

The Teaching of the Bible on Hell

The Places Called Hades and Hell, etc.

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The Recent Problem

I have been asked recently on several occasions about the Bible's teaching on Hell. Should we speak about it? Should children be told about it? Is Hell a literal place? Recently, once again, there has been a denial on the literal nature of the Scripture's teaching on eternal punishment of the wicked. Well-known actor Kirk Cameron's comments on the matter ignited an Internet firestorm over the issue.

The horrifying nature of Hades and Hell does not lend itself to acceptance in the human mind and I understand why most Christians find it very unpleasant to speak about Hell.

The Clarity of Scripture

The Biblical teachings on Hades (Sheol) and Hell are numerous and make it clear that Hell is (and will be) a real place and its duration for the unsaved is forever. The Bible teaches about the reality of this place as one of judgment for unbelievers. In fact, it is well said that Jesus said more in the Gospels about Hell than Heaven. Let us examine a number of key aspects of the Scripture's teaching on this distasteful but necessary subject.

Biblical Terms

There are several terms used in the Bible for places of fiery punishment. There are 54 uses of the word "hell" in the English Bible but these come from different words in Hebrew and Greek.

Gehenna. Word of Hebrew origin, from "Valley of Hinnom". The valley is near Jerusalem, and was a trash dump with ongoing fire. The term is used figuratively for the place or state of everlasting punishment. This word is used in the NT 12 times and in the NKJV is translated as *hell*. References include Mat. 5:22, 29, 30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 23:33, Mark 9:43, 45, 47, Luke 12:5, James 3:6. Six times it is used in the statements like "if body part X offend thee, cut it off, for it is better to have one member perish than your whole body cast into hell."

Hades. This is the place or state of departed souls. Also translated "grave" in 1 Cor. 15:55. It is used 11 times in the NT. These are: Mat. 11:23, 16:18, Luke 10:15, 16:23, 2:27, 31, 1 Cor. 15:55, Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 20:14. Equivalent of the OT term Sheol.

When I say "place or state" above, I am not intending to question whether it is a real place; rather, that sometimes the word focuses on the place, and sometimes the focus is on the state of those in that place.

Sheol. The world of the dead. The grave or the pit. There are 63 uses of this in the OT. 31 are translated “hell” and are in Deut. 32:22, 2 Sam. 22:6, Job 11:8, 26:6, Ps. 9:17, 16:10, 18:5, 55:15, 86:13, 116:3, 139:8, Prov. 5:5, 7:27, 9:18, 15:11, 24, 23:14, 27:20, Is. 5:14, 14:9, 15, 28:15, 18, 57:9, Ez. 31:16, 17, 32:21, 27, Amos 9:2, Jonah 2:2, Hab. 2:5. In Num. 16:30, 33 and Job. 17:6, the word is translated as “pit.” All other uses of the word are translated as “grave.” (Gen. 37:35, 42:38, 44:29, 31, 1 Sam. 2:6, 1 Kings 2:6, 9, Job 7:9, 14:13, 17:13, 21:13, 24:19, Ps. 6:5, 30:3, 31:17, 49:14, 15, 88:3, 89:48, 141:7, Prov. 1:12, Prov. 30:16, Eccl. 9:10, Song 8:6, Is. 14:11, Is. 38:10, 18, Ez. 31:15, Hos. 13:14 (2x)).

Tartarus. The deepest abyss of Hades; in verb form to incarcerate in eternal torment; to cast down to hell. This word is only used in 2 Peter 2:4 of God’s casting fallen angels down and delivering them to chains of darkness until the judgment.

Lake of Fire. The beast, false prophet, the devil, death, Hades, and those not written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:20, 20:10, 14, 15).

The Bible’s Teaching about Hell

The Scriptures do not contain many details about either Hades or Hell. But we can glean a number of things.

1. Hades and Hell are different.

Rev. 20:14 – Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

From the Biblical data, we know that *there are two places of punishment for the unredeemed dead*. One, Hades, sometimes called Sheol, is where the soul resides until bodily resurrection when the soul is reunited with the body. The other, Hell, is another name for the lake of fire, and is where eternal punishment of the non-believing dead takes place. One is like a county jail while the other is like the state penitentiary. The first is a temporary holding place; the second the permanent holding place.

