

Hell: Is it Real? Is it eternal?

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A Lesson on why we Need to Share
our Faith

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INTRODUCTION

Most people don't like to talk about hell. Our mind finds the subject quite repulsive. The thought of eternal and unfathomable pain in a place where there is non-stop weeping and gnashing of teeth is not something we want to believe in. So people choose to not believe in it, act like they don't care, or pretend that hell is the ultimate party. I have done a lot of funerals over 30 years of ministry, and have witnessed that the biggest way people deal with this subject is to act as if everyone just goes to heaven when they die. This way of thinking is very prevalent, and is an official doctrine by some theologians, pastors and churches. A lot of people almost deify their lost loved ones, no matter what they believed or how they lived. They believe that their loved one is with them daily in spirit, watching over them, guiding them, and protecting them. Our mind rejects the concept of hell.

The question, as always, is "What does the scripture teach?" More specifically, "What does Jesus say about the subject?" The purpose of this little booklet is not to prove others wrong, but to discover the

truth in the Scripture on a topic with a wide variety of views. There is value, however, in understanding some of the various viewpoints as we will run into those who believe them from time to time. So, I will briefly define some of the more common positions as they relate to hell's existence and whether or not it is eternal. But, let's not forget that it is the theology of Jesus that will help us draw a conclusion to these questions.

OPPOSING VIEWS

Following is a brief look at a few of the different theological positions on the existence and nature of hell. This is not an exhaustive list.

The Early Church

The beliefs of the early church are not equivalent to Scripture. Still, the closer we get to the time Jesus was on earth and to the teaching of the apostles, the more likely it is that they believed and taught what Jesus and the apostles taught. Theology is most often purest closest to its source, less subject to evolution of thought, and not as impacted by thinking tainted by human desires. In summary, these were the beliefs of the early church:

1. Hell is a place of judgment for those who have rejected God and denied Jesus as their Savior
2. Hell is a place of separation from God
3. Hell is a place of torment, anguish and pain
4. Hell's inhabitants are conscious of this torment for all eternity

I will provide you with just one quote from people that have been labelled 'Early Church Fathers' or

“Patriarchs” of the church. This list of men is a list of significant leaders, teachers and theologians in the first few hundred years, either during or soon after the death of the apostles. Each one of the persons, or their writings listed below, provided support for this summary of beliefs.

- “The Epistle of Barnabas” (70-130AD)
- Ignatius of Antioch (110AD)
- Clement of Rome (150AD)
- Clement was Bishop of Rome from 88 to 98AD, and his teaching reflects the early traditions of the Church. “Second Clement” reportedly a recorded sermon, and Clement discusses the nature of Hell: *“If we do the will of Christ, we shall obtain rest; but if not, if we neglect his commandments, nothing will rescue us from eternal punishment.”* “Second Clement” 5:5)
But when they see how those who have sinned and who have denied Jesus by their words or by their deeds are punished with terrible torture in unquenchable fire, the righteous, who have done good, and who have endured tortures and have hated the luxuries of life, will give glory to their God saying, ‘There shall be hope for him that has served God with all his heart!’ (Second Clement” 17:7)
- Polycarp (155AD)
- Tatian (160AD)
- Athenagoras of Athens (175AD)
- Theophilus of Antioch (181AD)
- Irenaeus (189AD)
- Clement of Alexandria (195AD)

- Tertullian (197AD)
- Hippolytus of Rome (212AD)
- Felix Minucius (226AD)
- Cyprian of Carthage (252-253 AD)
- Lactantius (307AD)
- Cyril of Jerusalem (350AD)

The early church leaders, for over 350 years after the death of our Saviour, believed that the soul of every man and woman live after the grave. They taught that immortality is not only for the Christian believer, but for the unbeliever as well. They believed that the souls of all men and women born into this world did not die or cease to exist after the death of the body. While the believer enjoys the benefits and blessings of heaven, the unbeliever will experience perpetual, unending punishment that we refer to as 'hell'.

Purgatory

The Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church beliefs are very much the same in terms of the nature and eternality of heaven and hell. However, the Catholic Church also believes in an intermediary place called purgatory. This is a place where some people go who are not bad enough for the eternal flames of hell, but are not yet pure enough for the abundant blessings of heaven. "According to Roman Catholicism, a venial sin is a lesser sin that does not result in a complete separation from God and eternal damnation in Hell as an unrepented mortal sin would. A venial sin consists in

acting as one should not, without the actual incompatibility with the state of grace that a mortal sin implies; they do not break one's friendship with God, but injure it." (Donovan, Colin. Mortal versus Venial Sin). After death, the souls of those guilty of only venial sin go to a 'hell-like', interim state, until their purification there allows them to enter heaven. The living can help the process of purification by their prayers and indulgences.

