

The Doctrine of Hell

(1) Jesus spoke more about hell than all the other biblical writers put together.

Mark 9:43-48

⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to **hell, to the unquenchable fire**. ⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. ⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, “where their **worm does not die and the fire is not quenched**.”

Matthew 8:11-12

¹¹ I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, ¹² while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the **outer darkness**. In that place there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**.

(2) Are the fires of hell literal?

Revelation 20:14-15

¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into **the lake of fire**. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

(3) Is hell fair?

(4) Heaven is God's presence.

Psalms 16:11

In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

John 17:3

And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

Numbers 6:24-26

²⁴ The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; ²⁶ the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

(5) Therefore, hell is separation from the goodness and love of God.

2 Thessalonians 1:9

They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, **away from the presence of the Lord** and from the glory of his might.

(6) And sin is the delusion that it is better to be independent from God than to worship him.

Genesis 3:8

And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife **hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God** among the trees of the garden.

John 3:19-21

¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and **people loved the darkness rather than the light** because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things **hates the light** and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God.

Romans 3:10-11

¹⁰ As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; **no one seeks for God.**”

Isaiah 59:2

Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

(7) If hell is separation from God, then even in this life, we begin to experience hell.

Ephesians 4:17-19

¹⁷ Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. ¹⁸ They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. ¹⁹ They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

CS Lewis, The Great Divorce (pg. 77)

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others, but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God “sending us” to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.

(8) But in this life, we never fully experience the absolute emptiness and tragedy of life without God.

Acts 14:16-17

¹⁶ In past generations God allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.

Matthew 5:45

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

(9) But make no mistake, there will be a final judgment:

Sin is saying to God – “let me be free from you.” Hell is God saying – “okay.”

Romans 1:18-25

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. ¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. ²⁴ Therefore God **gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!

(10) But once people suffer the agony of hell, won't they feel sorrow and repent of their sins?

The incredible tragedy of hell is that they will not. Hell is where we suffer total disintegration and delusion. There will never be a change of heart or repentance.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

The rich man also died and was buried,²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and **send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue**, for I am in anguish in this flame.”

²⁵ But Abraham said, “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.”

²⁷ And he said, “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – ²⁸ for I have five brothers – **so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.**”²⁹ But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.”³⁰ And he said, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”³¹ He said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

(11) So why does Jesus paint in such vivid detail the reality of hell.

Two reasons:

To warn us and wake us up to the awful reality of sin.

To show us how much God loves us. Jesus suffered hell for us to rescue us.

Luke 22:44 [The cup of God's wrath]

And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.

Luke 23:44 [Outer darkness]

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour.

Matthew 27:46 [Separation from God]

And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eli, Eli, lemasabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

John 19:28 [Cosmic thirst]

After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), "I thirst."

Notes

(1) Jesus spoke more about hell than all the other biblical writers put together.

Mark 9:43-48

The word for “hell” here is *Gehenna*. “GeHinnon” – Valley of Hinnom, outside of Jerusalem. It was the garbage dump of the city, where refuse and the bodies of criminals and dogs were thrown to be burned. This is the metaphor Jesus evokes when he speaks of hell as a place where there is unquenchable fire and the maggots do not die. Hell is an eternal burning (signifying torment) and an eternal decomposition (falling apart and becoming more and more dehumanized).

Matthew 8:11-12

Jesus gives us two more metaphors of hell. Hell is an outer darkness. This signifies banishment from the presence of God – who alone is true light. It is a picture of utter isolation and alienation. Hell is a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is a picture of the absolute misery and sadness and bitterness and anger of those in hell. The grinding of teeth is a picture of bitterness and anger.

If Jesus, the Lord of Love and the Author of Grace, spoke about hell more often and in a more blood-curdling, vivid manner than anyone else, it must be an important truth. It must be vital to our ultimate happiness and well-being to know about hell. The doctrine of hell is vital to Christianity and the message of Jesus.

And if we dismiss this teaching, we are really saying to Jesus, the greatest teacher of love and grace in history, “I am less barbaric than you Jesus and I am more compassionate and wiser than you.”

(2) Are the fires of hell literal?

Revelation 20:14-15 – “lake of fire”

No – the fire and all the other images are metaphors and symbols. (Obviously, fire and darkness cannot co-exist. And we know there are people in hell right now, but they will not have a body until the resurrection.)

But this fact should give us no comfort whatsoever. The reality will be far, far worse. Just as heaven will be far greater than those images we have in Revelation – streets of gold, etc. These are word-pictures helping us to understand the greater and deeper reality of what is to come. Hell will be far more awful than mere literal fire.

(3) Is hell fair?

This is the real issue here today. What makes the doctrine of hell so objectionable and repulsive to modern people is that they find the teaching to be profoundly unfair.

The image we have is that God sends people to hell simply because they didn’t believe in Jesus. That seems profoundly unfair, especially considering hell is eternal punishment. This makes God look incredible vindictive and cruel. People desperately don’t want to go to hell, but God casts them in anyway – “too late! Now you’ll suffer forever! Muhahaha!” God is sitting on the lid of hell and people are desperately trying to get out.

I want to question the idea that God sends people to hell against their will.

