

Why The Doctrine of Hell Is No Laughing Matter

Revelation 20:11-15

Introduction: 1) It was once a Bible doctrine that people believed and feared. It was never far from their minds or absent from serious conversations. But times have changed. American Church historian Martin Marty says, “Hell has disappeared and no one noticed.” (*HTR*, 1985, pgs. 381-398). Alan Bernstein, professor of medieval history at the University of Arizona says, “hell today is enveloped in silence.” Even among evangelicals there is a noticeable absence. The respected theologian Donald Bloesch notes, “The doctrine of hell has passed out of conversation and preaching, even in conservative evangelical churches” (*Insight*, Dec.29, 1986 - Jan. 5, 1987, p. 48). Still, hell has not really disappeared so much as it has been ignored or redefined or lampooned. I think Jeffery Sheler was on to something when he writes, “the netherworld has taken on a new image: more of a deep funk than a pit of fire” (*US News and World Report*, 1-31-2000, p.45).

So today it is “earthly infernos” that get all the attention. As Ross Douthat writes, “Hell means the Holocaust, the suffering in Haiti...And if it’s hard for the modern mind to understand why a good God would allow such misery on a temporal scale, imagining one who allows eternal suffering seems not only offensive but absurd.”

("A Case for Hell," NT Times, 4-25-11). Perhaps no one said it more clearly than theologian Clark Pinnock when he writes, "Let me say at the outset that I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine, a theological and moral enormity, a bad doctrine of the tradition which needs to be changed. How can Christians possibly project a deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness whose ways include inflicting everlasting torture upon his creatures, however sinful they may have been? Surely a God who would do such a thing is more nearly like Satan than like God, at least by any moral standards, and by the gospel itself." (*CTR*, 4.2, 1990, 246-47).

I decided to google "jokes about hell" and got 75,900,000 hits! I googled "hell quotes" and got 63,200,000 hits! There I discovered among a number of statements the following:

"What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love."
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

"Maybe this world is another planet's hell." —Aldous Huxley

"We are each our own devil, and we make this world our hell."
—Oscar Wilde

"Hell is—other people!" —Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*

“What is hell: Hell is oneself.
Hell is alone, the other figures in it
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.” –T.S. Eliot

“There are moments when even to the sober eye of reason, the world of our
sad humanity may assume the semblance of Hell.” –Edgar Allan Poe

“An intelligent hell would be better than a stupid paradise.”
–Victor Hugo, *Ninety-Three*

“I believe I am in Hell, therefore I am.” –Arthur Rimbaud

“Hell isn’t other people. Hell is yourself.” –Ludwig Wittgenstein

“No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,” he began, “especially a naughty
little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?”

“They go to hell,” was my ready and orthodox answer.

“And what is hell?” Can you tell me that?”

“A pit full of fire.”

“And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there forever?”

“No, sir.”

“What must you do to avoid it?”

I deliberated a moment: my answer, when it did come was objectionable: “I
must keep in good health and not die.”

–Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

It is often said that Jesus spoke more often about hell than any other person in the Bible. That is true. The Greek word *gehenna* is found 12 times in the New Testament and is always translated as “hell.” Christ used the word 11 times (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). The only other mention is in James 3:6 in reference to the tongue. Christ warned his listeners to be afraid of *gehenna* (Matt. 5:22) and claimed that only God has the power to cast humans into it (Luke 12:5). He testified that both the soul and the body could enter *gehenna* (Matt. 10:28). The unsaved could go there with two eyes (Matt. 18:9; Mark 9:47), two hands (Mark 9:43) and two feet (Mark 9:45). It is a place marked by fire (Matt. 5:22). In His contrast between the sheep (the saved) and the goats (the unsaved), Jesus said that the unsaved eventually would go into “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).”

Summarizing the teachings of Jesus on hell, using Matthew 25:31-46 as a primary text, Don Whitney says that Jesus taught:

- 1) Hell is real.
- 2) Hell is separation from God.
- 3) Hell is for all the “accursed ones.”
- 4) Hell is eternal.

