

HELL

“the lake of fire”

Key question

What can be known about hell?

Key text

Revelation 20:10

“And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

Key Definition

Hell

Hell is the final and eternal abode of Satan, his angels, and all who do not possess the righteousness commensurate with eternal fellowship with a holy God.

Introduction

The National Post reported that the Jesuits had made a important model shift in their theology of hell. The traditional mediaeval picture conveyed the idea that hell is a place of everlasting punishment. As suggested by C.S.Lewis in *The Great Divorce*, the new model pictures hell as a freely chosen direction of movement away from the love of God into eternal darkness, death, and non-being (the term used in a recent Church of England document).

Heb.6:2 suggests to us that an understanding of the “final eternal-judgment” is elementary and foundational to our spiritual growth, yet many believers do not have a clear understanding of what the Scripture says concerning this subject. Some of the popular ideas about hell may be more cultural than Scriptural. What does the Scripture clearly teach?

- Is hell a place or a state of being?
- Is hell eternal physical torture or is it simply nonexistence?
- Who goes to hell and why?

A. **What do Americans believe:**

1. In 1950, 58% believed in Hell; in 1990 60% believed.

Another pole indicated that 82% of Americans profess belief in an afterlife with heaven and hell.

2. Of Evangelicals, 80% believe in hell compared to 36% who believe in hell yet claim no religious affiliation.
3. In the general population of those 50 and older, 54% believe in hell while 71% of those between 18-29 believe.
4. While 46% of Americans expect to go to heaven, 4% expect to go to hell.

B. **The teaching of other faiths:**

1. **Islam** - Hell is pictured as a huge crater of fire beneath a narrow bridge that all souls must pass over to go to paradise. It has seven layers where the unworthy suffer endless physical torment.
2. **Hinduism** - Hell is merely one stage in the career of a soul as it passes from one life to the next. There are 21 of them where the evil that one commits during a lifetime is burned away.
3. **Buddhism** - There are a number of hells where a person temporarily stops in his journey toward nirvana, a sort of blissful nonexistence.
4. **Purgatory** - The Roman Catholic church teaches of a place separate from hell where sinners unfit for heaven are rehabilitated. This became part of church teaching in the sixth century. And later, limbo was conceived as a compartment for unbaptized infants who are spared sensory torments but never see God.

C. **Evangelical views of hell**

1. The Biblical terms used for “hell.”
 - a. **SHEOL** - (used 31 times) An Old Testament expression meaning the general abode of the soul’s of the dead. It is an obscure, shadowy place of futility. (Ps.9:17, 16:10; Lk.16:19-31)
 - b. **HADES** - (used 10 times - Gospels {4}, Acts {2}, Rev. {4}) The New Testament equivalent of sheol is the realm of torment for the departed souls of those outside the faith (Lk.16:23). It constitutes a holding place until the final judgment (Rev.20:13-14). It may be equivalent to the “lower parts of the earth” (Eph.4:9) to which Christ descended.
 - c. **GEHENNA** - (used 10 times in the gospels and 1 time in James) The place of future eternal punishment of the wicked, the lake of fire (Matt.18:9; Rev.20:12-15). A term used only by Christ (except for Jas.3:6) and derived from the Hebrew term “Valley of Hinnom” (a burial pit outside Jerusalem).
 - d. **TARTARUS** - The prison for demons and Satan. Used only in II Pet.2:4. It is similar to the term “abyss” or “bottomless pit” used in Lk.8:31; Rev.20:1-3; Rom.10:7.

The Biblical vocabulary of the afterlife.

After death (O.T. Sheol)		After the resurrection and final judgment	
Paradise “Abraham’s bosom”	Place of torment “Hades”	Heaven “New heavens and earth”	Hell “Lake of fire”