This is really going to cook your noodle, but the Bible teaches that, actually, hell is God giving people what they truly want. No one in hell will want to be in heaven. That even though hell is a place of torment and grief, it is the preferred reality for all those who do not know God in Christ.

(4) Heaven is God's presence.

First, we need to fundamentally redefine heaven. Modern culture gives us this image of heaven being this giant amusement park. It's the place where you can eat as much delicious food as you want, play any game, get massages – like some kind of super vacation that never ends.

But the Bible fundamentally defines heaven in God-centered terms. Heaven is the presence of God. Paradise is to know God and enjoy his presence forever.

(5) Therefore, hell is separation from the goodness and love of God.

HeavenHell

presence of God
“light”

away from the presence of God
“outer darkness”

(6) And sin is the delusion that it is better to be independent from God than to worship him.

John 3:19-21

Sin is trying to get away from God – meaning, sin is really a desire to get to hell.

{ Heaven -----sin-----> Hell }

The passage in John is profoundly deep. People “love” the darkness. Why? Because their sin and rebellion makes the presence of God a horror. The goodness and holiness of God, rather than being something beautiful and joyful, is something horrid and repugnant. There's a line from Milton's book, Paradise Lost, “better to rule in hell than serve in Heaven.”

(7) If hell is separation from God, then even in this life, we begin to experience hell.

Ephesians 4 – Paul is telling us that life without God is a gradual coarsening of the heart and a descent in folly. In that sense, sin is deception because it promises happiness, but like all drugs, what was once joyful becomes empty and full of despair.

CS Lewis gives us a great insight in that hell is really the end of a trajectory that begins in this life. Hell is the forever reality of a journey that begins in this life.

(8) But in this life, we never fully experience the absolute emptiness and tragedy of life without God.

Acts 14, Matt. 5 tells us that in this life, God shields the ungodly from the full reality of their sins. So that in this life, no one really fully escapes God. They still enjoy the reflected glory of God's goodness and his common grace and so their hearts are restrained. We can still see beauty and goodness in those who reject salvation in Christ.

Illustration of a cave. Imagine someone living in a cold, dank miserable cave, where it's 50 degrees. They have never left the cave and when you tell them about the beauty and warmth of the outside sun, they flatly reject that such a thing exists. However, even if they never see the sun or believe in the sun, nevertheless, the sun is what keeps them alive and keeps the cave from plummeting to 200 degrees below zero. In other words, they enjoy the indirect warmth of the sun.

(9) But make no mistake, there will be a final judgment:

Sin is saying to God – “let me be free from you.” Hell is God saying – “okay.”

Hell is the destination sinners freely choose and desperately want. They hate the light. Sin is trying with all might to get away from the loving embrace of God. And hell is the rightful justice of God saying – okay. CS Lewis has this haunting line from The Great Divorce, “*there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, ‘they will be done,’ and those whom God says, in the end, ‘they will be done.’*”

(10) But once people suffer the agony of hell, won’t they feel sorrow and repent of their sins?

The incredible tragedy of hell is that they will not. Hell is where we suffer total disintegration and delusion. There will never be a change of heart or repentance.

On the surface, it seems like the rich man regrets his choices and wants release.

But notice he never repents of his sins and he never requests to leave hell. Never does he ask to go to heaven.

That’s not his complaint. His complaint rather is that he didn’t get a fair chance. He says – send Lazarus to warn my brothers because I never got a fair warning.

And here we see the blindness, and denial, and self-pity and self-absorption of hell.

The rich man is miserable, yet he blame-shifts, accusing God for his troubles. “You didn’t give me enough evidence!”

And notice the absolute delusion and self-centeredness of hell.

Here is the rich man still ordering Lazarus around like he is his servant. “Go do my bidding.”

The rich man never comes to his senses, but rather descends into an ever darker pit of delusion and self-pity.

The truly scary reality of hell is that it is a prison in which the doors are barred from the inside.

The prisoners do not want to leave. Why would they when the only option is the presence of a good and holy God in heaven? CS Lewis has this fictional scene in The Great Divorce where a bus picks up people from hell and takes them to heaven. The people walk around a bit and it is a place of even greater horror and pain and, even though the people in heaven plead with them to stay, they all return to the bus to go back to hell.

(11) So why does Jesus paint in such vivid detail the reality of hell.

Two reasons:

To warn us and wake us up to the awful reality of sin.

Let’s go back to Matt. 5 where Jesus says better to cut off your hand than go to hell. What is he saying?

He’s alerting us of the awful reality and trajectory of our sins.

To show us how much God loves us. Jesus suffered hell for us to rescue us.

People say, “I don’t believe in a God who would send people to hell. I believe in a God of love.”

Well, how do you know God loves you? People believe in an amorphous vague love that doesn’t really cost God anything. But in Christ, we have a God who endured hell for us to rescue us and love us. Christ suffered the agony of hell in our place so that we can enjoy life eternal in God.

What will sustain us through the troubles of life? What will keep us from the allure of sin and temptation?

Not the vague distant love of the God of the modern world. But the unyielding, relentless, absolute love of Christ who endured infinite agony to have us. Only that kind of love will melt our hearts and transform our lives.