



Lesson 6 – Hell

“Do you really believe everyone who doesn’t believe in your God is going to hell?” “What about people who give their lives serving others?” “What about people who sincerely believe what they were brought up being taught, just like you are now?” “What about people who have never heard of Jesus?” “How could a loving God torment people in hell forever?” The doctrine of hell is a controversial teaching that brings up all sorts of questions.

In the medieval period everyone believed in hell. Everyone was terrified of hell and feared going there. During the Enlightenment, however, so-called science prevailed over religion, and the spiritual was replaced with the material. In such an age, the word “hell” has virtually disappeared from our vocabulary except as a curse word. Many people think holding onto a belief like hell is backward, cruel, and unimaginable. Those who believe in hell are assumed to do so out of a sick desire to see their enemies suffer in great pain for all eternity. The world hates the doctrine of hell, but if the Bible teaches it then we as Christians are called on to accept and defend the doctrine.

Studying what the Bible has to say about hell is sobering. It will probably make us uncomfortable, and perhaps even sad. But we must teach what the Bible teaches, even if it makes us squirm. Hell is too important a question to get wrong.

Why do you think people avoid talking about hell?

When we deal with the doctrine of hell, we are dealing with two primary questions. 1) Does the Bible actually teach that there is a place called hell? This might seem like an odd question, since the word hell repeatedly shows up in our Bible, but some will argue that our understanding of hell is greatly misguided. 2) Is hell fair? Can we believe in a loving, good, merciful God and also believe in eternal torment? In this lesson the first section will deal with whether or not Scripture teaches hell, and the second will help us think through how to respond to questions of fairness in relation to hell.

Is hell real?

When we ask this question, we are not just asking if the Bible teaches hell, but if the Bible teaches hell as it is commonly understood. We want to know if there will be a place of torment for those who die without Christ, and if that punishment will be eternal.

Is hell really a place of torment?

The Bible describes hell repeatedly as a place of unimaginable suffering. Two Greek words are translated as “hell” in our English Bibles. The first is *Hades*, a general term that refers to where the dead go but can also be used of the place of torment for unbelievers (cf Luke 16:23). The second term is *Gehenna*, a word that refers to a place of punishment and fire after death (cf Mark 9:43; James 3:6). Beyond just these words, there are other references to the destruction and pain that will be brought upon those who reject God and the gospel.

The Bible repeatedly describes hell as a place where there is great torment. In fact, the person who emphasizes this the most is Jesus Himself. The following passages show Jesus’ view of hell:

Look up the following passages and discuss what each one teaches about hell:

- Matthew 25:31-46
- Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43
- Matthew 18:7-9

These statements seem to pretty clearly teach a place of eternal fire, but not everyone is convinced. For example, one preacher argues that fire functions as a metaphor, and the point of the image is disintegration.¹ In other words, we shouldn’t think of people actually enduring the pain of burning, but that this is describing something beyond our ability to understand and fire is simply a metaphor for it.

What do you think of such a view?

The first problem with this view is the sheer number of times that Scripture describes hell as a place of fire. The Old Testament prophets describe it this way. Jesus describes it this way, repeatedly. The author of Hebrews uses the illustration of fire (Hebrews 10:26-27). John describes the end of the lost this way in Revelation 20:14-15. It is possible that fire could be an illustration for something else, but when Scripture describes hell over and over again with fire, we should be very wary of writing that off as a mere metaphor.

But even if this view is correct, and the language of fire is a metaphor for something beyond our experience, that does not solve our problem. If hell is a place so awful that it is beyond our understanding and the closest thing we can come up with is fire, that isn’t too reassuring. But what if the fire is merely describing the destruction of something? After all, doesn’t the Bible describe destruction? That leads us to our second question about hell...

Is hell eternal?

If we agree that the Bible does describe a place of torment and that this torment is a punishment for sins, does the Bible actually teach that this is forever? After all, there are two other ways we could free ourselves from that depressing teaching. We could argue for something called “annihilationism,” which

¹ Tim Mackie, “Isn’t the Idea of Hell Just Plain Mean?” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLAhk0Cvqa4>

says that everyone suffers for awhile and then they cease to exist. Or we could argue for some modified form of purgatory, where everyone is given another chance to repent or to pay for their sins and then they can make it into heaven. Both these views are taught today, but do they find good support in Scripture?

- **Is There a Second Chance in Hell?**

Many would be more able to stomach the Bible's teaching on hell if people in hell were given another chance. As one example of this, C.S. Lewis paints an interesting, imaginative take on hell in his book *The Great Divorce*. Here people are allowed to come up from hell into heaven, but it to be a place that is painful to them, and in order for it to be a place of joy they must be willing to give up their greed, pride, bitterness, and a host of other sins that they refuse to let go of. The book's message is pointed – people in hell wouldn't enjoy heaven and wouldn't be willing to give up their sins even if they saw what hell

Transparently, I would love it if death were not the end and people we knew and love had a second chance. But this is not the teaching of Scripture. Scripture is very clear, "as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). The rich man in hell holds out no hope for getting out of his position and is told that movement between heaven and hell is impossible (Luke 16:24-26). Beyond that, the Jesus specifically envisions people wanting to escape their torment and being refused (Luke 13:22-30). Paul describes the punishment at the end of life as "everlasting destruction" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9). The Bible nowhere holds out hope for another chance at redemption after the grave.