The Catholic Bible contains 14 books that have been rejected by Protestants as verifiable Scripture. These include the first and second books of Maccabees. This is one of the passages in which they find support for their belief in purgatory. 2 Maccabees 12:41–12:46 *"So they all blessed the ways of the Lord, the righteous judge, who reveals the things that are hidden; 42and they turned to supplication, praying that the sin that had been committed might be wholly blotted out. The noble Judas exhorted the people to keep themselves free from sin, for they had seen with their own eyes what had happened as the result of the sin of those who had fallen. 43He also took up a collection, man by man, to the amount of two thousand drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin-offering. In doing this he acted very well and honourably, taking account of the resurrection. 44For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. 45But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore he made atonement for the dead, so that they might be delivered from their sin."*

The doctrine of purgatory as a physical place was not officially formalized until the 11th Century. That means that it was not commonly believed by the Christian Church for over 1000 years after Christ's death.

Universalism

Universalism, or 'universal reconciliation' is a school of theology that believes that all human beings will ultimately be saved and reconciled to God. They believe in life after death. Most Universalists believe that hell does not exist and that there is no possibility of eternal punishment or hell. A few believe that there is a hell, but punishment there is corrective in nature and does not last forever.

Although Universalists believe that their thinking was common Christian belief prior to the 6th century A.D., it was not formalized as a doctrine until the 18th century. This, of course, was many hundreds of years after the presence of Christ on earth and the teaching of the apostles. The Universalist Church of America was first formed late in the 18th century.

In 1899, the Universalist Convention adopted these five beliefs:

- God is the loving Parent of all people.
- Jesus Christ reveals the nature and character of God and is the spiritual leader of humankind.
- Humankind is created with an immortal soul which death does not end—or a mortal soul that

shall be resurrected and/or preserved by God—and which God will not wholly destroy.

- Sin has negative consequences for the sinner either in this life or the afterlife. All of God's punishments for sin are corrective and remedial.
- Every individual of the human race shall become holy and happy

The doctrine of Universalism is certainly appealing to the human mind. It allows for all individuals to live how they want to live, worship whichever God they want to worship, and still reap the benefits of Jesus' sacrifice. This view has been adopted by many individuals, along with some Christian organizations in addition to the official Universalist denomination.

This way of thinking helps reduce the pain that comes from the loss of a loved one, as well as the fear of dying. It means that, ultimately, men and women bear no responsibility for their choices in life.

Annihilationism or Extinctionism

This is the belief that those who have rejected Christ's free gift of salvation will eventually be completely annihilated, or exist no more. The proponents of this teaching believe that after the final judgment some human beings, Satan, and all fallen angels will be totally destroyed. They will either cease to exist or their consciousness will be extinguished.

They believe that the human soul is not immortal unless redeemed and given eternal life, therefore the soul

of the unbeliever does not exist forever. Those who make a choice to reject Christ's offer of salvation will suffer a period of punishment, but will eventually be eternally destroyed. Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses share this belief.

This doctrine has appeared throughout Christian history, but has never been widely accepted. It had a bit of a resurgence in the late 1900's as a few popular Christian writers adhered to the thought.

HELL WAS NOT MADE FOR PEOPLE

One of the stumbling blocks in the mind of many is understanding how a loving God could ban men and women to a place of eternal pain and punishment. Such thinking is backwards. We should be asking how people could reject the loving and costly ‘free-to-us’ gift of salvation offered by a loving God, knowing that the alternative is a place of eternal pain and punishment.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23, NIV)

God did not make hell for people. It was a place created for Lucifer/Satan and the hordes of angels that followed him in his rebellion against God. Presumably, this took place before man ever inhabited the earth.

God never intended for man to sin, or to require a place other than heaven to spend eternity. In Jesus’ teaching in **Matthew 25:41**, He said: *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels’”*. He was speaking of a time when men and women who chose to reject Him would have to be sent to a place that was specifically prepared for the devil.

Only two locations are available for the soul to continue to exist after death. Heaven and hell.

The punishment for sin was issued in the Garden of Eden; and that is death. Spiritually, that means separation from God. The solution to separation from God was a perfect sacrifice, the death of God's Son at Calvary.