- 5) Hell is fire.
- 6) Hell is a prepared place.
- 7) Hell is eternity with the devil and his angels.
- 8) Hell is inevitable if you have never come to Christ.
- 9) Hell is inescapable once you are there.
- 10) Hell is avoidable if you will repent and believe in Jesus Christ.

(Heartland, Autumn 1998, pgs. 10-13).

Add to this Luke 16:19-31, The Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, and it becomes clear that our Lord believed hell was real. He leaves no room for either:

- 1) Universalism – the teaching that all will eventually be saved; or
- 2) Annihilationism – the teaching that all who are lost will go into non-existence and simply cease to exist.

*I know Jesus believed in hell because He taught it.

*I know Jesus believed in hell because of the cross!

Robert Murray M'Cheyne got it exactly right:

“The dying of the Lord Jesus is the most awakening sight in the world. Why did that lovely One that was from the beginning the brightness of His Father’s glory, and the express image of His Person, degrade Himself so much as to become as a small “corn of wheat,” which is hidden under the earth and dies?

Why did He lie down in the cold, rocky sepulcher? Would Christ have wept over Jerusalem if there had been no hell beneath it? Would He have died under the wrath of God if there were no wrath to come? Oh! Triflers with the gospel – and polite hearers, who say often, “Sir, we would see Jesus,” but who never find Him – go to Gethsemane, see His unspeakable agonies; go to Golgotha, see the vial of wrath poured upon His breaking heart; go to the sepulcher, see the “corn of wheat” laid dead in the ground. Why all this suffering in the spotless One if there is no wrath coming on the unsheltered, unbelieving head?”

The coming of the Son of God into this fallen world and the bloody cross testifies there is a hell. Now, there is one major objection to address before we investigate our text. Why would a good God punish forever a finite offense at a particular moment in time? This seems unjust or at the least all out of proportion. I believe the answer is two-fold. First, sin against God is far more serious than most imagine. Sin is an act of insurrection against an infinitely worthy and holy Sovereign. Sin is not a slap to the face of a mouse. It is a repeated slap in the face of the King of the universe. Second, as Russell Moore says, “hell is the final handing over of the rebel to who he wants to be, and it is awful. The sinner in hell does not become morally neutral... We must not imagine the damned displaying gospel repentance and longing for the presence of Christ. They do not in hell love the Lord their God with heart, mind, soul, and strength. Instead, in hell, one is now

handed over to the full display of his nature apart from grace. And this nature is seen to be satanic (Jn. 8:44). The condemnation continues forever and ever, because the sin does too” (Why Is Hell Forever).

Transition: Now, what do we learn of this terrible doctrine in Rev. 20:11-15?

Why is hell truly no laughing matter?

I. Unbelievers will stand before the sovereign God of the universe 20:11

- Following the millennial kingdom (20:1-6) and the final defeat of the devil (20:7-10), John sees another vision. John MacArthur calls it, “the most serious, sobering, and tragic passage in the entire Bible.” (vol. 2, 245). It is a vision of “a great white throne,” the place of final eternal judgment. That it is white symbolizes the holiness and purity of the one on the throne, His glory and majesty. This is our great God in all His power and sovereignty.
- Though God the Father and God the Son share the heavenly throne, Scripture would seem to indicate it is the Lord Jesus who will preside at this ominous event.
 - John 5:22, 26-27, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son... For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.”

- Acts 10:42, “And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.”
- Acts 17:30-31, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”
- Romans 2:15-16, “They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”
- 2 Timothy 4:1, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom.”
- King Jesus sits upon the eternal throne of judgment. The risen and glorified Christ is the One to whom and before whom all will give an account. As the scene unfolds the universe’s “uncreation” is described in striking imagery. From the presence of the Son both “earth and sky fled away.” Before the

eternal state of chapters 21-22 began, Isaiah 51:6 says, “the heavens vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment, and they who dwell in it will die in like manner, but my salvation will be forever, and my righteousness will never be dismayed.”

