

# What Is Hell Like?

The subject of Hell can be very contentious. I recall an evangelist telling a group of us back in the 1970s that when he addressed a crowd of unbelievers, he could speak on nearly any subject without much trouble, but when he spoke about Hell, it often evoked an emotional negative response from one or two of the listeners. These days, evangelists rarely engage people in open-air campaigns, but the subject can still stir up much debate, even amongst Christians. Therefore, it is best to be well-armed with the correct answers.

This paper will briefly look at the following:

- Hell defined
- Past beliefs and attitudes
- The intermediate state
- Is Hell everlasting and is it just?
- The trial
- The effect of Hell on its occupants
- Summary
- A practical application of the doctrine

## Hell defined

One authority makes the point that the English word 'Hell' "... is from a Teutonic root meaning 'to hide' or 'to cover'"<sup>1</sup>

The King James Version of the Bible uses the word 'Hell' quite broadly. In the Old Testament, it uses the word 'Hell' for 'Sheol' which is simply the place of the dead - the godly and the ungodly. It is in this sense that the 'Apostles Creed' uses the word when it declares that Jesus descended into Hell and on the third day, rose again.

The New Testament uses the word 'Gehenna' when referring to the ultimate place of the ungodly. In this paper, it is the Greek word 'Gehenna' that I am referring to when I use the English word, 'Hell', unless otherwise indicated.

The origin of the word 'Gehenna' is the valley of Hinnon located SW of Jerusalem. It is the place where people sacrificed children to the god Molech. King Josiah desecrated the site of sacrifice so that people could not continue in the abominable practice (2 Kings 23:10). This site became "a common refuge dump, a place of perpetual fire and loathsomeness"<sup>2</sup> A place that is a picture of the Hell to come for many people.

## Past beliefs and attitudes

I rarely hear a sermon on Hell these days, perhaps that is why I can still vividly remember a sermon on the subject by Billy Graham back in the 1970s. He made the point that many people spend a lot of money to cure pain in their body, but those same people will live a Christ-denying life which will bring them to judgment before God and a place of pain called Hell. He then placed some emphasis on the pain that people will suffer when they go to Hell. This type of preaching is typical of a group of preachers from an earlier period called the "Hellfire and brimstone preachers".

They wanted their audience to firstly fear Hell, then take remedial action through seeking salvation in Christ. It is good that the Godless fear Hell, but some of the preaching/teaching was not balanced. A picture of Hell developed in the minds

of many that was so terrible it became hard to reconcile the picture with a just God.

To protect the name of God from the terrible picture of Hell that had developed in the minds of many, some Bible teachers resorted to ingenious interpretations of the text to argue that there is no Hell at all, or that it is a place of brief pain where the person is annihilated. Others have even speculated that souls are purified in Hell and transported to Heaven. The fact that people are resorting to these ideas shows that they do not understand what Hell is like.

The fact of Hell can not easily be ignored. If you were to get a pair of scissors and cut the word 'Hell' out of the Bible, and then match that action by cutting the word 'Heaven' out every time the word 'Hell' was cut out, you would soon end up with a Bible which failed to give testimony to the existence of Heaven, but it would still bear testimony to a Hell.

## The intermediate state

When a person dies, it is sometimes stated that the person has gone to Heaven, or if the person was a non-Christian and was particularly wicked, it might be stated that he has gone to Hell. While those statements will ultimately be true, they are a simplification of what takes place. When a person dies, there is an intermediated phase which he or she passes through. The exception to this rule is when Christ returns. Those who are dead in Christ will be raised first, then those who are alive will be changed and taken up to be with Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:15-18). So those who are alive at his coming will not go through the intermediate state.

In the intermediate state, people are without a body. Our old body will remain on earth when we die, and it will decay (Acts 13:36). Only the soul and spirit of a person departs this earth at the moment of death. The apostle Paul speaks of being absent from the body from the moment of death, "Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

In another passage we read, "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (Philippians 1:22-24).