Isaiah 59:2 *"But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear."*

John 5:24 *"Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."*

If an individual chooses to accept God's offer to be born *again* (see **John 3:1-16**), they will spend eternity in heaven with the giver of abundant life. If they choose to not accept this gift, then only one option remains. It is the choice they make. They spend eternity with the father of lies, the first to commit sin, and the one for whom hell was made. Hell was not made for man. It is the default location for those who do not prepare their hearts for heaven by accepting Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Saviour.

God loves all men and women. *John 3:16* "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." **Matthew 8:14** *"In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."* He did everything that had to be done to keep

every person out of hell. He paid a great price to make that possible; the ultimate sacrifice. But out of respect for humanity He would never violate the free will of any individual human being. Where we spend eternity is our choice.

No decision to accept Christ is the equivalent to a decision to not accept Christ. In both cases, man's sin has not been dealt with. They have not been made pure in the sight of God by placing their faith in Christ's sacrifice at Calvary. Since nothing impure can enter heaven, there is but one place left for their soul. Hell.

HADES AND PARADISE

I want to clarify that ‘hell’ is an English word. It is the translation of the Greek words, ‘Hades’ and ‘Tartarus’; or the Hebrew words ‘Sheol’ and ‘Gehinnom’. These words essentially mean: ‘underworld, doom, destruction, or abyss’.

Are those who have passed on before us in either heaven or hell? The answer is ‘yes’ by definition. However, neither are in their eternal home.

The following is a story told by Jesus that provides insight and raises some questions about life after death. Please note that this is not likely a parable; as parables are commonly introduced as such in the Scripture. Also, Jesus never used names in parables, but He did in telling this story. Jesus is most likely recounting a real event. (Note: The Lazarus in this story is not the same Lazarus that Jesus raised from the dead, but a man with the same name.) **Luke 16:19-31, NIV**

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.

23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24 So he called to him, 'Father 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.' 25 "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' 29 "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

30 "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' 31 "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

This is a powerful story of two men. A beggar named Lazarus, who went to heaven, and a wealthy man who went to 'hades' or 'hell'. Their status in life on earth had nothing to do with their eternal destiny. Faith in Jesus determines the eternal home for both rich and poor, black or white, male or female.

Part of the horror of hades was that those present could see into the place referred to as "Abraham's side" (Abraham's bosom in the KJV). There is no indication that those in heaven could see into hell. Thank God! In Life, Lazarus survived on scraps from the rich man's

table. Now the rich man looks from hades and spots Lazarus enjoying all of the blessings of heaven. Now, Lazarus is rich with God's goodness, and the previously rich man is suffering in hell. He is recorded as saying: "Father 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." He is looking for just a little something from Lazarus, just as Lazarus once looked to him for scraps from his table during life on earth; but it is impossible. People cannot cross from heaven into hell, nor can people cross from hell into heaven. This indicates the finality of our decision about Christ while on earth.

The story makes clear that immediately following death on earth we go to one place or the other. The Apostle Paul indicates that, for the believer, to leave this body means to enter the presence of God. "*We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*" (**2 Corinthians 5:8, NIV**). When the man, hanging on the cross beside Jesus, acknowledged Him for who He is "Jesus answered him, *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*" (**Luke 23:43, NIV**). There would be no delay. Immediately upon leaving this earth he would be in the presence of Jesus in heaven. Keeping this in mind, Jesus had said earlier that "*I am going there to prepare a place for you.*" (**John 14:2, NIV**). So, a place of paradise existed and yet Jesus was going to prepare a place for us.

Neither hades, nor what Jesus referred to as paradise and Abraham's side are permanent homes. At

the time of the future judgment both will be destroyed. Those in hades, or hell, will experience what the Bible refers to as the second death. **Revelation 20:11-15, NIV**
“Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books.

13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done.

14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.

15 Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.”

Now, I'd like to back up a bit and look at Satan's final sentence. Keep in mind that there are only two places to go for eternity – where Jesus is, or where Satan is. “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” (**Revelation 20:10, NIV**). This is the new hell. Is hell eternal? If that is what “for ever and ever” means, I think we just found our answer. The lake of fire is the eternal home of all who were in hades.

What happens to those whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life? *“Then I saw “a new heaven and a*

new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” **(Revelation 21:1-5, NIV)**

All of this teaches us two important lessons relative to our topic.