- My friend Matt Chandler provides an insightful observation in the context of what is beginning to unfold before our eyes. He says, “If God is most concerned about his name’s sake, then hell ultimately exists because of the belittlement of God’s name, and, therefore, our response to the biblical reality of hell cannot, for our own safety, be the further belittlement of God’s name. Are you tracking with that? Someone who says hell cannot be real, or we can’t all deserve it even if it is real, because God is love is saying that the name and the renown and the glory of Christ aren’t that big of a deal.” (*The Explicit Gospel*, 44-45). When sinners stand before God at the Great White Throne, they will realize the name and the renown and the glory of Christ is a very big deal. They will be standing before the sovereign God of the universe.

II. Unbelievers will be judged for their personal righteousness not the imputed righteousness of Christ. 20:12-13

- Acts 10:34 teaches that “God shows no partiality.” There will be no ethnic, social or economic discrimination at the great white throne. Now, I do believe there will be a spiritual discrimination. And, though good Bible students disagree, I think there is a distinction between “the great white throne judgment” and what is called “the judgment seat of Christ.” Jesus Christ is the judge at both. However, those who are judged and for what they are judged is radically different. (Note the following Chart).

CONTRASTING THE “JUDGEMENT SEAT OF CHRIST” AND THE “GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT”		
Issue	Judgment Seat of Christ (The Bema Seat of Judgment)	Great White Throne Judgment
Persons Judged	Believers Only Who Have The Imputed Righteousness of Christ	Unbelievers Only who Have Only Their Own Righteousness
Key Scriptures	Romans 14:10 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 2 Corinthians 5:10	Revelation 20:11-15
Basis of the Judgment	Faithfulness in Christ and resultant good works (even to the motivations)	Rejection of Christ and thus one’s own righteousness
Results	Rewards or loss of rewards but not salvation which is secure	Eternity in Hell, the “Lake of Fire”

- John here only sees “the dead,” the spiritually dead (cf. Eph. 2:1-3), those who died apart from Christ. They are called “the dead” four times in these verses. The words “dead” or “death” appears a total of seven times. Further, it is the “great and small, standing before the throne.” One’s status in this life will have no bearing at this judgment. John then sees books plural opened. These are the books of works which contain every action, thought and emotion of all unsaved persons. To say it is something akin to a heavenly video recorder is not enough. It is more than that. In fact the theology of a comprehensive judgment for all persons finds repeatedly biblical support:

- Psalm 44:21, “Would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart.”
- Ecclesiastes 12:14, “For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”
- Matthew 12:37, “For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.”
- Luke 8:17, “For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.”

- Romans 2:16, “On that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.”

Because their name “was not found in the book of life” (v.15) and because in unbelief they rejected the perfect imputed righteousness of Christ, they now stand spiritually naked, fully exposed, before the all-seeing, omniscient Judge of the Universe. And, no one escapes as verse 13 makes clear. The sea, often an image of the evil turmoil of this world system, forfeits its dead. Death, that which claims the body, gives up its dead. Hades, that which claims the soul, gives up its dead. With resurrected bodies fit for hell, peoples from every corner of the earth will stand before righteous King Jesus.

- Now, I want to speak to a very important theological truth. Verse 12 tells us the spiritually dead are judged by “what was written in the books [of works], according to what they had done.” Verse 13 reinforces this truth saying, “they were judged each one of them, according to what they had done.” Here is a theological principle we must not miss. At the great white throne every single person will be judged fairly and equally. But, the people there will not all receive the same penalty and punishment. Everyone will be “thrown into the lake of fire (v. 15; 21:8), but there will be varying degrees of punishment and suffering. You see revelation brings responsibility. The

more you know and reject, the greater and more severe is your judgment.

You may ask, where did you get such an idea? The answer is simple and important. I got it from Jesus. Hear the words of Christ:

- Matthew 10:14-15, “And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the Day of Judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”
- Matthew 11:21-24, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”
- Mark 12:38-40, “And in his teaching he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places

of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Yes, there will be degrees of torment in the lake of fire, but do not be deceived. Everyone in hell will suffer terribly in a place where no good thing is present. And why is no good thing present? Because God is not there in His grace, love and mercy. Randy Alcorn is right, “The unbeliever’s “wish” to be away from God turns out to be his worst nightmare” (“Banished from Humanity: C. S. Lewis and the Doctrine of Hell,” *D. G.*, 3-18-15). C. S. Lewis would add, “To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth; to enter hell is to be banished from humanity” (*The Problem of Pain*).