All who have died wait for the resurrection of a new body. For those who go to be with the Lord, it will add to the joy which they already have, and for those who are ultimately cast into Hell, it will add to the misery they endure.

The resurrection body will not suffer decay. It will be imperishable. The apostle tells us, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a

natural body, there is also a spiritual body.” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

The Bible speaks of only two bodies. The body we have now and the body we receive when we are raised from the dead. So quite clearly, in the intermediate state, people do not have a body. When the apostle John saw those who had died, he did not see their bodies, but only their souls. “... When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.” (Revelation 6:9).

The Westminster Confession sums up the situation well when it says, “The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”

The apostle Paul spoke of consciously being with Christ in the intermediate state, “... We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 5:8). The fact that we will behold Christ immediately after we die is clearly stated by Christ himself. He told the penitent sinner on the cross beside him, “... ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise’” (Luke 23:43).

I have spent some time on the situation for the Christian in the intermediate state for good reason. The Bible says little on the intermediate state for the non-Christian. Knowing what happens to the Christian is helpful because several passages of Scripture indicate that the non-Christian takes a somewhat parallel course. The non-Christian upon death is also without a body. He too awaits the resurrection of his body. The apostle Paul said, “and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.” (Acts 24:15). The book of Daniel also speaks of the resurrection of all of mankind. “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.” (Daniel 12:2).

We learn from the parable of the wheat and the tares (or weeds) that the godly and ungodly will be on the earth together until harvest/judgment time (Matt. 13:24-30). “Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.” (Matt. 13:24-30).

After the resurrection, Christians will be judged to see what reward they should receive. Paul told the Christians at Corinth, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” (2 Cor. 5:10). He also told the Church in Rome, “... For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat.” (Rom. 14:10).

From this we can see that the Christian is not able to receive his full reward until after he has stood before God’s judgment seat. After God’s judgment, his full reward is given.

One other thing must be considered, and that is the final destiny for the believer. Christians will dwell with God forever upon a renewed earth. The Bible says, “‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first

earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” (Rev. 21:1-4). Because it is a common misconception that Heaven will be a place out in the far reaches of the universe, I will quote further passages of Scripture.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (Matt. 5:5). From the book of Romans we learn, “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.” (Rom. 4:13). So here we have it clearly stated that Abraham and his offspring - meaning all believers (Rom. 2:28-29) will inherit the earth. For more on Abraham, see ‘*God’s Covenant With Abraham*’ on the web site.

Just as the Christian must face the judgment seat of Christ before his final reward, so too, the wicked must face the judgment of God before entering his ultimate place of punishment.

The Bible says regarding the great judgment and the final place for the wicked. “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” (Rev. 20:12-15). From the above, we can see that a clear sequence is set out. The wicked wait for the resurrection of a supernatural body. They then face judgment, after which they are thrown into the lake of fire.

The wicked angels (demons or evil spirits) who rebelled against God must also follow a sequence toward their final destiny. “And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but abandoned their own home - these he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great Day.” (Jude 1:6).

Not all evil spirits are kept in this place of darkness - the Abyss. Those who are free are fearful of going there. That is clear from the request that demons presented to Jesus when he came across a demon possessed man. “And they begged him repeatedly not to order them to go into the Abyss. A large herd of pigs was feeding there on the hillside. The demons begged Jesus to let them go into them, and he gave them permission.” (Luke 8:31-32). Satan is bound and held in a great pit (Rev. 20:1-3).

Many demons are held in the Abyss until the day of judgment. Regarding Godless humans, the Bible gives no

detail, but it seems logical that the human wicked upon death go to the same place. There is no necessity on theological grounds that they must go to a different place.

So far, we can see that the Christian and the non-Christian follow a parallel sequence of events.

1. The righteous in Christ and the wicked will remain together on the earth until harvest/judgment time.
2. Both are without a body upon death.
3. Both receive a taste of what is to come in the intermediate location.
4. Both are raised with a supernatural body.
5. Both face judgment.
6. Both enter their final everlasting destiny.