Luke 16:19-31

2. The development of the classic tradition of hell through history.
 - a. As one would expect, the **Jewish** position on this subject did not enjoy a consensus. Some of the Jewish literature is very graphic in picturing hell as an “eye for an eye” torture chamber but because the Old Testament is largely silent about the after life, the Jewish position is not uncertain.
 - b. The **early church fathers** were consistent in picturing hell as a place of eternal punishment and suffering. The first four centuries of the church saw the development of hell as a bizarre horror chamber.
 - c. **Dante** (Italian poet of the 14th cent.) continued to develop this tradition with a dramatic contrast between the pain of the damned and the pleasures of the blessed.
 - d. Jonathan **Edwards** and Charles **Spurgeon** pictured hell in much the same way - as an eternal torture chamber.
3. The traditional Christian teaching
 - a. **Universal immortality** — all human souls are immortal.
 - b. **Conscious unending torment** for unbelievers — the “lake of fire.”
 1. Literalists - use fire and brimstone language.
 2. Metaphoricalists - see the language as symbolic.
4. Three questions challenging the traditional teaching:
 - a. **Is it reasonable** for a fair God to consign a part of His creation to such a fate? (Secular sentimentality seems to be the force behind this logic.)
 - b. **Is it possible** for a person to be tormented by the pain of fire without being consumed by it in the process? (This question suggests that the language of hell may be symbolic of an indescribable torment.)
 - c. **Is it Scriptural** in the sense that the text demands a traditional literalist interpretation? (Much of the traditionalist view is shaped by tradition that goes beyond the text of the Bible)
5. Alternatives to the traditional view.
 - a. **Materialism** — everything ends at physical death. The soul is not immortal.
 - b. **Universalism** — all are immortal and eventually “saved.” The Liberal gospel = “*A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.*” H. Richard Niebuhr
 - c. **Conditional Immortality** — only believers are granted immortality (eternal life). The unbeliever is annihilated at physical death or after a period of torment. Among those who hold this view are: Clark Pinnock, John Stott, Philip Hughes, & C.S Lewis. “*Hell was not made for men. It is in no sense parallel to heaven: It is “the darkness outside,” the outer rim where being fades away into nonentity.*” C.S. Lewis, “The problem of Pain”

D. **The Biblical Testimony**

1. **The Old Testament**

- a. The Old Testament describes the final state of the wicked as a place of general destruction or annihilation.
 1. “like a vessel broken to pieces” Ps.2:9.

2. “ashes trodden under foot” Mal.4:3.
 3. “smoke that vanishes” Ps.37:20.
 4. “chaff carried away by the wind” Ps.12:4.
 5. “a slug that melts” Ps.58:8.
 6. “straw that is burned” Is.1:31.
 7. “thorns and stubble in the fire” Is.33:12.
 8. “wax that melts” Ps.68:2.
 9. “a dream that vanishes” Ps.73:20.
 10. “pass away,” “be no more” Prov.2:21-22, 10:25, 12:7 24:15-20.
- b. This stands in contrast to the fate of the “righteous” who are rescued from death to enjoy God forever. (Ps.9, 21:4-10, 36:9-12, 49:8-20, 52:5-9, 59, 73, 92)
 - c. One important text suggests an “**everlasting contempt**” for the wicked that parallels an “everlasting life” for the righteous (Dan.12:2).

2. The New Testament

- a. **Matt.13:41-42** “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the **furnace of fire**; in that place there shall be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**.”
- b. **Matt.25:46** “And these will go away into **eternal punishment**, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Note the following observations from this text.

1. Hell is a place that is contrasted with eternal life suggesting that the punishment (not extermination) is eternal.
 2. Hell is a place that will exist after the judgment at the end of time.
- c. **Mk.9:47-48** “And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into **hell**, where their **worm does not die**, and the **fire is not quenched**”.
 - d. **Lk.16:23-24** “And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in **agony in this flame**.’”

Note the following observations from this key text.

1. Hell is a place where choices end but existence does not.
 2. Hell is a place where there is an understanding of good, love, and virtue but no experience of these virtues. This is part of the frustration of the soul contributing to its agony.
 3. Hell is a place of suffering for both body and soul.
- e. **II Thess.1:9** “And these will pay the penalty for **eternal destruction**, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.”

Note the following observations from this text.

1. Hell is a place of complete separation from God and the blessings of His Kingdom.
2. This earth is as close to heaven as the unjustified will ever be and it also is as close to hell as the believer will ever be.

- f. **Heb.6:2** “Of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and **eternal judgment.**”

Note the following observations from this text.