III. Unbelievers will spend eternity separated from God in the lake of fire

20:14-15

Human language is incapable of describing both the glories of heaven and the horrors of hell. Take all the images that appear in the Bible, including “the lake of fire” (vs. 14-15) and “the lake that burns with fire and sulfur” (21:8), multiply it ten billion times and you will still not give an adequate description of those who experience the second death.

- “The pit is prepared. The fire is made ready. The furnace is now hot, ready to receive them. The flames do now rage and glow. The glittering sword is whet, and held over them, and the pit has opened her mouth under them.... O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in.” (Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”)
- “It is an unworthy motive to preach on hell to frighten people into the family of God... We preach it because it tenders the hearts of the Christians and creates within them a concern for the lost people... No redeemed child of God can look through the eyes of the scriptures at the awful glaring destiny of the lost and not have a grave concern about the sinners on their way to eternal damnation... The mantle of the prophet falls upon the shoulders of a preacher who can look through the eyes of this great doctrine at a lost world.” C.E. Autrey, Prof. of Evangelism, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1957 Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference.
 - Death and Hades (body & soul joined together) are cast into hell, the lake of fire. This is the second death – spiritual death; eternal death; permanent separation from God forever. Alone. Trapped. Imprisoned. No way out. No 2nd chance.
 - Hell is never seeing God. What an awful and great punishment.

Yes, in one sense God is there (Ps. 139). However, the lost will have no sense of His gracious presence, only His terrible wrath.

- Finding their name absent from the book of life, they are all, each and every one, “thrown into the lake of fire.” Language like this leaves no room for any form of universal salvation, an intermediate state of purgatory, a second chance, or annihilation of the wicked. This is the eternal infliction of punishment resulting in the physical and spiritual and mental misery mentioned by Jesus (Mt. 25:41, 46). The wicked will be tormented without rest, day and night, forever (Rev. 14:11). Remember, “it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). This day is coming and it will be impossible to avoid it.

Conclusion

- 1) Dorothy Sayer was a close friend of C. S. Lewis. She died in 1957. When it comes to the doctrine of hell, she was filled with insight and wisdom. We do well to consider her words.

“There seems to be a kind of conspiracy, especially among middle-aged writers of vaguely liberal tendency, to forget or to conceal, where the doctrine of hell comes from. One finds frequent references

to the “cruel and abominable doctrine of hell,” or the childish and grotesque mediaeval imagery of physical fire and worms.”...

But the case is quite otherwise; let us face the facts. The doctrine of hell is not “mediaeval”: it is Christ’s. It is not a device of “mediaeval preistcraft: for frightening people into giving money to the church: it is Christ’s deliberate judgment on sin. The imagery of the undying worm and the unquenchable fire derives, not from “mediaeval superstition,” but originally from the Prophet Isaiah, and it was Christ who emphatically used it....one cannot get rid of it without tearing the New Testament to tatters. We cannot repudiate Hell without altogether repudiating Christ.” (Dorothy Sayers, *A Matter of Eternity*, ed. Rosamond Kent Sprague [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973], p. 86).

- 2) Thus the great patristic preacher John Chrysostom wisely advised, “Let us think often of hell, lest we fall into it.”
- 3) And Charles Spurgeon would add, “Think lightly of hell, and you will soon think lightly of the cross....He who does not believe that God will cast unbelievers into hell will not be sure that He takes believers into heaven.”
- 4) In an interview the great heavyweight boxing champion Muhammad Ali said “The most important thing about life is what’s gonna happen when you

die. Are you gonna go to heaven or hell, that's eternity." He then added,
"It just scares me to think I'm gonna die one day and go to hell."

Muhammed Ali is wise to have such a fear, because the doctrine of hell is
no laughing matter.