

What Does the Bible Say About Hell?

Revelation 20:11-15

Introduction

1. "Hell has disappeared and no one noticed." These words came from the respected American Church historian Martin Marty in the latter part of the 20th century. To some degree we must judge his assessment as correct, though that does not mean people have completely removed hell from their mind or their tongue.
2. In January 1987 *Insight Magazine* ran an article entitled, "Hell Hath Little Fury These Days." In that article the following judgments were given:
 - Alan Bernstein (Professor of Medieval History, University of Arizona) – "hell today is enveloped in silence."
 - Donald Bloesch (theologian, Dubuque Theological Seminary) – "The doctrine of hell has passed out of conversation and preaching, even in conservative evangelical churches."
3. However, March 25, 1991, *US News & World Report* runs as its cover story "The Rekindling of Hell" and a lead article entitled "Hell's Sober Comeback." They noted that 3 in 5 Americans, 60% believed in hell, up from 53% in 1981, 54% in 1965 and 58% in 1952. Interestingly only 4% believed they had a good or excellent chance of going there. Hell is real for many, it's just no one, at least not me, is going to be there.
4. In July 1997, *The Dallas Morning News* ran a point/counter point article entitled "Has Hell Frozen Over?" Representing the sentiments of modern liberal theology, Lonnie Kliever, Chairman of the Department of Religious Studies at S.M.U. said, "The idea that God could have created the world, knowing, much less predestinating, that some of his creatures would suffer in hell forever in hell is incompatible with a God of unlimited power and love. Belief in an eternal hell is, in the final analysis, an admission that evil is stronger than good, that hate is deeper than love." Former evangelical Clark Pinnock likewise finds the traditional view of hell repulsive and unworthy of the God he envisions. Opting for annihilationism, the view that unbelievers simply go into existence, he says, "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 ordinary moral standards... everlasting torment... makes God into a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for victims whom he does not even allow to die. How is one to worship or imitate such a cruel and merciless God?... I consider the concept of hell as endless torment in body and mind an outrageous doctrine...which needs to be changed. (*CTR*, Spring 1990, 243-259). Again hell is evacuated.
5. Fast-forward to July, 1999. The Pope issues a statement from the Vatican announcing, "Hell is not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the condition resulting from attitudes and actions which people adopt in this life. More than a physical place, hell is the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy. So eternal damnation is not God's work, but is actually our own doing. Hell is the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God." The Pope's statement ignited a firestorm of reaction. R. Albert Mohler, Jr. responded on August 3, 1999 with "Should We Lose the Fear of Hell? The Pope Redefines the Doctrine." In the article he writes, "The Pope's denial of the traditional Christian understanding of hell is one more step in a progressive rejection of the very real and very horrible picture of hell revealed in the Bible. The temptation to "air condition hell," as one Catholic magazine put it, is constant in a secular world that rejects hell as outdated and promises

some kind of vague harmonic convergence in the afterlife. In popular culture, hell has gone the way of the hula hoop. It simply doesn't fit the modern secular mind. As British novelist David Lodge once remarked, "At some point in the nineteen-sixties, hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't. Different people became aware of the disappearance of hell at different times." Though Americans poke fun at "hellfire and brimstone" sermons, you are not likely to hear one in most pulpits, where hell has been conveniently domesticated for popular consumption. In liberal Protestantism, the traditional concept of hell is simply denied and "demythologized." Among some evangelicals, the preferred practice is simply to preach the promise of heaven and avoid hell at all cost. Polls consistently reveal that most Americans believe in heaven – and believe they are going there. Far fewer believe in hell, and almost no one believes he is headed there. Modern Americans are quite certain that their democratic deity wouldn't do anything so rash as to consign their neighbors to eternal punishment; much less themselves."

US News & World Report would respond to the Pope's declaration with a cover story on Jan. 31, 2000 entitled, "Hell Hath No Fury." They would note 64% of Americans still believe in hell, but only 34% believe it is a real place where people suffer eternal fiery torments and that 53% believe it is an anguished state of existence eternally separated from God. Their sobering judgment, "Indeed, the 20th century was nearly the death of hell. Lampooned by modern intellectuals and increasingly sidelined by preachers preferring to dwell on more uplifting themes, the threat of post-mortem punishment of the impenitent in an eternal lake of fire all but disappeared from the religious mainstream by the 1960s. Theological discourse on the subject at the nation's divinity schools almost evaporated. And while polls showed that the majority of Americans professed to believe in hell's existence, almost no one thought he would go there. (p. 47)

Newsweek, Nov. 1, 1999 had again reported, of those polled, only 3% believe they will be going to hell.

