

# HELL: WHAT IS IT?

By

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Perhaps no other doctrine has been so abused as that of the destiny of the lost. Not too much is said these days about hell-fire and damnation, as the idea conflicts with the popular bumper-sticker doctrine that whoever you are, you can smile because God loves you. Of course, the sinner who still has some conscience left doesn't buy that kind of easy grace. So the church has tried the "hold-'em-over-hell-and-shake-'em" approach and also the "something-good-is-going-to-happen" approach, and a quiet "ho-hum" is the general response to both.

Is there a hell? A better question might be, "What is hell?" The word isn't found in the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, but four different Greek words were translated "hell" in the King James Version of the Bible.

**Sheol:** This is an Old Testament Hebrew word translated as "hell" 31 times. The same word also appears 31 times translated as "grave" and 3 times as "pit." When the Psalmist says, "If I make my bed in hell, behold thou art there" (Psa. 139:8), he simply means that even burial in the grave does not remove him from God's care.

**Hades:** This is the Greek equivalent of *sheol*. It appears 10 times in the New Testament. The quotation in Acts 2:27, "thou will not leave my soul in hell" (KJV), is from Psalms 16, where it is translated "*sheol*." Again it refers to the grave or place of the dead.

**Gehenna:** Like the word "hades" this is a transliteration from a Greek word and is used nine times as "hell" in the KJV and three more times in combination with "fire" (hell-fire). It comes from the word referring to the Valley of Hinnom, an area outside the city of Jerusalem where idolaters burned their children during the reigns of King Ahaz and King Manasseh (II Chron. 28:3). It was considered defiled and unclean and eventually became the city dump of Jerusalem where fires smoldered and maggots fed on the refuse of animals and criminal bodies thrown there. Jesus described it as a place where the "worm dies not and the fire is not quenched." The word He used for worm is the Greek word for maggot, and did not refer to immortal maggots, but rather to the fact that one always found them there, eating on that which the fire had not destroyed.

**Tartarus:** This word appears only once (II Peter 2:4). Tartarus was a mythical place of detention for punishment, and is used only in reference to the "angels that sinned."

So we have three meaning for the one word, "hell."

1. The grave or pit.
2. A place for burning garbage.
3. A place or condition of detention for sinful angels.

The only one of the three that has to do with the punishment of the sinner is "Gehenna." In all the references of man being cast into "Gehenna," it is in the future

tense. “The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation and to reserve the unjust unto the day of judgment to be punished” (II Peter 2:9). Jesus said that “the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28–29).

Jesus emphasized this fact, that the punishment of sinners would not take place until His return. “So shall it be in the end of the world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Mt. 13:40–42).

Paul writes that those who obey not the gospel “shall suffer punishment, even eternal destruction from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might when he shall come to be glorified in his saints...” (II Thess. 1:8–9).

Contrary to much evangelical emphasis, there are no “lost souls in hell” today. Judgment and hell are still in the future.

What happens in hell? Several scriptures indicate that the wicked will experience intense suffering. It is also plainly indicated that some shall suffer more and some less. “And then he shall reward every man according to his works” (Mt. 16:27). “That servant which knew his lord’s will...shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not...with few stripes” (Luke 12:47–48). If the Bible praises God for anything, it is His justice. Here Jesus plainly teaches that men will be punished according to their deeds, and that not all shall receive the same degree of punishment, although all will eventually be destroyed or put to death, as that is the ultimate object of the fire. In comparing the righteous and the wicked to the wheat and the chaff, John said that Jesus will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Mt. 3:12). Although the fire is unquenchable, this does not say that it will not cease to burn when its work is done, and it certainly does not say that the wicked cast into it are imperishable and must burn forever without ever being burned up! This would be a ridiculous contradiction in the statement.