At this point, I must introduce a passage of Scripture which appears to overthrow some of the above neat sequence of events. The passage tells a story of a rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). A contentious point regarding this story is over the question of its nature. Is it a story relating a real event, or is it a parable? If the story is a real event, then every part of the story must be true. If it is a parable, then it is a story made up to convey certain truths.

In favour of the claim that it was a real event is the plain matter of fact way in which it begins. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day." (16:19). A rich man in great luxury and a poor man at his gate in great poverty was a distinct possibility in the time of Jesus.

There are parts to this story which indicate that it is a parable. Angels carry Lazarus to Abrahams side (literally 'bosom' 16:22). Do angels carry the righteous to Abrahams side or is this part of the story to emphasise the special welcoming treatment given to Lazarus in contrast to what happens to the rich man? The rich man sees Abraham in Paradise (literally 'sees Abraham from afar') and calls out to him (16:23-24). Is it a fact that the wicked in Hell (Hades) can call out to people, and then strike up a conversation with them? The rich man asks that water be placed on his tongue (16:24). Where did he get his tongue from if his body is not yet resurrected? What did the angels carry and what did the rich man see if the righteous do not yet have a body? If the story relates a real event, then it means the rich man will at some point in the future be taken out of Hell (Hades), brought before the great judgment, have his sentence pronounced, and be cast back to where he came from. That sequence of events obviously devalues the importance of having the great judgment. As can be seen from the above, treating the story as a real past event creates many problems. Treating it as a parable tends to focus the attention of the reader on the lessons to be drawn from the story. I will come back to some of the lessons later.

### **Is Hell everlasting?**

Some believe the wicked are quickly consumed in the flames of Hell, which means that it is not everlasting. A simplistic reading of John 3:16 seems to support that view.

This well-known verse says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16). The use of the word 'perish' in this verse seems to support the idea that the ungodly will be completely destroyed - annihilated. The Greek is literally 'not may perish' (Gk. *me apoletai*). That 'perish' may not necessarily mean complete destruction, but rather, destruction of well-being, can be seen from how it is used in other passages of Scripture. For instance, "the wineskins will perish", "be ruined" (NIV, Luke 5:37). "... food that spoils..." or literally "food which is perishing" (John 6:27). The same Greek word is used of lost sheep. That is, lost to the shepherd, metaphorically, spiritual destitution. See Luke 15:4, 6. In John 3:16, the word 'perish' is used in the sense of loss of well-being. Of being left spiritually destitute and ruined.

The fire of Hell is eternal (Greek *Aionios*) "... it is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire." (Matt. 18:8).

It can not be argued that the Greek word means temporary because the same word is used to describe God "... the eternal God, ..." (Rom. 16:26). It is used to describe our redemption "... an eternal redemption." (Heb. 9:12).

Some fear those who can kill the body, but Jesus informs people that the first priority is to fear the one who has power over Hell. He said, "I tell you, my friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him." (Luke 12:4-5). See also Matt. 10:28. Quite clearly, Jesus is not telling people that the suffering of Hell is very brief.

### **What is Hell like?**

At this point we come to the heart of the study. Firstly I will deal with the Bible's description of Hell before looking at its effect upon its victims.

In Revelation chapter twenty, it is called "the lake of burning sulphur" (v. 10) and "the lake of fire" (20:14-15). A place of fire is a typical description of Hell. For instance:

Matt. 3:12 "... burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

Matt. 5:22 "... anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell!"

Matt. 13:42 "They will throw them into the fiery furnace..."

Matt. 25:41 "... the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

Mark 9:44 "... the fire never goes out"

Other references include Luke 3:9, 17, 16:24, Heb. 10:27, James 3:6.

### **Hell is just**

Now I must introduce one more parallel situation between the righteous and the wicked. All of the righteous in Christ go to Heaven and are rewarded for their good deeds. The Lord tells us, "Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done." (Rev. 22:12). See also Eph. 6:8, Col. 3:24, Heb.