2. Hell is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In four passages in Matthew’s gospel and one in Luke, Jesus speaks about a place of outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is a place for the hypocrites. See Matthew 8:12, 13:42, 13:50, 22:13, 24:51, 25:30, and Luke 13:27-28.

Weeping indicates grief and regret over the lost condition of one’s soul. Hell is a place of extreme anguish and utter despair. Perhaps opportunities for salvation will be in mind as one weeps and realizes that the wrath of God is, in fact, real.

Gnashing of teeth is a more harsh response, one of anger and wrath. Some atheists today indicate an attitude that will be reflected in gnashing of teeth. Through gritted teeth, some will be cursing God for the punishment that they experience. Gnashing is used in Acts 7:54 of those who hated and killed Stephen. Mark 9:18 uses the word of a boy possessed by a demon, where the gnashing is the demon’s doing. Gnashing is almost always done by evil enemies (Job 16:9, Ps 35:16, 37:12, 112:10, Lam 2:16).

One object to the above is drawn from Matthew 8:12.

3. Hades is a real place.

Revelation 20:13 indicates that it is a place just like the sea is a place: dead bodies and souls are collected from those places and resurrected in order to face divine judgment at the last day. Those in Hades are removed from Hades for the purpose of judgment.

4. Jesus depicted Hades as a real place with real people in it.

In Luke 16:19-31 we see the following thoughts:

- a) The rich man, though he had died, still consciously exists in Hades;
- b) he believes that it is a real place;
- c) in Hades, the rich man is in torments, an extreme form of human suffering;
- d) there is a flame there which makes the rich man want water to cool his tongue;
- e) no relief will be provided;
- f) there is a great gulf between Hades and Abraham's bosom;
- g) the Word of God will be sufficient to persuade the living of the need for repentance; if they will not hear that, then nothing will convince them;
- h) the dead cannot inform the living of their suffering or the importance of avoiding the suffering.

Note that Abraham's bosom is a place separate from Hades. It is another "compartment" in the grave, but for redeemed people.

5. Hell is also a real place.

In Rev. 20:15 Scripture says that anyone not found in the Book of Life will be "cast into the lake of fire." It appears therefore to be a real place, and since the people who are at the judgment are "standing before God" it is reasonable to suppose that they are resurrected, in a body, and thus the lake of fire is a place for their bodies and spirits to go.

6. Hell is the final residence of the evil characters in the book of revelation: the beast, the false prophet, and the Devil.

Rev. 19:20 says that the beast and false prophet, who will be the archenemies of God's people during the last days (the Tribulation) will be captured and thrown alive into the lake of fire.

In Rev. 20:10 the Bible says that Satan will be consigned to the lake of fire and tormented day and night forever.

7. Hell burns with brimstone.

Rev. 19:20 informs us of this. Brimstone is identified as sulfur, a yellow crystalline solid. It is found in the Dead Sea Valley. It produces an acrid and poisonous smoke. Its smoke is sometimes used as a fumigation substance.

8. Hell is called the second death.

Rev. 20:14 says that being thrown into that place is the second death. The first death is physical; the second death is a spiritual one, being placed where there is no connection with God.

9. Jesus has authority over death and Hades.

Rev. 1:18 – The Lord Jesus has the keys of Hades and death, meaning he has authority over those things.

10. Hell was designed and built for the Devil and demons.

Jesus says in Mat. 25:41 that the everlasting fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. This gives us some slight comfort in that God did not design it “for” people. People go there as a consequence of their choice to go there, but there is a real sense in which God did not design or desire that people would go to that awful place.

11. Hell and Hades are sometimes confused, and sometimes the grave and Hades are confused.

In the Old Testament, there is a place called Sheol, which is the grave and probably also was viewed by the Jewish person as the entrance to the underworld or the world of the dead. It was a dark and gloomy place, and it was not desirable to go there. It was a place of sorrows (2 Sam. 22:6, Psalm 18:5); a place that consumes the living (Job 24:19); a place of pain (Psalm 116:3); where there is no hope (Isa. 38:18); a place of affliction (Jonah 2:2).

