



Does Hell Exist?

What should Christians believe about hell?

Introduction

In New England in 1741, a Reformed pastor named Jonathan Edwards preached a sermon called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he said that God holds each sinner over the pit of hell as someone holds a spider over the fire: “There is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God’s hand has held you up.” (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/sermons.sinners.html>).

Though critics say that Edwards’s sermon is more about God’s grace and mercy than damnation, many Christians today find this sort of rhetoric intolerable and

in conflict with the concept of a loving and forgiving God. Christians today might find it difficult to imagine that Edwards’s fire-and-brimstone style of preaching was common in the eighteenth century, and that most Christians believed there was an actual place where the souls of the damned go for eternal punishment.

For Paul, hell is not a place, but is being forever separated from God.

For many Christians today, the idea of hell is simply old-fashioned. Yet there remains among Christians a sense that a just God must punish those who have done evil things, and if that punishment does not happen in this lifetime, then perhaps it happens in the afterlife. In addition, Christians know that there are places that could be described as hell on earth, where innocent people endure unimaginable pain, squalor, hopelessness, grief, starvation, and threat of violence. Hell can exist as a state of mind for those who are severely depressed, mentally ill, or who live in chronic pain; yet we do not believe that these people deserve to suffer because of some sin they committed.

This study will look at where the concept of hell comes from and what the Bible says about damnation.

Where Does Hell Come From? The Ancient Egyptian Version of Hell

The ancient Egyptians believed that the god Anubis weighed a deceased person’s heart in a balance; if the person was righteous, his or her soul (“*ba*”) achieved

Gehenna and Unquenchable Fire

Gehenna (Matt. 5:22, 29–30; 23:15–33; Mark 9:43–48; Luke 12:5), comes from the Hebrew *ge hinnom*, meaning “Valley of Hinnom,” located southwest of Jerusalem (Josh. 15:8; 18:16; Neh. 11:30). There, the Canaanites sacrificed children to the god Molech. Because of these burned children, Jeremiah called it the “valley of slaughter” (Jer. 7:32), and it was believed to be a place where corpses would burn in unquenchable fire (Isa. 66:24; see also 33:14). Gehenna appears in other texts about punishment in the afterlife (Judith 16:17; 1 Enoch 90:25–26; and in the Dead Sea Scrolls). John the Baptist talks about the punishment of unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12), as does the book of Revelation (20:10, 14; 21:8). Some scholars have suggested that the Hinnom valley became a garbage dump that was always smoldering, an apt image of hell.

immortality and reward. The wicked were sent to a place where they experienced a reversal of the pleasures of life: for example, they had to walk upside down, so that they excreted through their mouth. Some of the souls of the dead were hacked to pieces and thrown into a lake of fire (compare Rev. 20:14). The Egyptians did not believe that this torment lasted forever. The point was to destroy and consume the wicked soul so that it no longer existed.

Greek Concepts of Hades and Tartarus

The New Testament describes Hades as a place of fiery judgment (Luke 10:13–15; 16:23–28), but in ancient Greek thought, Hades was merely an underworld for spirits of the dead, a place without reward or punishment. Some Greek myths and poems describe Tartarus, a place reserved for the torment of a few select people who tried to steal divine power. The punishments of the damned are designed to fit the specific crimes against the gods. Sisyphus must continually push a boulder that falls back down because he tricked the god of the dead and prevented him from doing his work. Tantalus is plagued by unending thirst because he stole the food and drink of the gods for his people. The punishments illustrate the futility of trying to usurp divine power. Similar stories can be found in the Bible: Adam and Eve are banished from the garden of Eden for eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3) and the people who build the tower of Babel are scattered and confused (Gen. 11). The offenders, who tried to be like God in some way, are put in their place, consigned to the everyday toils, frustrations, and sorrows of mortal human life, which they pass down through the generations for eternity. Such everyday toil is not hell, but a description of the reality of life in this world.

Zoroastrianism and the Devil

The biggest influence on Jewish and Christian ideas about heaven and hell was Zoroastrianism, an Iranian religion that took a dualistic approach parallel to the dichotomy of God and Satan: the supreme god Ahura Mazda continually battles his evil son Angra Mainyu. Christians and Jews sometimes wonder: “If there is only one God, and God created everything, does that mean that God created evil?” The suggestion that there is an opposing force, not equal to God but a fallen creature of God’s, has contributed to the concept of Satan and to hope for the day when God will overcome evil once and for all.