11:26. Not everyone has the same reward. A parallel situation happens in Hell. All of the wicked go to Hell, but they do not suffer the same amount of punishment. They suffer according to what their deeds deserve. The Bible depicts Hell as a place of just punishment. Jesus told a story which tells of a situation between a master and a servant to show that some will be punished more in Hell than others. "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked." (Luke 12:47-48).

A personal part of the suffering in Hell comes from the 'worm'. The Bible says regarding the worm, "where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'" (Mark 9:48). The Bible says little about the worm. Perhaps the 'worm' is an awakened conscience which gives the person no rest. If that is the case, it would certainly be personal because the greater the sin, the greater the torment for the person concerned. The only things that can be definitely stated about the worm is that it is personal, 'their worm', and it does not die, it will remain forever.

The Bible is clear on the point that people get what they deserve. "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve." (Jeremiah 17:10). The punishment that God gives will be just and will be seen to be just. "...he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth." (Psalm 96:13).

### The trial

A popular view of the trial of mankind is one where God sits on his throne and simply pronounces judgment. It is God versus mankind. However, a statement from Jesus indicates that for some at least, the process is more complicated than that. He reveals the involvement of people in the judgment of fellow mankind. He said, "The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and now one greater than Jonah is here. The Queen of the South will rise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon's wisdom, and now one greater than Solomon is here." (Matt. 12:41-42).

God does not need the testimony of the accusers to arrive at a verdict. He knows the correct judgment before the above process begins. "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." (Heb. 4:13).

God is allowing mankind to take part in the process to satisfy the needs of man. The action of the accusers - 'will stand up' - conveys a sense of indignation at the wickedness of the guilty party. Their actions also reveal their thoughts on the justice of Hell. Quite clearly, they do not think Hell is unjust, otherwise they would not be so eager to condemn the failings of some of fellow mankind.

### The punishment

Some years back, I heard a preacher on the radio give his view on Hell. He asked his audience to imagine holding their hand over a lit candle and to think of the pain they would receive. To understand Hell, they had to imagine their whole body being in flames. There are several problems with this widely accepted view.

(a) The body which is resurrected is not the same as the flesh and blood body, therefore, sensations will be different.

(b) The pain level in the Bible's version of Hell does not match that of the imaginary and sensational version. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we should note that the rich man does not scream endlessly from the pain. He is able to have a conversation and describe his experience. He requests that some water be brought and placed on his tongue to relieve his suffering. This indicates a measured amount of suffering to fit his crime. As stated earlier, the story is a parable, however, this part of the parable needs to be close to the truth. The suffering of the rich man needs to be stated, as it is the reason why he brings his request that Lazarus raise from the dead to warn his brothers. As for the degree of his suffering. It does not make sense that Jesus would under or overstate what the ungodly can expect. Therefore, I believe the parable is a very good guide in that area.

Jesus spoke of the jealousy the wicked will experience. "There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out." (Luke 13:28). We can see from this passage that some of the suffering that the wicked will receive will come from their sense of loss when they see many in the Kingdom of God, but themselves shut out. I think it can be argued that it would be rather pointless to mention this suffering if the overwhelming suffering of Hell was like that of holding a flesh and blood person over the flames of a fire.

(c) In this age, there is much unjust suffering. Jesus suffered unjustly. In fact, he was familiar with suffering (Isaiah 53:3). In the age to come, there will be no unjust suffering. Any suffering the wicked receive must be within God's strict rules of justice which are naturally much higher than that of any human ruler or standard.

The no suffering for the wicked after death view (annihilation) is supported by Atheists and a few others. That idea is justice denied for those who have been terribly wronged by the ungodly. It also denies God's vengeance upon sin. The Bible tells Christians, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." (Rom. 12:19). See also Heb. 10:30-31, Rev. 6:10.