1. Hell is a part of the eternal judgment, which is seen as an elementary doctrine of the faith.
2. Hell is a doctrine that is learned about through instruction.

- g. **Rev.14:10-11** “He also will drink of the wine of the **wrath of God**, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be **tormented with fire and brimstone** in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up **forever and ever**; and they have no rest day and night, those who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Note the following observations from this text.

1. Hell is a place of prolonged torment. The eternal nature of hell can be debated but the notion that it is a long period of time cannot be questioned.
2. Hell is pictured as something that will be in view of Christ and the angels but not necessarily the saints.

- h. **Rev.20:10** “And the devil who deceived them was **thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone**, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be **tormented** day and night **forever and ever.**”

- i. **Rom.2:6-10** “⁶ Who will render to every man according to his deeds: ⁷ to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; ⁸ but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, **wrath and indignation.** ⁹ There will be **tribulation and distress** for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, ¹⁰ but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

1. This text clearly indicates that something other than annihilation awaits the unredeemed.
2. This and other texts like it can be explained from an annihilationist view but only by using means that seem to the average and trained reader to be heroic and unnatural.

3. **Degrees of punishment** are suggested in Scripture.

- a. Lk.12:47-48 “many and few lashes”
- b. Rom.2:5-6 “storing up wrath in the day”
- c. Matt.11:24 “more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah”
- d. Rev.20:12-13 “According to their works”
- e. II Tim.4:14 “Lord will repay him according to his deeds”
- f. Jn.19:11 “the greater sin”

E. **The Annihilist’s Critique of the traditional view.**

Note: Some evangelical scholars—Philip Hughes, John Stott, I. Howard Marshall, John Wenham, Clark Pinnock, C.S. Lewis - hold this view. “When Christ fills all in all and God is everything to everyone (Eph.1:23; I Cor.15:28), how is it conceivable that there can be a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fullness and by its very presence contradicts it?” *Philip Hughes*

1. **“Unquenchable Fire”** Mark 9:43,48

Note: Matt.3:12 suggests that “unquenchable” is not incompatible with “annihilation” of that which is burned up. (See also Isa.34:9-10)

2. **“Undying Worms”** Mark 9:48

Note: Isa.66:24 suggests that “undying worms” is not incompatible with the termination of the wicked. The issue seems to be one of undying shame, not pain.

3. **“Gnashing of Teeth”** Matt.13:41-42

Note: Psalm 112:10 suggests that “gnashing of teeth” is more a description of rage than physical pain and endless suffering. (See Luke 13:28)

4. **“Eternal Punishment”** Matt.25:46

Note: “Eternal” can refer to the effect and not the act. “Eternal fire” is used in Jude 7 to describe the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah - cities that were consumed and destroyed (forever) by fire (that was temporary). Note that Jude 7 is used as an example of what will happen to the wicked at the judgment. Heb.6:2 “eternal judgment” addresses the effect of the judgment not the event.

5. **“forever and ever”** Rev.14:10-11, 20:10

Note: Revelation is a symbolic book whose apocalyptic images should not be taken literally. “Forever” can have a temporal sense as in Isa.34:10 where the fire that will consume Edom “shall go up forever.”

- In Gen.13:15 the land of Canaan is given to Israel “forever”.
- The Law is to be a statute “forever” (Ex.12:24; 27:21; 28:43).
- Sodom's fiery judgment is "eternal" (Jude 7) until -- God "will restore the fortunes of Sodom" (Ezek.16:53-55).
- Israel's "affliction is incurable" (Jer.30:12) until -- the Lord "will restore health" and heal her wounds (Jer.30:17).
- The sin of Samaria "is incurable" (Mic.1:9) until -- Lord "will restore ... the fortunes of Samaria." (Ez.16:53).
- Ammon is to become a "wasteland forever" and "rise no more" (Zeph.2:9, Jer.25:27 until -- the Lord will "restore the fortunes of the Ammonites" (Jer.49:6).
- An Ammonite or Moabite is forbidden to enter the Lord's congregation "forever" until -- the tenth generation (Deut.23:3):
- Habakkuk tells us of mountains that were "everlasting" until -- they "were shattered" Hab.3 3:6).
- The Aaronic Priesthood was to be an "everlasting" priesthood (Ex.40:15), that is-until-it was superceded by the Melchizedek Priesthood (Heb.7:14-18).
- Many translations of the Bible inform us that God would dwell in Solomon's Temple "forever" (1 Kings 8:13), until -- the Temple was destroyed.
- The children of Israel were to "observe the Sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant" (Exodus 31:16)-until -- Paul states there remains "another day" of Sabbath rest for the people of God (Heb.4:8,9).
- The Law of Moses was to be an "everlasting covenant" (Lev.24:8) yet we read in the New Covenant the first was "done away" and "abolished" (2 Cor.3:11,13), and God "made the first old" (Hebrews 8:13).
- The fire for Israel's sin offering (of a ram without blemish) is never to be put out. It shall be a "perpetual" until -- Christ, the Lamb of God, dies for our sins.

