

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #43: WHATEVER BECAME OF HELL?

By John Temples

Hell has come under fire, so to speak. Over the past 20 years, the percentage of people who believe in hell has dropped from 78% to below 50%. When is the last time you heard a sermon on hell? And have you noticed that nobody even remotely considers any more that someone might go to hell? A funeral can be held for the worst, most immoral, non-church-going-est person in town, and the unanimous sentiment of all present is that he will go to heaven (or is already there).

The reality of hell is Biblically plain and clear, but still hard for us to deal with emotionally. Robert Velarde writes in a *Focus On The Family* article, “Doesn’t eternal hell seem like cosmic overkill? Couldn’t God reform bad people or just annihilate them? After all, why punish people forever for one limited lifetime of behavior? And wouldn’t annihilation be preferable to eternal suffering? These objections may seem reasonable at first glance, but...they ignore or fail to understand key aspects of God’s nature as well as human nature. In short, God has made efforts to reform people. Each of us is given a lifetime to reform and embrace God through Christ. Unfortunately, some reject God and His truths, choosing their own path rather than God’s. As for eternal suffering being overkill in reference to limited or temporal behavior, this fails to understand the nature of sin and its relation to a holy God.... Hell is not an easy belief to accept.... C.S. Lewis said of it, ‘There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason. (C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, Macmillan, 1962, p. 118).’ According to Lewis, then, hell is a biblically supported doctrine, has been accepted by the Christian church throughout the centuries, and in his assessment is also reasonable.”

(<https://www.focusonthefamily.com/faith/is-hell-real/>)

In spite of the Bible's plain teaching, though, even Christians struggle with the question of how a loving God could send people to hell. Why? Because hell is *personal*--each of us knows deep in our heart of hearts that someone we know or love will go there unless they change their ways, and we cannot bear that thought. So we might try to rationalize hell away or say that it is temporary, or just figurative. Of course, our emotion-based opinions don't count--we must ask, what does God's word say?

I was recently asked two questions relating to hell: (1) Will the wicked in Tartarus/spirit prison¹ have a chance to get out? (2) What is the nature of everlasting punishment in hell? Here are my answers:

QUESTION #1: Is there anything the wicked in Tartarus/spirit prison can do to get out and not go to hell after the judgment? The answer is no. Their fate is sealed once they are there. Jesus's account of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 answers that decisively. He spoke of the rich man being in torment in Hades (the bad part, Tartarus) and pleading with Abraham to send Lazarus from Paradise with some water. Abraham's answer was "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed [a great chasm has been fixed, ESV], so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us" (Luke 16:25-26).

This text also negates the increasingly popular ideas of both annihilation and purgatory. Annihilation is the idea that those who do not make it to heaven simply cease to exist or disappear. Purgatory is the Roman Catholic tradition based on the extra-biblical book of 2 Maccabees and church tradition that there is an area of "limbo" or transition in which souls can dwell and later reach heaven. Neither idea has any Biblical support.

¹ Tartarus or spirit prison are terms relating to a realm in Hades which holds the spirits of the wicked dead who are awaiting the judgment. This realm is like hell, but it is temporary--it will give up its inhabitants at the resurrection and judgment. It is the present abode of the rich man Jesus spoke of in Luke 16. For a study of this, look at Luke 16:19-31, 2 Peter 2:4 and 9, and Jude 6.

QUESTION #2: What will the everlasting punishment of hell be like? Answer: Well, two things basically--it will be everlasting, and it will be punishment.

Of all the concepts the Bible makes clear, the fact that hell will be forever is among the clearest. Notice these Scriptures:

- Daniel 12:2--"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt." (Notice that in this and many other passages, the same word (everlasting) is used to describe both states, heaven and hell. Hell will last as long as heaven lasts.)
- Matt 18:8-9--"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire."
- Matt 25:31-46--"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.... Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'.... And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."
- Mark 9:42-44--"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched — where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched." ("Their worm" may mean their remorseful and stricken conscience, which will continually remind them in hell of what might have been; or, it may be a figurative reference to maggots that feed on dead bodies. Normally, maggots will feed until there is nothing left for them to feed on; but Jesus describes hell as a place where

“their worm does not die”--it keeps on gnawing and feeding forever, implying continual and eternal existence for the people in hell.)

- 2 Thess 1:6-9--“...it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power....” Some might ask, “How can destruction be everlasting? Answer: In the Bible, destruction does not always mean annihilation. We speak of a car being “totalled”--totally destroyed--but obviously the car does not cease to exist. The Greek word for destroy is *appolumi*, which means “to come to complete ruin.” Vine’s Expository Dictionary says of this word, “The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss; not of being, but of wellbeing. This is clear from its use, as, e. g., of the marring of wine skins, Luke 5:37; of lost sheep, i. e., lost to the shepherd, metaphorical of spiritual destitution, Luke 15:4,6, etc.; the lost son, 15:24; of the perishing of food, John 6:27; of gold, 1 Peter 1:7. So of persons, Matt 2:13, “destroy”; 8:25, “perish”; 22:7; 27:20; of the loss of well-being in the case of the unsaved hereafter.”)
- Jude 7--“...as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them in a similar manner to these, having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh, are set forth as an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”
- Rev 14:9-11--“If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”
- Rev 20:10,14,15--“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.... Then Death and Hades

were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.”

Not only will hell be everlasting, but it will also have these characteristics:

- *Suffering or torment.* The most often-used descriptor of hell is fire, and to suffer or die by fire has to be one of the most dreaded human experiences. The Bible also portrays this fiery torment as constant and unremitting. Hell is also described as a lake of fire. The combination of metaphors--fire and water, burning and drowning--is stunning.
- *Continual remorse, frustration, and anger.* Think of it--the rich man Jesus spoke of in Luke 16 who died 2,000 years ago, is still in Hades, and is still rueing his wasted life; and he is now doing so alongside his five brothers he desperately sought to warn. At the judgment, his temporary state will become permanent.
- *Eternal consciousness and awareness for those ensconced there.* The rich man in Hades (which is a type or foretaste of hell) could see, hear, feel, and remember his earthly life. He knew who he was and why he was there.
- *The complete absence of God, Christ, and any good person or thing.* Jesus described hell as “outer darkness”--complete, utter darkness, far as possible from any light. God is light, and outer darkness is the complete absence of God. The other side of that coin is who WILL be in hell. It’s a horrible thought for those who despise the wicked here that they will have to spend eternity in their company. And that brings up another staggering thought: the residents of hell will include Satan himself.²

A couple of final thoughts: God will not “send” people to hell; they will go there by their own choices. Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). But in His divine justice, God will also send to hell those who have served Satan. But He will do so with sadness. God is not a cruel tyrant. He will derive no pleasure in sentencing anyone to hell. Ezekiel 18:23 says, “Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the lord God, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?’” And Peter tells us, “The Lord is...not willing

² Another misconception people have about hell is that Satan is going to be “in charge” of it. Revelation 20:10 plainly states that at the end of time, Satan will be cast into the lake of fire and will be tormented therein just like everybody else. Satan will not be “the warden”--he will be one of the inmates.

that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). God has done everything He could possibly do within the framework of His divine justice to keep us out of hell, up to and including the sacrifice of His own Son. While Jesus was on the earth, He emphasized the vital importance of avoiding hell. In fact, He spoke more about hell than He did about heaven!

We may be tempted to rage at God and criticize Him for preparing a hell of fire; but we need to hold our tongues and trust Him to do what is exactly right and just.
--John Temples