

Is There Really a Hell?

Rick Rood discusses the biblical teaching on hell, as well as the practical effects of this belief for Christians.

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



The story has been told of C. S. Lewis listening to a young preacher's sermon on the subject of God's judgment on sin. At the end of his message, the young man said: "If you do not receive Christ as Savior, you will suffer grave eschatological ramifications!" After the service, Lewis asked him the question, "Do you mean that a person who doesn't believe in Christ will go to hell?" "Precisely," was his response. "Then say so," Lewis replied. [\(1\)](#)

This story illustrates something that most Christians know, but few articulate: that of all the doctrines of the Christian faith, the one we feel most uncomfortable discussing is the doctrine of eternal punishment or hell. And it is not difficult to understand why this is so. The doctrine of hell is offensive to unbelievers, and contradicts the emphasis on tolerance and on human potential that dominates our times. Who of us enjoys alienating our friends by speaking of eternal judgment for sin? For many of us, the doctrine of hell is also difficult to reconcile with the the love and grace of God. Furthermore, we are well aware of Christians who have misused the doctrine of hell by using it to manipulate and control other people. In seeking to distance ourselves from the abuse of this doctrine, and to avoid appearing intolerant and uncaring, many of us have eliminated the word "hell" entirely from our vocabulary (making our belief an entirely personal matter).

Recent surveys have revealed some very interesting facts about current attitudes toward hell. A survey conducted by George

Gallup in 1990 revealed that just under 60% of Americans believe there is a hell (down over 10% from 1978), though only 4% believe that hell was their own personal destination. A survey in the mid-1980s of American evangelical college and seminary students revealed that only one in ten believed that the first step in influencing unbelievers for Christ should be to warn about hell. 46% of seminary students believed that to emphasize to non-believers that eternal judgment would be a consequence of rejecting Christ was "in poor taste." A survey conducted in 1981 revealed that 50% of theology faculty believe in the existence of hell (61% of Roman Catholics, and 34% of Protestants)! [\(2\)](#)

In spite of the prevailing current attitudes toward hell revealed by these surveys, however, it is still apparent to most Christians that the doctrine of hell is firmly grounded in the teaching of Scripture. All but one of the letters of the Apostle Paul mention the wrath or judgment of God on sin. And of the twelve uses of the word *gehenna* (the strongest word for hell) in the New Testament, eleven come from the lips of Jesus himself! In fact, the Savior taught more about hell than He did about heaven! Of the more than 1850 verses recording the words of Christ, 13% pertain to the topics of judgment and hell. Of the 40 or so parables uttered by Jesus, more than half relate to God's eternal judgment on sin. Surprisingly, the much beloved "Sermon on the Mount" contains some of Jesus' most straightforward words about hell!

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

In his book simply titled "Inferno," Dante Alighieri describes in great detail his imaginary tour through nine levels of hell. Dante's book makes for fascinating reading. But to learn what hell is really like, we must turn to another source: the Bible.

As we begin reading through the Old Testament, we find frequent references to "sheol" (the world of departed spirits)

as the abode of all the dead (cf. Deut. 32:22). As we continue reading, we find also that a day will come when the bodies of all who are in sheol will be resurrected: some to “everlasting life” but others to “everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

The common belief of godly rabbis during the intertestamental era that sheol was divided into two sections is reflected in the New Testament, which refers to the abode of the righteous as “Paradise” (Lk. 23:43) or “Abraham’s bosom” (Lk. 16:22), and the abode of the unrighteous as “Hades” (Lk. 16:23). After Christ’s resurrection, it appears that those who resided in Paradise were ushered into the presence of God in heaven where they await the future resurrection of their bodies. But those who are in Hades await a resurrection to a different destination— hell.

The word that is used most frequently in the New Testament for hell is *Gehenna*. Gehenna is a reference to the Valley of Hinnom located on the south side of Jerusalem, which served as the city’s “garbage dump” during Jesus’ time. The fires that burned here never went out.

As did his contemporaries, Jesus referred to Gehenna as the place where “the fire is not quenched” and where “their worm does not die” (Mk. 9:48). Whether He implied a literal flame and a literal worm is not of great importance. Jesus also described hell as a place of “outer darkness” (Mt. 22:13). But it is clear that He meant us to understand that hell is a place of continual deterioration and suffering for those who inhabit it! Jesus also referred to those who were cast into hell as being “cast outside” (Mt. 8:12), or as Paul simply puts it “away from the presence of the Lord” (II Thess. 1:9). Hell is a place of exclusion and loss of every blessing that comes from God. Hell is described as a place of “contempt” by the prophet Daniel (Dan. 12:2)—where every person is despised by every other inhabitant. As one writer has put it: “Sinners in hell will have company but no sympathy” [\(3\)](#)

Jesus said hell will be a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:42). The weeping no doubt speaks of terrible remorse and grief. But the gnashing of teeth speaks of intense anger—anger at oneself, anger at Satan, anger at God. Paul speaks of hell’s inhabitants as experiencing “wrath and anger ... trouble and distress” (Rom. 2:8-9).

