

# AN ACT OF LOVE

In our last study, we learnt that Jesus is coming back to earth because He loves us and He's going to take us to a place that He has prepared for us. But in saying that, He's not going to force us into that place. He gives us the option. He allows us to choose. Something we didn't look at in our last study though was what God does with those who choose to reject Him and His gift of eternal life. There are a lot of ideas out there but one of the most widespread ideas is that God subjects them to torture in a place called hell for eternity. Have you heard this before? It's everywhere and honestly, it's difficult to imagine anything more horrifying. And it's even more difficult to imagine a God of love allowing this to happen to people, let alone people He loves enough to die for.

It's important to know that the Bible actually paints an entirely different picture, revealing that God is loving in all His ways, even in the way He will deal with those who, by their own choice, reject Him.

Let's read [Jude 1:7](#).

This is written by a man called Jude and he is saying that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah serve as a warning, or more accurately an example, of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire, or hell. Within this one verse is a lot of insight into what happens to those who reject God but it requires us to know what happened to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Let's read [Genesis 19:24-25](#).

Wow! God rained down fire and burning sulfur from the sky on Sodom and Gomorrah, destroying everything and everyone. [Why do you think God would have done this?](#)

Let's read [Genesis 18:20-21](#).

These cities had become so wicked and corrupt that God, after seeing witnessing their wickedness, felt that this was the most loving thing to do. How is this loving? It's like if a mother was to see her child playing on a busy street. What would she do? Of course she would stop her child from playing on the busy street. She loves the child and she knows that the child's actions are going to end badly for the child if she doesn't step in there and do something. In the same way, it would not be loving for God to let Sodom and Gomorrah continue in their ways. But why didn't God just force them to turn to Him and follow Him? Why did He resort to destruction? God does not force anyone to do anything because He is a God of love and respects humanity's freedom to choose what they want to do. So the most loving thing for God to do was to destroy the cities and those living in them once and for all. Was God happy to destroy them? No way! Ezekiel 33:11 says that He takes "no pleasure in the death of wicked people." But this was the most loving thing He could do in this situation.

Now, back to Jude. He says that Sodom and Gomorrah are an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. But hang on, there is no evidence that Sodom and Gomorrah are still burning. There is no fire burning in the Middle East that has been burning for the last few thousand years. Not just that, but there are a number of Bible texts in the Old Testament that make a point of Sodom and Gomorrah's total destruction (Isaiah 13:19-22; Jeremiah 49:18; Lamentations 4:6; Zephaniah 2:9).

[So what might have Jude meant when he said "eternal fire"?](#)

This is where it gets tricky. [Can you speak a language other than just English? If so, are there any words that](#)

you know in that other language that just don't exist in the English vocabulary? This is a very real problem no matter what language you are trying to translate to. Some languages have words that other languages don't have and all we can do is try our best to translate with what we have. Here we have a situation just like that.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the word that we translate as "eternal" is *aionios*. Its equivalent in the Old Testament, which was written in Hebrew, is *olam*. What's super crazy is that there are times in the Bible that *aionios* and *olam* are used regarding things that do not or cannot last forever.

For example, let's read [Jonah 2](#).

If you're unfamiliar with the story of Jonah, this was a guy who was stuck in the belly of a fish for three days and three nights before being spat out onto a beach. While Jonah was in the belly of this fish, he prayed a prayer and that prayer is what we just read. Verse 6 is particularly interesting because Jonah uses the word *olam* to describe how long he was in the belly of the fish. Jonah wasn't in the belly of the whale forever. He was only in there for three days and three nights. We can see that when we read the word "eternal" or "forever" in the Bible, it doesn't necessarily literally mean "eternal". It means as long as an event lasts to reach completion, which in the case of the fire that destroys those who reject God, means until they are consumed to ashes. This is in accordance with other verses in the Bible like John 3:16 which says that those who reject God will "perish". And perishing doesn't generally take long!

So do those that reject God burn forever? No, they will burn for as long as it takes for them to be consumed. So the fire is not eternal in duration, nor is their punishment, however, the effect of the fire is.

This is huge. Although God would love for everyone to receive the gift of eternal life, His punishment for those that don't is not really a punishment at all. He literally just honours their decision and eradicates them from existence as though they had never been. There's no eternal burning. There's no eternal torture. Hell is totally an act of love, just like God's actions towards Sodom and Gomorrah.

[What does this tell us about God?](#)

It's so easy to love those who love you but when someone doesn't like you, it can be a real challenge to love them. It's so normal when someone rejects you to want to get revenge. But God isn't like that. God is so good and so loving, even in the way that He deals with people that reject Him. Revenge and torture is so foreign to His character.

[So how does this change the way we should live?](#)