The hope of the resurrection was a center focus of saints like Job, and an important message in the prophets like Ezekiel (37:11-12) and Isaiah (25:7-8, 1 Cor. 15:54, Isaiah 26:19)

12. Hell has unquenchable fire and undying worms.

Mark 9:43-48 says as much. I can imagine both fire and worms, but in combination, and with people present, it is hard to imagine. I do not know exactly what the function of the worms is.

13. The long and short of it for us who are alive now is that the unredeemed at death go to Hades; the redeemed go to Paradise, which is now directly in the presence of the Lord. Those who went to the “Paradise section” of Sheol in the OT were taken to be with Christ at the time of his crucifixion/resurrection and all believers in Christ since then go to be with Him (Phil. 1:23). Those who are impenitent in Sheol/Hades will be extracted for judgment and then cast into the lake of fire, Hell.

14. Human spirits in Hades are incorporeal, that is, they are not accompanied or joined to their bodies because their bodies are buried in the grave (or cremated). Because it is spirits of people that go there, and spirits are not spatial things, some people have suggested that it is hard to define the “place” of Hades. However, note these factors: Hades is always portrayed as “down,” and as an actual place despite the incorporeality of the dead. In addition, the Lord explains the rich man in Hades is in torment and asks for relief for his “tongue.” Perhaps the people there have some sort of intermediate body. This is not de-

tailed for us in the Bible. In Hell, people both spirit and body are incarcerated, so the question of incorporeal existence does not arise.

15. There is no clear, explicit text that teaches that the unsaved stop existing at some point in the future. The case for temporary punishment or cessation of punishment are built on extrapolations of God's mercy and kindness, or on a possible (though contextually unlikely) nuance of the idea of destruction.

The Moral Justification for Hell

The text of Scripture clearly teaches the real existence of Hades and Hell. And that is enough for the faithful Christian to receive the truth. After all, matters of Heaven and Hell become evident to souls only after they die, so divine revelation is the only way that we can reliably know anything about them. Even if all that is accepted, it remains true that the justification for Hell is difficult. Rationalizing or explaining *why* is tough. But I offer several points here that may be of help as you think about the issue.

1. Hell must exist because the future existence of the saved cannot exist in the presence of sinners. Hell is an appropriate holding cell for them to keep them separated from the righteous so they are unable to soil the perfect conditions in Heaven. If those who rebel against God are present in Heaven, Heaven would cease to partake of its utopian qualities!

2. Hell must exist because God is holy and a just judge. A judge cannot be a good judge if he lets wrongdoers off the hook. Therefore, there must be some kind of punishment for sin. Otherwise, many people who sin in this life do not experience significant consequences for their sometimes very wicked behavior. If the world's genocidal dictators got off the hook

3. Annihilationism would satisfy the requirement to remove sinners from the presence of the righteous. But it would not satisfy another logical and moral requirement: justice must be meted out to sinners on behalf of their victims in proportion to the consequences of the crime. A victim of, say, murder is impacted forever: perhaps never having had the chance to believe in Christ, or experience the joys of life like marriage and children and grandchildren, among many other things. He or she lost opportunities to gain rewards by service in this life. Furthermore, *their* loved ones are also victims who were robbed of the love of that person, the children that he or she could have produced, and so forth. All of this is an eternal impact. If the punishment is to fit the crime, it must not be brief.

4. Justice must be given to sinners who continue to commit sin for all eternity. As long as unbelieving people are conscious, whether in this life or in the afterlife, at least some of them will be rebels against God in one form or another. They will continue to sin even in Hell, and thus are worthy of ongoing punishment. There will be no rehabilitation there, even though we would like to think there could be. Sin is so *bad* that it causes people to continue in it despite its self-destructive consequences. The punishment is continual because the sin is continual.

5. For "lesser" sins, we must understand that sin is committed against the infinitely holy God. Sin is very bad—much worse than we give it credit for, I am afraid.