The Bible also tells us that in hell not all will be judged alike. Jesus made it clear that there will be degrees of judgment in hell. He said that the one “who knew his master’s will and did not ... act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few” (Lk. 12:47-48). But though not all will be judged equally, all will be judged with certainty. Exodus 34:7 tells us that though the Lord is “compassionate and gracious, ... yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.”

Why Would a Loving God Send People to Hell?

Does the Bible teach that hell is a place of eternal conscious punishment for sin? One alternative proposal is that for many (if not all) a second opportunity will be given after death to respond to the grace of God. Appeal is usually made to the statement in Peter’s first letter that “the gospel ... has been preached even to those who are dead” (4:6). William Barclay states that in this passage we find a “glimpse of nothing less than the gospel of a second chance” (Commentary on the Epistles of Peter). Yet, the context makes clear that he is speaking of those to whom the gospel was preached during their lifetime, but who now were deceased! There is no indication at all that a “post-mortem” opportunity to repent exists.

In John 8, Jesus says that for those who “die in their sins” there is no possibility of joining Him in heaven (vv. 21,24). In contrasting the expectation of the believer of being

reunited with loved ones in heaven, he says that unbelievers "have no (such) hope" (I Thess. 4:13). These statements are difficult to reconcile with the belief that the deceased are offered a second opportunity after death. Hebrews 9:27 says that "it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."

Another proposal, that is gaining a wider acceptance today, is that unbelievers will simply be snuffed out of existence or "annihilated." Support for this belief is often sought in statements throughout Scripture that describe sinners as "perishing" or being "destroyed." The psalmist says, "May the wicked perish before God" (68:2). The same word, however, is used in Isaiah 57:1 to refer to the righteous: "The righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart." It is clear that in the latter case, the word implies "severe suffering." It could not possibly mean that the righteous are "extinguished." There is, therefore, no reason to believe that the opposite is the case when the word is used to describe the fate of sinners. To "perish" or be "destroyed" means to "suffer ruin," not to be "annihilated."

That the Bible teaches eternal conscious punishment for sin in hell, is the only deduction that can be reached from the fact that the most emphatic words available to the biblical writers were consistently used to describe hell's endless duration, as well as to describe the duration of heaven, and even the eternal existence of God! Just as Jesus described the destiny of the righteous as "eternal life," so He described the destiny of the unrighteous as "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:46). Just as John described God as the one who "lives forever and ever" (Rev. 15:7), so He described the fire of hell as lasting "forever and ever" (Rev. 14:11).

Sometimes it is said that the Greek word for eternal (*aionios*) really means "age lasting," implying that at the end of a series of ages God will empty hell of all its inhabitants. Those who hold this interpretation, however, fail to recall

that while this present age is finite in duration, it was the common understanding among Jesus' listeners that the "age to come" was eternal!

In reference to the fate of Judas, Jesus said: "It would have been better for him if he had never been born" (Mt. 26:24). If indeed it is as terrible a fate as these words suggest, and if it is eternal in duration, why would a loving God send people to hell? If God is a God of love, why would He consign anyone to an eternity as terrible as the Bible describes the fate of those whose destiny is hell?

Perhaps the biblical doctrine of hell can begin to make more sense to us when we reexamine our understanding of two other teachings of Scripture: the nature of God, and the nature of man and of sin.

One of the wonderful revelations of Scripture is that God is a God of infinite love and grace. Who of us is not refreshed when we read the words of the psalmist: "But Thou, O Lord, art a God merciful and gracious, Slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth" (86:15)? Yet it is the same God who is also described as the One who "will by no means leave the guilty unpunished" (Ex. 34:7)! The God who loves the sinner is also the God whose "eyes are too pure to approve evil" and who cannot "look on wickedness with favor" (Hab. 1:13). The psalmist quotes God at one point as saying, "You thought that I was just like you" (50:21). But we are in need of the realization that just as God's love is far beyond our own, so the purity of his holiness exceeds all our conceptions! When Isaiah was granted a vision of the Lord on his throne, he was shaken by his impression of his holiness (Isa. 6:3)! For sure, God is a God of indescribable love, but He is just as much a God of absolute holiness and righteousness! When we gain a vision of the holiness of God as it is portrayed in the Bible, we begin to understand the reasonableness of the doctrine of hell.

