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:4

On the ashes of this purified world, God will create new heavens and a new earth. He promises joy, peace, and indescribable happiness for all living creatures throughout eternity.

18. Will the sin problem ever rise again? Nahum 1:9; Isaiah 65:17

19. What penetrating question does Job ask? Job 4:17

If your son became a hardened murderer, would you feel that he should be punished? You probably would. But would you want him to burn alive in a fire, in terrible agony, for even one day? Of course not! You could not stand that. Neither could our loving God stand to see His children so tortured. That would be worse than the very worst of all war atrocities. Is God like that? No indeed! An eternal hell of torment would be unbearable for God and diametrically against His character of love and justice.

As we compare what the Bible says about God's character, it is more than evident that a God of love will not burn people forever. We should rejoice that hell was never intended for you and me. Jesus said it was "*prepared for the devil and his angels.*" Matthew 25:41. You would have to go there over the broken body of Jesus Christ and in spite of the Father's love, the Holy Spirit's pleading, and the heavenly influence of a million angels.

More than anything, Jesus wants you to dwell in His glorious new kingdom. He longs for you to occupy the mansion He has prepared for you in a Golden city. Do not choose to be a citizen of the Ash Cities.

Will you decide now to accept the offer of Jesus to be among His saved people?