- The soul of every individual is immortal, and lives on after physical death. It goes immediately to either heaven or hell
- There will be a new hell (lake of fire) and a new heaven that will be unveiled in the future. The ‘Lake of Fire’ will be the eternal home of Satan, the angels that followed him, and those who have rejected Christ’s offer of salvation during life on earth. Remember, Jesus taught that, although hell wasn’t made for people, the eternal home of the lost would be the place prepared for Satan. *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”* **(Matthew 25:41, NIV).**

APOSTOLIC TEACHING

What the apostles believed on this subject is important, because it is what they heard and understood from Jesus Himself. In the book of Revelation, John was recording a vision of future events. He also recorded the words of angels, and a voice from the throne of heaven when he penned the words that we talked about on pages 15 to 19. If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, we can hardly argue with John's record regarding the eternal 'Lake of Fire' and the 'New heaven and new earth'.

Let's take a look at what the Apostle Paul had to say about hell. Keep in mind that Paul mainly emphasized God's grace in his writings, so did not make hell a major topic of discussion. Still his opinion is clear.

In the book of Romans, he pens: *"God will repay each person according to what they have done. 7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. 8 But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger."*

(Romans 2:6-8, NIV)

His letter to the Thessalonian church is clearer in terms of his opinion on the eternality of punishment for the lost. *"He will punish those who do not know God and do*

not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, NIV). Some may argue that the word ‘destruction’ supports the idea of annihilation. James E. Rosscup, Professor of Bible Explosion at Masters Seminary helps us understand the original language, and clarifies Paul’s teaching: “...*eternal destruction represents a different Greek expression, one that depicts a ruin that lost people continue to suffer forever as they are denied opportunity to be with Christ.*” The Apostle Paul believed that there is a hell, and that its punishment is forever.

JESUS' TEACHING

Jesus spoke of hell more than anyone else in Scripture. In fact He spoke more of hell than He did of heaven. It isn't that He was fixated on it, but He felt it necessary to provide a clear warning for those He loved and came to die for.

No one else's theology on the matter is as important as that of Jesus. Does hell exist? Do people go there? Is it unending punishment? Jesus couldn't be any clearer: *"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."* (**Matthew 10:28, NIV**).

In **Matthew 13:36-43, NIV**, Jesus explains a parable He told earlier in the chapter. He makes it very clear that hell is a place of horrible punishment. *"Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, 'Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.'"* 37 He answered, *"The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 'As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be*

at the end of the age. 41 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.

42 They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.”

Jesus’ description of this horrid place is worth noting. Hell is nothing to joke about. It’s not a giant party. Someone once said, and it was popularized in a song that “Heaven don’t want me and hell’s afraid I’ll take over.” Sayings like this glorifies an ungodly lifestyle, and minimizes the awfulness of this eternal existence. Jesus describes it with words such as fire, darkness, and a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

- **Matthew 8:12, NIV:** *“But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*
- **Matthew 22:13, NIV:** *“Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”*

We already looked at some of **Matthew 25**. It is important to note, however, that twice in this passage (**vs. 21 and 26**) Jesus refers to hell as eternal.

Jesus issued a loving warning to everyone who would listen. The Jesus, of whom Paul said: *“For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have*

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been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Colossians 1:16-17, NIV) taught that hell is both real and eternal. I choose to believe in the words of the creator of all things over and above any Christian author, theologian, or official church doctrine.

CONCLUSION

As one who views the Bible as the Word of God, to be taken literally, but with an understanding of the original languages, culture and historical context in which it was written – the answers seem clear. We really needed to look no further than the teachings of Jesus.

- Is hell a real place? Yes.
- Is it a place of unending punishment? Yes.

It is important to end this discussion by repeating a couple of things.

- “One of the stumbling blocks in the mind of many is understanding how a loving God could ban men and women to a place of eternal pain and punishment. Such thinking is backwards. We should be asking how people could reject the loving and costly ‘free-to-us’ gift of salvation offered by a loving God, knowing that the alternative is a place of eternal pain and punishment.”
- “God loves all men and women. **John 3:16** *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”* **Matthew 8:14** *“In the same way your*

Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.” He did everything that had to be done to keep every person out of hell. He paid a great price to make that possible; the ultimate sacrifice. But out of respect for humanity He would never violate the free will of any individual human being.

I sincerely hope that every person who reads this little booklet has accepted God’s free offer of salvation. Jesus literally suffered and died in order to make that offer possible. He gave His life to keep us out of hell. Jesus’ cries of pain and death at Calvary is God’s love song to us. It shows us how badly He wanted to keep us from hell. If you haven’t already, would you accept that offer today?