We are also helped when we allow Scripture to more fully inform us in our comprehension of the nature of man and of sin. The emphasis in our generation on the value and dignity of the human person has been a welcome corrective to a past overemphasis on the depravity of man. Yet it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that though we are indeed created in the image of God and of very special value in His eyes, nonetheless we are also deeply and indelibly stained by sin in every area of our being. The God who knows every thought and motive of every human heart, said that it "is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer. 17:9). Jesus himself said that "from within, out of the heart of men, proceed (all manner of evil)" by which we are defiled (Mk. 7:21-23)!

When Ezra learned of the disobedience of the people of Israel in marrying unbelievers, he said, "I tore my garment and my robe, ... and sat down appalled" (Ezra 9:3). When the Apostle Paul saw the city of Athens filled with idols, "his spirit was ... provoked within him" (Acts 17:16)! Is it possible that we have lost something of the sense of the seriousness of sin that seemed to grip the heart of these two men?

Some have objected that while sin is certainly worthy of punishment, a "finite" sin is hardly worthy of the "infinite" punishment of hell. But that our rebellion against God should be considered "finite" in nature is not entirely clear.

When we consider that the One against whom we have rebelled is the One who gave us life, who is the source of every good thing that we know in life, and who has extended his love by giving his own Son as payment for our sin, how can we possibly measure the gravity of our sin or the punishment it deserves? When we consider too that there is no indication that those in hell will ever experience a "change of heart" in attitude toward God, perhaps we can see that God's judgment is entirely just.

The Doctrine of Hell: What Difference Does It Make?

We want to focus on three areas of life that should be impacted by our understanding of the biblical doctrine of hell.

The first is our attitude toward sin ... particularly our own. A number of years ago, Dr. Karl Menninger wrote a book entitled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* In it he challenged the popular notion that all of our thoughts and actions can be accounted for by factors beyond our own personal control, that we are rarely responsible for our own conduct. For sure, there are "mitigating" factors in most of our lives that influence our character and conduct to greater or lesser degree. And God is not unaware of these things. "He knows our frame, that we are but dust" (Ps. 103:14). He knows as well that we are born with a sinful nature that is beyond the power of human will to overcome (cf. Rom. 7:14-25). But He also knows that the choice is our own as to whether we approve and condone the fruit of our sinful nature, or whether we turn to Him for grace to hold in check our sinful impulses and to learn to follow his will. In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis said that there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "Thy will be done." The choice is ours as to which kind of person we will become.

When we realize that we are responsible for what we choose to do about our sin, and that it is more than merely an act that may result in unpleasant consequences for ourselves, but that it is also a disposition of rebellion against God, that requires his holy judgment, we cannot help but become more sensitive to its presence in our lives!

The second result of a biblical understanding of hell is a much greater appreciation for the grace and salvation we have

received from God! Our appreciation for the immense value of this gift is greatly enhanced when we fully comprehend the nature of that from which we have been delivered. Our perception of the awesomeness of salvation is determined in large measure by our perception of the awfulness of hell!

Finally, a biblical understanding of hell should move us to include in our proclamation of the gospel a clear warning about the consequence of failing to respond. We need to be more forthright than the preacher whom Charles Spurgeon reported as saying, “If you do not love the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be sent to the place which it is not polite to mention.” [\(4\)](#) C.S. Lewis once said: “If Christianity only means one more bit of good advice, then Christianity is of no importance. There has been no lack of good advice for the last four thousand years. A bit more makes no difference.” [\(5\)](#) If there really is a hell, then Christianity is far more than one more bit of good advice!

In his book *Our Guilty Silence*, John Stott recounts how the seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries to China, not wanting to offend the sensitivities of the Chinese, excluded the cross of Christ and other details from their message. Quoting Hugh Trevor-Roper, Stott says, “We do not learn that they made many lasting converts by the unobjectionable residue of the story.” [\(6\)](#)

There is little question that the doctrine of hell has at times been abused. But as one writer has well put it: “May its misuse not result in its disuse” in our efforts to lead people to Christ.

Notes

1. Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News*, Wheaton:

Victor Books, 1992. p. 13

2. Dixon, pp. 10-13; Jerry L. Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992, pp.2-3.

3. John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992, p. 146.

4. Quoted in Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991, p. 171.

5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960, p. 133)

6. John Stott, *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd, p. 45.

Recommended Resources on the Subject of Hell:

Blanchard, John. *Whatever Happened to Hell?* Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1992.

Dixon, Larry. *The Other Side of the Good News*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1992.

Fernando, Ajith. *Crucial Questions About Hell*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991.

Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. New York: Macmillan Press, 1960.

Morey, Robert A. *Death and the Afterlife*. Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984.

Stott, John. *Our Guilty Silence*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, nd.

Walls, Jerry L. *Hell: The Logic of Damnation*. South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

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