6. - So philosopher Barry Kogan says, "The hottest fires of hell probably burn in the human heart, in the harmful ways we treat each other."
 - Les Kaye, author of *Zen at Work*, may identify hell as life stagnation, the absence of spiritual practice (*RNS*, 2-27-01).
 - *Newsweek* may opine in its "Conventional Wisdom Watch" on the last week of 2001 that Timothy McVeigh is a "benchwarmer for bin Laden in hell" (Dec. 31, 2001/Jan. 7, 2002, p. 12).
 - And Buddhist lama Rimpoché Nawang Gehlek may say, "There is no such thing as a doomed soul in Buddhism. But there is such a thing as a prolonged period of suffering over many lives brought on by negative karma. Karma truly means 'cause and effect.' The terrorists [of 9-11-01], by killing so many people, are creating a negative karma that keeps them in hell for a long time through many lifetimes of suffering" (*RNS*, Oct. 26, 2001).
7. However, as interesting and fascinating as all of this is, the most important question still remains to be answered: WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT HELL? And complementing that questions, WHAT DID JESUS TEACH ABOUT HELL? We will quickly survey the gospels to answer the latter question. We will turn to Rev. 20:11-15 to answer the former.
 - What did Jesus think?

Jesus spoke more often about hell than any other person in the Bible: “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 (18:9; Mark 9:47), two hands (v. 43) and two feet (v. 45). It is a place marked by fire (Matt. 5:22). In His contrast between the sheep (the saved) and the goats (the unsaved), Christ said that the unsaved eventually would go into “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41).” Summarizing the teachings of Jesus on hell using Matt. 25:31-46 as a primary text, Don Whitney of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary says 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.

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 – all will eventually be saved.
 - 2) Annihilationism – all who are lost will go into non-existence.
- *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 cross testifies there is a hell.

Transition: Now, what insights does John provide for us in Rev. 20:11-15?

I. **Those who go to hell will stand before God. 20:11-12**

“God’s Judgment Day will be far less harsh on us and we should not fear it. His judgments will finally crystallize around the truth of our lives, not the spin put on it by public relations or the caricature made of it by legal distinctions. The worst that can happen to us in God’s all-knowing presence, is that our untruthful, self-applied layers of makeup and make-do will be gently removed and we will at last reach the goal of our lives: to become ourselves. That revelation of the truth about who we are and what we really did for or to others will come less as punishment than as relief for millions of good people whose hearts were in the right place beneath the compromises and mistakes they made in life. In short, God runs a sinner-friendly final judgment. God’s judgment is a cure for, rather than a curse on, our imperfect ways... Our small vanities will not be held against us. God is very easy on imperfections. God’s judgment is freeing because he gently allows us to come to, accept, and forgive ourselves for what we truly are. We will see clearly, for example, when we loved less than we thought but also when we loved more than we imagined.” (“Who Should Run Judgment Day - - God or Alan Derchowitz?” *RNS*, Dec. 4, 2000). This is the opinion of Eugene Kennedy, Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Loyola University in Chicago. How incredibly different is the picture painted for us by John in the Word of God.

1. **Unbelievers come before the Great White Throne. 20:11**

Then I saw – what follows takes place after the millennium and the final rebellion by Satan.

Him – The Lord Jesus. Why?

- **John 5:22, 26-27**, “For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, ... For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man.”

- **Acts 10:42**, “And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He [Jesus] who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead.”

- **2 Timothy 4:1**, “I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom.”

Great White Throne – Great – dignity of the judge, the extent of its judgment. White – purity, holiness and justice of the one seated there. Throne – sovereign majesty and authority.

- **Psalm 9:7-8**, “But the Lord shall endure forever; He has prepared His throne for judgment. He shall judge the world in righteousness, and He shall administer judgment for the peoples in uprightness.”

From whose face the earth fled... this is the universe’s uncreation stated in poetic imagery. It expresses the fear of corruptible creation before the presence of God in anticipation of the “new” in chapter 21. The scene is unnerving, as everything in all of creation flees from its Creator. What is to follow at this throne is terrifying to imagine. Unbelievers, in their own righteousness, will stand before the sinless, perfect holy Savior whom they rejected. Words cannot capture the horror of the moment.

2. **Unbelievers are condemned by the books of works. 20:12**

- Hell is an equal opportunity provider for the spiritually dead (cf. Eph. 2:1). Those without Christ are called the dead 4 times in this text. “Dead” or “death” occurs 7

times. Note small and great “dead ones” are here. Your status in this life, your accomplishments and accolades in this life will count for zero when you stand before the great white throne.

- Hell will not be equally hot and terrible for everyone. There will be degrees of punishment. Revelation brings responsibility...
- Hear the words of Jesus:

Matthew 10:14-15, “And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!”

Matthew 11:21-24, “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.”