We now have a better covenant established on better promises (Lev. 6:12-13, Heb. 8:6-13).

- God's waves of wrath roll over Jonah "forever" until--the Lord delivers him from the large fish's belly on the third day (Jonah 2:6,10; 1: 17); Egypt and Elam will "rise no more" (Jer.25:27) until -- the Lord will "restore the fortunes of Egypt" (Ez.29:14) and "restore the fortunes of Elam" (Jer.49:39).
- "Moab is destroyed" (Jer.48:4, 42) until--the Lord "will restore the fortunes of Moab" (Jer.48:47).
- Israel's judgment lasts "forever" until -- the Spirit is poured out and God restores it (Isa.32:13-15).
- The King James Bible, as well as many others, tells us that a bond slave was to serve his master "forever" (Exodus 21:6), until -- his death.
- "Eternal" (Greek *aionia*, *αιωνια*) is sometimes used of a limited (not endless) period of time. But the most common use is illustrated in II Cor.4:18 where it is contrasted with "temporal" and in Philemon 15 where it is contrasted with "for a while."

6. Biblical references suggest annihilation.

- a. "die" — Rom.6:21,23.
- b. "perish" — Rom.2:12.
- c. "be destroyed" — Gal.6:8; I Cor.3:17; II Thess.1:9; Phil.1:28, 3:19; Jude 10.
- d. Ps.1:3-4,6 "like chaff that the wind drives away . . . the wicked will **perish**" (Ps.2:9; 34:16,21; 37:9-10; 50:22; 69:28 with Dan.29:20)

7. God's final and ultimate victory over all evil does not seem to fit the traditional view.

- a. If Christ is to be "over all" (Eph.1:10, 21-22) and God is to be "all in all" (I Cor.15:28) how can there be a dimension of reality perpetually opposed to God?
- b. If all creatures in heaven and earth will bow before the throne (Phil.2:10-11, Rom.14:10-11) and all things will be reconciled to God (Col.1:20, Acts 3:21) how can some creatures forever exist in hostile rebellion to God?
- c. If in the end there will be no "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Rev.21:4) and no sorrow or death, how can it be that multitudes will suffer an endless second death?

8. "How can one reconcile this doctrine (of eternal punishment) with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Is He not a God of boundless mercy? How then can we project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness? Torturing people without end is not the sort of thing the "Abba" Father of Jesus would do. Would God who tells us to love our enemies be intending to wreck vengeance on his enemies for all eternity? . . . What would we think of a human being who satisfied his thirst for revenge so implacably and insatiably?" Clark Pinnock in *Four Views on Hell*, p.140

9. Karl Barth introduced a third concept (*das Nichtige*—"the nothing"). Those who have rejected God, and therefore reality, cease to exist to everyone except himself or herself in that they are isolated in their own unreality.

F. **The Traditional Response to this critique.**

1. "Everlasting destruction or punishment," (II Thess.1:9; Matt.25:41,46) makes specific reference to the punishment, not the results of punishment, i.e., annihilation.
2. What need is there for a resurrection of the wicked if they are annihilated at death?