6. The length of punishment reasonably varies depending on the victim of the crime.

1. Killing someone else's tree by cutting it down could result in a fine in civil court of triple the value of the tree.

2. Killing a deer is a misdemeanor and can be punished with up to 90 days in jail and up to \$1000 fine.

3. Killing a dog is a felony punishable by up to 10 years in prison, fine up to \$5000, and up to 500 hours of community service.

4. The punishment for killing a person depends on the circumstances. Manslaughter is 15 years in prison; up to first degree murder resulting in life in prison without parole.

5. Then what is a sin against God valued at? For those who grasp God's perfect and infinite holiness, although a crime against Him does not kill Him, it is nonetheless a very high crime indeed to violate God's law and His honor. Sin's punishment is not properly measured by the duration of the act (for example, a murder can be committed in seconds, but its punishment rightly lasts much longer than that), but by the being against whom it is committed—His worth, honor and dignity. Some argue that finite humans may be able to commit an "infinite offense" but they cannot have "infinite guilt" because they are not themselves infinite. In this view, the punishment is not tied so much to the infinite crime, but to the finite culpability of the perpetrator.

Application

Is Hell in the Pauline Epistles?

One interesting thing to note is that the word *hell* is not used in any book from Romans to Hebrews. Paul preferred to use the term "the wrath". This term refers both to eternal punishment as well as the wrath God as displayed during the tribulation. Paul mentions "the wrath" in the following places: Rom. 1:18, Eph. 5:6, Col. 3:6, 1 Thess. 1:10, 2:16, Rev. 14:10. Jesus uses the term in John 3:36. "Wrath" also means anger, indignation, vengeance. Really it is synonymous with the punishment meted out in the wrath. The wrath of God burns in Sheol, for example (Deut. 32:22).

Speaking of tribulation wrath are verses including Rev. 6:16, 14:8, 19, 15:1, 7, 16:1, 18:3.

Imperative to be Saved

It is imperative that you make sure to be saved. The consequences described in Luke 16:19-31 for lack of repentance are too terrible to risk.

Witnessing is Crucial

As for witnessing, concern for the plight of the lost should be a critical factor. The theme of Rom. 6:23 should drive us—the wages of sin is death (physical, spiritual, and the second death), but the gift of God is eternal life. What a contrast. What a salvation!

How much do I care about the other guy? Or do I care more about myself? Remember the verse in Rom. 12:9 where it says "Let love be without hypocrisy." It has been said of this verse that a hypocritical love is one that looks out for my own concern and comfort before that of others. If I really loved a person, I would speak to them the truth, whether about sal-

vation or an issue of sin, or whatever, without regarding for my own self. What cost is too high for you to tell someone else about the gospel?

Wrong Teachings on Hell

The traditional view is the “eternal conscious torment” view. There are other understandings within and outside of Christian circles.¹

Annihilation and Conditional Immortality

This is the view that non-Christians do not suffer conscious torment for eternity, but instead ultimately cease to exist. They are completely destroyed after facing or in the act of facing God's judgment. The wicked dead may suffer for a while, and then be extinguished. A sizable portion of evangelical Christians hold this view.

There are reasons for this view. First, adherents question whether sin done during a limited lifespan can justly be punished by an infinite punishment. Thus, an appeal is made to the nature of God's justice such that the punishment should fit the crime. For a brief response, it should be noted that sin is a crime against an infinite God with infinite holiness. Finite timeframes are not suitable for such crimes. It should also be noted that sin caused the infinite Son of God to die. If sin can be just erased or swept under the rug, it would seem that Christ died for no reason.

Second, the adherent to the conditional immortality view agrees with the doctrines of Hell, judgment, and punishment, but disagrees with what he claims is a secondary issue of the duration of that punishment. In response, I am unaware of anyone who has truly elevated the duration question to “primary doctrine status” as if someone must believe that way to be saved. Relegating the duration question to secondary status allows the conscience of the conditionalist to not be bothered by it.