It is well-known that some societies in the past were excessively harsh in dealing with criminals. God forbids his people from beating a man more than forty times. "When men

have a dispute, they are to take it to court and the judges will decide the case, acquitting the innocent and condemning the guilty. If the guilty man deserves to be beaten, the judge shall make him lie down and have him flogged in his presence with the number of lashes his crime deserves, but he must not give him more than forty lashes. If he is flogged more than that, your brother will be degraded in your eyes.” (Deuteronomy 25:1-3). If God expects judges to examine a man thoroughly and then give a just judgment, then it can hardly be argued that he will act differently himself on Judgment Day. Jesus informs us that the judgment to come will be very thorough. “But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.” (Matt. 12:36).

While planning to write this paper, two Christians with different experiences gave their view on Hell. One was of the view that the wicked will be annihilated. The other had recently finished reading a book on Hitler’s Nazi regime. He said, “After reading that book, it makes you glad there is a Hell”. So which of the two is right? Actually their views don’t count. It is what the Bible tells us that matters.

### Summary

There are several views on Hell.

- Hell is a place of extreme never-ending suffering.
- Hell is a place of brief extreme suffering where the person is consumed (annihilated) in the flames.
- Hell is simply the grave.
- Hell is a place of eternal moderate pain. The suffering is in accordance with the level of evil.

Of all the above views, the last is the only one which fits comfortably with the whole of Scripture. It is the only view which meets God’s demands for the punishment of evil and at the same time meet his standards of justice. For those who think God can let sin go unpunished, I must ask the question, “If that is the case, then why did God punish his own Son on behalf of the redeemed in Christ?”

A correct view of Hell affects my understanding of my salvation. If Hell is a place of unjust suffering, then God had to save me to rescue me from a suffering I don’t deserve. But if Hell is a place of just suffering, then God could have let me go to the suffering I deserve, and that would have been just. The wonder of my salvation is that God sent his Son to the cross to save me from a punishment I rightly deserve. It is a case of mercy and love shown to one who does not deserve mercy and love. My own life merits me Hell. It is the life of Christ in my place - substitutionary atonement - which merits me Heaven.

### A practical application of the doctrine

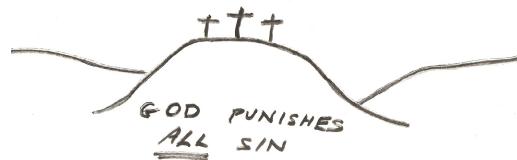
During my ministry at the West Rockhampton Baptist Church in Central Queensland, I gave Bible lessons in the “Religious Instruction” part of the school programme. Most Church Pastors leave that work to others, but I saw the work as an opportunity to reach out to non-Christians in a society where non-Christians rarely take the opportunity to hear the

Gospel.

In my presentation of the Gospel, I spoke about God’s justice and punishment. I presented Hell as a place of just punishment where people get exactly what they deserve. While speaking on the subject, I noticed the children paid close attention to what I was saying. Possibly because my presentation made a lot of sense. On at least a couple of occasions, I drew a picture of a hill with three crosses on it. Underneath I wrote the words, “God punishes all sin”. I informed the children that God does not let any sin go unpunished, either their sin is punished in Jesus Christ, or it is punished in their own bodies in Hell. God is 100% efficient, so no sin goes unpunished.

I was teaching two large classes at the time, numbering 35-40 in each class. At the end of the year, I asked one of the classes to indicate by raising a hand if any of them had placed their faith in Christ during the year. I counted ten raised hands. Around 25% of the class. An indication that the conversions were genuine comes from the fact that there was a big improvement in the behaviour of the children. I took up the second class because a lady teacher had found her class to be too unruly to persist with, so she resigned from the work. The improvement in the children was noticed by the teachers, resulting in their keen support of my Bible teaching programme.

Teaching about Hell is an important part of an evangelism programme. Just telling people that they need to find salvation in Jesus Christ may simply get the response, “Salvation from what?” The reality of a Hell to come must be proclaimed vigorously and accurately.



### End Notes

1. Hell, “*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*”, Ed. Merrill C. Tenney, Vol. 3, p. 114.
2. Hell, “*Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*”, p. 267.

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