If the wicked lived forever, being tortured in hell, they would be immortal. But this is impossible because the Bible says that God “only has immortality” (I Tim. 6:16). The teaching that sinners will be immortal in hell was originated by Satan in the garden of Eden when he told Eve “You shall not surely die,” even after God had expressly said that she would, if she ate of the forbidden tree (Gen. 3:4). After she and Adam had sinned God put them out of the garden and posted an angel to guard the tree of life so that man could not partake of the tree and “live forever” (Gen. 3:22). I cannot think of any doctrine taught in churches today any more contradictory to plain Bible statements than the one that says that every person who dies out of Christ must go to live forever in hell, and there be tortured, roasted, seared, scorched, singed, baked and burned without ever being burned up because he is an “immortal soul” and must suffer this torture perpetually and eternally. Not only does this contradict the plain statement that “the soul that sins, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:20), but makes a mockery of the kind of Justice God has demonstrated.

**Not just poof!** From all the scriptures referring to God’s wrath and man’s punishment for sin, it seems clear enough that for the wicked there will be great suffering . Being “cast into hell” doesn’t mean that life will be snuffed out in a flash and a puff of smoke. No one knows how much punishment a person deserves; that is, no one but God,

and he certainly is able to make the punishment fit the crime. But ultimately, there is to be an end to the suffering and to the sinner. As mentioned above, Adam was barred from the tree of life because God didn't want him to live forever as a sinner. The Bible says that the wicked suffer "death" (Rom. 3:23), shall be "destroyed" (Psa. 145:20), shall suffer destruction (Job 21:30), shall perish (Psa. 27:20), shall be burned up (Malachi 4:1), shall be cut off (Psa. 37:9), shall be slain (Psa. 62:3). Aren't these scriptures supposed to mean anything? And if God was trying to say that the wicked would NEVER die but be perpetually tortured, could He not have said so, instead of saying over and over that their lives are to come to an end?

**What of these Scriptures?** I know many are thinking about Matthew 25:40. "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire, which is prepared for the devil and his angels." In the first place this text does NOT say that the cursed are eternal. It says nothing about eternal souls or immortal sinners. In the second place the "eternal fire" does not necessarily mean a continuous burning, but a fire that produces an eternal effect. This is exactly the meaning of the term as used in Jude 7, which describes the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as being "set forth as an example, suffering the punishment of eternal fire." The fire is not still burning, but the cities were destroyed for eternity.

And what of Matthew 25:46, which says that the wicked are to go into "eternal punishment" and the righteous into "eternal life."? "The wages of sin is death." The punishment is death, and it is death that is eternal, not the process of punishing.

**Who's in charge?** All my life I have heard people speak of the "devil in hell" as though he were already there. My impression from early teaching was that the devil was in charge of hell as if he were the judge who sentenced the wicked to their punishment. Wrong on both counts! Neither the devil nor anyone else is in hell yet. Gehenna (hell) refers to the fire kindled after judgment (II Peter 3:7). It is the Lord who does the sentencing to death and the devil himself will be a victim of the fire (Mt. 25:41, Rev. 20:10).

God is sovereign and self-sufficient. He can create or not create; he can give life or destroy. He has not created something (immortal soul) which He cannot get rid of! In His ultimate purpose for all created things in heaven and on earth, they must ALL be found "in Christ" and bringing glory to God (Eph. 1:9-10, Phil. 2:10-11, Col. 1:16, I Cor. 15:26-28). There is to be no place for any rebellious spirit or thing in all of God's creation. Furthermore, even "death and hell" are to be "cast into the lake of fire," which is without meaning unless it means the final destruction, rather than continuing torment.

Is that punishment enough? Why is it that some think that final and total death (after a period of suffering) is not sufficient? For centuries people have been trying to eliminate capital punishment, saying it is too severe, that it is stiffer punishment than imprisonment. Yet many believers think a final death for sinners is not enough! Let us be reminded that Jesus died for sin. The penalty was not perpetual torture, but death, and that is the wages for sin which Jesus met. Praise God!

After the destruction of the unbelievers, the people of God will live forever in a new Paradise with God, where there will be no pain, no death, tragedy, woe, tears, sickness, sorrow, nor sin. Everyone will be filled with perfect peace, joy, love and happiness far more glorious than words are able to describe. What a terrible tragedy for anyone to fail to enter into such a life.

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