Roman Catholic View

“At the General Audience of Wednesday, 28 July 1999, the Holy Father reflected on hell as the definitive rejection of God. In his catechesis, the Pope said that care should be taken to interpret correctly the images of hell in Sacred Scripture, and explained that ‘hell is the ultimate consequence of sin itself... Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy’.” [Pope John Paul II, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2HEAVN.HTM>]

"Hell is not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the condition resulting from attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life," he said. "So eternal damnation is not God's work but is actually our own doing." [Pope John Paul II, <http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/fidelitas/fearofhell.html>]

“Incorporeal things are not in *place* after a manner known and familiar to us, in which way we say that bodies are properly in *place*; but they are in *place* after a manner befitting spir-

¹ Note that some of these quotes were taken from the Internet up to 26 years ago and are no longer present there.

itual substances, a manner that cannot be fully manifest to us.” [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Supplement, Q69, a1, reply 1, <http://www.sbts.edu/mohler/fidelitas/fearofhell.html>]

This seems to deny the reality of the literal place of final judgment and the place of God in judgment.

Roman Catholics have another “holding area” for sinful souls that is called *purgatory*. In this place, supposedly sins are paid for before the person can get into heaven. This doctrine denies the complete sufficiency of the work of Christ and is not taught by Jesus or in the 66-books of the Bible.

Metaphorical View

“But what does it mean to lose our souls? To answer this question, Jesus uses his own solemn imagery – *Gehenna* (“hell” in Mk 9:47 and ten other Gospel texts), the valley outside Jerusalem where rubbish was burned; the *worm* that *dieth not* (Mk 9:47), an image, it seems, for the endless dissolution of the personality by a condemning conscience; *fire* for the agonizing awareness of God’s displeasure; *outer darkness* for the knowledge of the loss, not merely of God, but of all good and of everything that made life seem worth living; *gnashing of teeth* for self-condemnation and self-loathing.” [J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, page 153]

This makes a metaphor out of Hell. It seems to become an image of spiritual or mental realities. The elements listed in the text of Scripture are pictures for something other than the words plainly mean. In later paragraphs Packer discusses the “growing into the state in which one has chosen to be” and the “often highly figurative” biblical passages on God’s judgment. This is similar to the Roman Catholic positions on Hell quoted above.

“Dr. Graham's total content regarding a future hell is contained in the brief statement ‘third, there is hell in the future, and it goes on and on...’ and further, he ‘wondered if hell is a terrible burning within our heart for God, to fellowship with God, a fire that we can never quench.’” [Quotes from Billy Graham, <http://www.techplus.com/bkqv1611/bd0006.htm>]

Again, instead of an objective reality, Hell is described in this definition as a state of mind.

Humanistic View

“Further, the doctrine of hell can be extremely painful to sensitive persons who may believe that a loved one died after committing an unforgiven mortal sin. Throughout history, many people have suffered much unnecessary anguish from the belief that a deceased friend or family member was experiencing eternal torture in hell.”

[http://www.humanismbyjoe.com/a_humanistic_daming_doctor.htm]

This indicates that since the doctrine of hell is not pleasant, terrifying, and (in their view) leads to a cruel and selfish attitude in those that believe it, it must be wrong. It is to be avoided because of its supposed negative effects.

Jehovah's Witnesses View: Conditional Immortality

Charles Taze Russell, founder of the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, rejected the reality of Hell. He replaced it with the concept that *hell* is synonymous with the grave and that the biblical term of *second death* means extinction. [2026: <https://wit.irr.org/hell-grave>; Old: <http://www.watchman.org/jw/jwafterl.htm>]

JWs hold the heretical doctrine of annihilationism, that the soul of unbelievers is annihilated at death and they have no more consciousness. The soul is extincted into oblivion forever. This view is also called conditionalism or conditional immortality as described above.

Related: The View of Soul Sleep Held by Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists

Technically, the view called "soul sleep" is not the same as annihilationism. This view teaches that when someone dies, they are in the grave and unconscious. They take the euphemistic statements in the Bible of a dead person being "asleep" as literal. The dead allegedly remain this way until the resurrection, and then are "awakened" to life again. It is a separate question what happens after resurrection and judgment.

Christian Science View

Heaven and Hell do not exist. They are spiritual states of mind, not actual places for the afterlife.

In response, the Scriptures are quite clear that heaven exists. Very few people seem to object to this comforting idea! If the Scriptures can be believed about Heaven, there seems to be no valid reason that they can be dismissed about Hell.