3. The language of Rev.14:9-11, 20:10 seems to demand at least a period of suffering, certainly not quick annihilation.
4. Although “everlasting” can very well refer to the effect and not the action of destruction, it seems redundant to use “everlasting” as an adjective to “destruction” unless the process is in view.
5. The fact that Scripture refers to degrees of punishment would suggest that annihilation is not the expected end. See Lk.12:47-48; Rom.2:5-6; Matt.11:24; Rev.20:12-13; II Tim.4:14; John 19:11.
6. In Matthew 26:24 Jesus indicates that it would have been better for Judas if he had never been born. Could this be possible if he were annihilated at death?
7. Noah’s generation as well as Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed (Lk.17:27-29), but they shall yet come up for judgment (Matt.11:24).

G. **The metaphorical view**

1. This is the view that seems to be most popular among present evangelical scholars. (Carson, Erickson, Henry, Nicole, Bruce, Graham, Guthrie, Kantzer, etc.)
2. The Bible (reflecting ancient Greek and Hebrew culture) is rich with metaphorical language.
 - a. Lk.14:26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children . . .”
 - b. Matt.5:29 “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away . . .”
 - c. Mk.11:23 “If anyone says to this mountain, ‘Go, throw yourself into the sea,’ . . . it will be done for him.”
 - d. Lk.9:60 “Let the dead bury their own dead”.
3. The **language of heaven and hell** seems culturally conditioned.
 - a. **Heaven** is pictured as a walled city with pearled gates and streets of pure gold (Rev.21). Why would heaven need gates and walls? These are meaningful in an ancient culture only.
 - b. **Fire** is often used in non-literal ways in Jewish writings and in the NT.
 1. Rev.1:14 “his eyes were like blazing fire”.
 2. Jas.3:5-6 unruly words.
 3. I Cor.3:15 “judgment”.
 - c. The **Valley of Hinnom** (southwest of Jerusalem) had a long history of desecration -
 1. to burn children in sacrifice to the Ammonite god Molech (II Kings 23:10).
 2. Jeremiah denounced it as the valley of God’s judgment (Jer.7:32).
 3. It became a garbage pit that burned garbage with sulfur.
 4. The Hebrew name ge-hinnom (canyon of Hinnom) evolved into gehenna (the Greek word for hell).
 - d. **Conflicting language** suggests a non-literal view.
 1. Jude 7 “eternal fire”, Jude 13 “blackest darkness”. (See also Matt.3:10,12; 25:41 alongside Matt.8:12; 22:13; 25:30)
 2. Rev.19:20 “Lake of fire”.
 3. Isa.66:24 “burn eternally” “rotting away with worms and maggots”.
 4. The Qumran texts talk about eternal punishment and annihilation at the same time.

- e. **Physical fire works on physical flesh** not resurrected (spiritual) bodies. This suggests that the fire may be metaphorical in some way.
 - f. **Rabbinic hyperbole** is evident in the New Testament. “let the dead bury their own dead (Lk.9:60), “Gouge out” and offending eye (Matt.5:29), etc. In Jewish literature we see examples of symbolic language. Bodies in hell are said to “rot with maggots (Judith 16:17), and also burn with fire.
4. If hell is created for the Devil and his demons, who are spirit creatures how can it be a place of physical torture for humans?

Conclusion

1. Lewis, “**Sin** is man saying to God ‘go away and leave me alone.’ **Hell** is God saying to man ‘you may have your wish.’”
2. The Biblical language concerning hell is often vague and figurative, but it does suggest strongly a place of (if not eternal) certainly prolonged anguish and pain in being separated from the light and life of God.
3. There is certainly room for legitimate differences of opinion on this subject, yet extreme dogmatism would be unwise.
4. The doctrine of hell, in a strange way, reinforces the authenticity of the Christian message is that it is a doctrine that we would not expect man to invent or perpetuate. Liberal Christianity is largely a human construct; it is what happens to a revealed religion after human beings finish redecorating it to modern tastes.
5. We might define hell as the state of being where we are left alone with the full weight of our shame, anger, and fear without the grace, love, and hope of God, and apart from any of our God given defense mechanisms.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. What do Americans believe about hell?
- b. Where, in the Bible, do we find references to hell?
- c. What are the words used in the Bible that are sometimes translated “hell”? What do they mean?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How does the Biblical view of hell compare with the views that come from other traditions?
- b. Why is annihilationism so attractive?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. How can a God of love who asks us to love our enemies consign anyone to an eternal torment?
- b. What is the absence of God going to be like?