Unlike Jewish and Christian belief, the Zoroastrians thought that all people would be saved through a rite of purification. In Zoroastrian belief, the dead must undergo an ordeal of refinement by passing through molten metal. For the righteous, the molten metal will feel like a warm bath, but for the wicked, the ordeal will be excruciatingly painful. The ordeal burns away all evil (like the “refiner’s fire” in Isaiah 48:10), so that everyone becomes sinless and can enter the afterlife. Thus, the Zoroastrian version of “hellfire” is something that all dead people encounter, and no one stays there for eternity. The purpose of the fire is to refine and prepare, not to punish. The early church father Origen would adopt the same view of hell: it is a place where God can refine out sin and purge the soul of it (“purge” is where we get the word “purgatory”). In early Christian tradition, the idea developed that in the refining fire, Christians would be able to see their sin and choose to repent.

Biblical Concepts of Hell

The Old Testament and Apocrypha

In the Old Testament, the concept of hell as a place of punishment does not exist. The dead go to a place called “Sheol,” sometimes called the “Pit,” which was a

Dante’s “Inferno”

One of the most influential treatments of hell is Dante Alighieri’s “Inferno” from the *Divine Comedy*, written in the early fourteenth century. Dante’s depiction of a place of darkness, stench, burning, and endless torture, governed by the Devil, endures today in modern imagination. Dante provides vivid descriptions of punishments that correspond to the sin committed. For Dante, eternal punishment is not something God imposes on the sinner; rather, it is the end result of the sin. In hell, the sinners are unable to break free from their obsessions.

For example, those guilty of lust are swept along by strong gusts of wind, like their passion, and the gluttons wallow in excrement and other filth. Those who are guilty of sloth or apathy are submerged in a black mire and sinners who have committed violence suffer a continual rain of fire. Traitors are immersed in a frozen river that emulates their hardness of heart.

shadowy underworld. Sheol was not a place of punishment and torment, nor a place of reward and comfort: “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17). The dead in Sheol are not completely separated from God (see Job 26:6; Ps. 139:8), but they apparently do not do anything or have any connection to the living.

Christians do not have to believe in an actual place of hellfire and eternal punishment as motivation to be good people.

The Old Testament portrays punishment as something that happens during the lifetime of the unrighteous or in the lives of their descendants. Cain must wander the earth for murdering his brother (Gen. 4). God sent the flood (Gen. 5–7) and rained fire on Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19). Korah and his tribe are swallowed up by the earth (Num. 16). And yet there are evil deeds that God turns to good, such as the way Joseph’s brothers treat him (Gen. 50:20; see Gen. 37).

The first mention of reward or punishment in the afterlife comes in the prophetic book of Daniel: “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to everlasting shame and contempt” (Dan. 12:2). Daniel was written during the exile, sometime in the second century BCE, when many Jews suffered death rather than submit to the idolatry of their captors, and the idea that there must be a reward for those who remained faithful was very comforting. Also, it was some consolation to know that there would be punishment for those who persecuted the Jews, as well as for the Jews who renounced their allegiance to Yahweh. Beliefs in heaven and hell arose from this sense of justification in the afterlife.

The books of the Maccabees were also written around this period of time. In the second century BCE, the foreign king Antiochus Epiphanes forbade circumcision, tried to force Jews to eat unclean foods, and erected pagan idols in the temple. Judas Maccabeus led the Jews in a revolt and purified the temple (a story commemorated annually at Hanukkah). During this time, many Jews chose torture and execution over breaking the law of God (for some vivid accounts, see 2 Maccabees 6–7).

The concept of heaven and hell became a very real part of Jewish thought during this time, and it had a large influence on early Christianity.

The New Testament

The New Testament offers different answers to the question of how one avoids damnation, or how one is “saved.” Like the Old Testament prophets, the authors of the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that a person must do good deeds, particularly on behalf of the poor and dispossessed, to be included in heavenly reward. However, the Gospel of John and the apostle Paul imply that salvation is a matter of right belief, not right action. A person can do nothing to save himself or herself—only faith in Christ can do that. The book of Revelation, which has the most vivid descriptions of “the lake of fire” as eternal punishment (see Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14–15), imagines an ongoing cosmic battle between the forces of good and evil (much like Zoroastrianism), a battle that mirrors the struggle of God’s faithful against the forces of evil on earth. Revelation also draws imagery from the book of Daniel.