What difference does believing in a second chance after death or believing that death is the end make for us practically?

- **Will Hell Result in Annihilation?**

But what if the point of fire is that people are destroyed, and no longer exist? The problem with this view is that again and again we have seen the word "everlasting" and "eternal" used to describe God's punishments. Although some will try to explain away these words using very sophisticated arguments,² three passages in particular unavoidably lead to the conclusion that hell lasts forever.

Matthew 25:46 contrasts the eternal punishment of unbelievers and the eternal life of believers. The same word is used in both instances, which means that if our joy and life with God will be eternal, so will the torment of unbelievers.

Revelation 14:9-11 describes God's coming judgment on those who receive the mark of the beast. This torture is described as "forever and ever" and as continuing "day [and] night." These descriptions clearly teach an eternal punishment.

² The Greek word for "eternal" is *aionios* related to the word for "age" *aion* and reflects the idea that something will be true in the coming "age" which will extend on indefinitely, and hence is everlasting. Some argue that this word can also mean "age-long" or very long, and therefore need not be eternal in the sense we use the word. A careful exegetical discussion of how this Greek word is used is not needed, however, given the passages that will be looked at in this section.

Revelation 20:10-15 shows us the final destiny of the devil, his angels, the antichrist, the false prophet, and all unbelievers. They are all to be sent to the lake of fire, which we are again told is where they will “be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

God’s punishment is clear in Scripture: eternal torment. While that might make us uneasy, it is the clear teaching of Scripture and must be accepted and believed.

Is hell fair?

Everything we have seen so far from Scripture leads us to believe that there really is a place called hell, that it is a place of torment, and that there is no escape. But as we come to accept what the Bible says, we might find ourselves wrestling with challenging questions.

Is it fair to punish people eternally for their sins on earth?

When we ask the question, “Is it fair that God do...” we are subtly putting ourselves in the place of determining what is right and wrong. Now, as image bearers of God, we are built with a sense of right and wrong, but we need to realize that our sense of right and wrong can be skewed. That means that we need to take God’s view on sin and its seriousness rather than our own. As one writer put it, “I really believe it’s time for some of us to stop apologizing *for* God and start apologizing *to* Him for being embarrassed by the ways He has chosen to reveal Himself.”³ God invites us to ask questions, but at a certain point He reserves the right to declare something so and to ask us to respond in faith.

Part of this comes down to how bad sin is. We take the view that our sin is not so bad – a little white lie, a little lust, a short temper. Yet when we see the way that God treats our sin – eternity in hell or the death of His Son – we begin to realize that sin is a much bigger deal than we have thought.

How would our behavior change if we took sin as seriously as God takes sin?

Is it fair to punish people who have never heard of Jesus?

Some wrestle with whether or not it is right for God to send people to hell who do not know the way of salvation through Jesus. Some try to argue that there might be other ways for people to get to heaven apart from faith in Jesus, ignoring that “there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). But is that fair?

We have to realize that people who have never met Jesus are not sent to hell for rejecting Jesus. They are sent to hell for their sins against a holy Creator. Romans 1 reminds us that the natural man has a

³ Francis Chan and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell: What God Said about Eternity, and the Things We’ve Made Up*, 102. This book is very helpful overall, although the authors do waver on the eternal nature of punishment even if they lean in that direction.

knowledge of God but that he rejects that knowledge and replaces it with a lie. Those who have never heard the name of Christ have still rejected God and have sinned against the commands they have written on their hearts, and it is for those sins that they will face judgment.

What would happen to our evangelism if we thought it was possible to be saved apart from Jesus?

Where do we go from here?

The idea of fellow image bearers burning for eternity in hell is a sobering thought. It makes us uncomfortable, as it should. But it is also the teaching of Scripture, which means we need to wrestle honestly with what an eternal punishment in hell will mean for us as believers.

We Need to Make Sure Our Salvation

The first question that should be answered is whether we ourselves are sure we know where we are going. The stakes are too high to play around. This doesn't mean that if someone has trusted Christ and are living for Him they should be doubting their salvation, but it does mean that if there are any questions they should be addressed. It can be all too easy to live life focusing on the things which are seen and forget that the things which are not seen and which are future are just as real as what we see every day. Too many have had questions about eternity that they put off until a later time, only for that time never to come.

What would you say to a friend who was questioning whether or not they were saved and were fearful they might be headed to hell?

We Need to Warn the Lost

Salvation is not primarily a question of whether you will go to heaven or hell. Primarily salvation is a question of whether you will accept Jesus or whether you will continue to cling on to something else instead. But all the same, we need to warn people that the stakes for that choice are indeed heaven and hell. Fear should not be the only tool in the Christian's belt, but there should be a sense of fear over God's punishment of our sins if we do not turn to Christ. Jesus didn't back away from warning about fear. Paul did not back away. John did not back away, neither did Peter, and neither should we?

What role do you think hell should play in evangelism? How big a deal should we make of it?