Mark 12:38-40, “Then He said to them in His teaching, “Beware of the scribes, who desire to go around in long robes, love greetings in the marketplaces, the best seats in the synagogues, and the best places at feasts, who devour widows’ houses, and for a pretense make long prayers. These will receive greater condemnation.”

Yes, there will be varying degrees of punishment, but everyone in hell will suffer terribly and miserably in a place where nothing good is present.

Books – books of works, which contain the record of every thought, act and emotion of every unsaved person.

Psalms 44:21, “Would not God search this out? For He knows the secrets of the heart.”

Ecclesiastes 12:14, “For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Matthew 12:37, “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.”

Matthew 16:27, “For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works.”

Luke 8:17, “For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light.”

Romans 2:16, “In the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.”

Punishment in hell will fit the sins. No one will call God unfair or unjust when His heavenly video recorder plays back, “This is Your Life.” These books will tell one side of the story. But another book will tell the other side.

Book of Life (cf. v. 15) – This corresponds to the ancient idea of a divine register and also to the registry of citizens in ancient cities. It contains the record of the names of all persons who have trusted and received Jesus as Lord and Savior (cf. Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:15; 21:27).

Philippians 3:20 says, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” If your name is in the Book of Life it will not be in the books of works. But, if your name is in the books of works, it will not be in the Book of Life.

Transition: Those who go to hell will stand before God.

II. Those who go to hell will be sentenced by God. 20:13

- “Preaching that downplays God’s wrath does not enhance evangelism: it undermines it. One survey of evangelical seminary students revealed that nearly half (46%) felt preaching about hell to unbelievers is in poor taste.” John MacArthur (quoted in *MEF Newsletter*, Feb. 2000, page 4).
- God’s wrath is a reality, a reality never more evident than at the judgment of the great white throne.

1. God’s summons goes out to all.

- The sea, Death (claims the body) and Hades (claims the soul).
- Every speck of dust, every particle that makes up the bodies of the unsaved will be regathered and reformed when they stand “naked” before the Savior. With resurrected bodies fit for hell they will all, from every corner of the earth, stand before God.

2. God’s standard is applied to all.

- A 2nd time we are told, “they were judged, each one [added for emp.] according to his works.
- How will the unsaved be judged from the books? First, by how they responded to the Word of God (which they rejected). Jesus said, “He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him in the last day” (Jn. 12:48). Even if people never read the Word of God, they will still be without excuse (Rom. 1:20; 2:12) because God’s law was written in their hearts (Rom. 2:14-16), and the revelation of God could be discerned in their consciences from creation (Rom. 1:19-20). Second, their own words will judge them: “But I say to you that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matt. 12:36-37). Third, their own works (v.13) will judge them. All the evil that people thought, said, or did will be manifested and properly rewarded in that day. Concerning the wicked, one writer put it this way: “Back they will come, with faces wrecked and ruined by sin and with souls knotted and gnarled, shriveled and shorn by lust and hate, envy and scorn, passion and pride, iniquity and crime. Back they will come to be judged – according to their works” (John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation*, p. 258). The Bible is clear: “be sure your sin will find you out” (Num. 32:23).

III. Those who go to hell will be separated from God. 20:14-15

- “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.

1. They experience the second death. 20:14

- Death and Hades (body & soul joined together) are cast into hell, the lake of fire.
- Second death – spiritual death; eternal death; permanent separation forever from God. Alone, no way out, no 2nd chance.
- Timothy George, “Hell for me would be I would never see God. That would be the greatest punishment.”
*In one sense God is there (Ps. 139), but the lost will have no sense of His presence, other than that of His wrath.

2. They experience the suffering of fire. 20:15

- Is the fire literal? I don’t know. I do know...
 - 1) I don’t want to find out.
 - 2) Whatever it is, it is worse than you could ever imagine.
- Language like this leaves no room for any form of universal salvation, soul sleep, 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 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).

Conclusion

In an interview in the year 2001 boxing champion Muhammad Ali was asked if there was anything he was afraid of. His response: “I’m afraid of not going to heaven.” Ali is wise to have such fear.

- The great preacher from the early church, John Chrysostom, wisely advised, “Let us think often of hell, lest we fall into it.”
- Charles Spurgeon adds, “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 will take believers into heaven.”

- And note the thoughts of C.S. Lewis, “No one ever goes to heaven deservingly – and no one ever goes to unwillingly.”
- How appropriate that the One who died so we should not suffer punishment actually will judge those who have rejected His grace. Charles Haddon Spurgeon again says, “He shall be the judge. He shall lay open the thoughts and intents of the heart. There will be no witness needed to convict you, for the Judge will know all the evidence. The Christ whom you despised will judge you; the Savior whose mercy you trampled on, in the fountain of whose blood you would not wash, the despised and the rejected – it is He who will judge you.”