Protestants traditionally are uncomfortable with “works righteousness”—the belief that we are saved by our good works—as it is portrayed in both the Old and New

Does Salvation by Faith in Jesus Mean That Non-Christians Are Going to Hell?

Though Romans 3–5 seems to condemn non-Christians, Paul himself says that the Jews are not damned because God does not go back on his covenant (Rom. 9–11). The Bible allows for several possibilities. The Old Testament talks about the election of Israel, and yet there is plenty of room for “the nations” (Gentiles, or all non-Jews) at the messianic banquet (Isa. 25:6–10). The bottom line is that matters of salvation and damnation ultimately are in God’s hands, and though the Bible speaks of exclusion, it also has a lot to say about the eventual inclusion of those who seem to be “outside” the circle of the elect.

Testaments. However, Protestants still acknowledge that true faith typically leads to good works and avoidance of evil. Just as the prophets of the Old Testament convey God's concern for the poor, the Gospel of Luke relates a parable of Jesus about the fate of a man who snubbed the needs of the poor. A destitute man named Lazarus begs for food outside a rich man's house, but the rich man ignores him. Lazarus eventually goes to heaven and the rich man goes to hell where he asks if Lazarus could bring him some water to cool his tongue (Luke 16:19–24). In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells a parable about the last judgment, when those who feed the hungry and clothe the naked will enjoy everlasting reward, while those who neglect to minister to those in need will “go away into eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:31–46). These parables indicate that how Christians treat others, particularly those in need, is what separates the “sheep” from the “goats” and makes the difference between eternal reward and punishment.

Paul and the Gospel of John say that good deeds are important, but they emphasize right belief. A person comes to the Father through the Son (John 14:6), and all who believe in him have eternal life (John 3:16). John includes exhortations to serve others—Jesus' injunction to Peter that he “feed my sheep” (John 21:17), and Jesus' example of foot-washing (John 13:14) and laying down his life for his friends (John 10:11; 15:13)—and yet, what constitutes being saved is “abiding” in Christ (John 15:4–10), believing in Jesus.

Like John, the apostle Paul does not say much about hell, per se, but about missing out on heaven, which is eternal life with God. For Paul, hell is not a place but is being forever separated from God. Paul does give instructions for right living that will help Christians avoid eternal death: “If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit” (Gal. 6:8) but for Paul, salvation is a gift from God, based on faith in Christ, not something that can be earned (Rom. 5).

The book of Revelation indicates that the ones who are thrown into the lake of fire are those who opposed God and persecuted the church (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14–15). It would seem that Revelation is written to Christians suffering from persecution, as a means of encouragement and reminder that Christ is already victorious over evil (Rev. 12:7–12).

Should Christians Believe in Hell?

In some ways, hell is a very human concept. The threat of hell has been used in coercive ways, resulting in undermining rather than strengthening faith. Many people do not want to serve a harsh and punitive God. There are people who take comfort in believing that those who do evil things will be duly punished in the afterlife, and yet this sense of vindictive comeuppance can lead to an us-against-them mentality that is detrimental to Christian ideals of forgiveness and redemption. What place does hell have in Christian belief?

Christians do not have to believe in an actual place of hellfire and eternal punishment as motivation to be good people. As the introduction states, there is ample evidence of “hell on earth” suffered by innocent people. There is a great deal of suffering and injustice that Christians can work to help relieve or eliminate in this lifetime, not out of fear of eternal punishment, but as a grateful response to a loving God who empowers us to act. As in Jewish tradition, Christians can work for *tikkun olam*, the healing of this world, to try to erase evils and hellish conditions. Human actions in this life do matter, and not just as a means to heaven or hell. The good or evil humans do continues to impact the world after we die, regardless of what happens in an afterlife.

Conclusion

Christians must decide: do we serve God out of fear and a desire for retribution against our enemies, or out of gratitude, love, and a desire for the ultimate good of all things? The overwhelming evidence of the Bible is that God is just but also loving and forgiving. God does not condone evil, but God redeems that which is lost. Both Jewish and Christian traditions include the concept of a refining fire in which sin is burned away so that only the good in each person remains. Whether or not a person believes in an actual fiery hell, one way to look at it is that even in this life we all experience a metaphorical refining fire that continually prepares us to be more faithful and better servants and that opens our eyes to the needs of the world around us.

About the Writer

Marianne Blickenstaff is an acquisitions editor for Westminster John Knox Press and teaches religious studies at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee.