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HELL, WHAT IS IT ANYWAY?

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Hell

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Introduction

A study on hell???? Now what is that for you might ask. This topic was chosen because relatively little is known about hell. There is a kind of taboo on the subject among Christians, not to mention what non-believers think about it.

Church history

The term 'hell' will sound familiar to everyone. Most people associate it with unbearable pain and with fire in which the souls of deceased people are tormented. This notion is deeply rooted in our Western folklore. The early church took advantage of the fact that most ordinary citizens were illiterate. The priests told people about hell and used scenes engraved in picture books and stained-glass



windows in these narratives. In this way, people were made aware that they had to be faithful to the church with its many rules. If someone was not faithful, he would be considered an apostate and end up in that terrible place called hell. This fear made people do pretty much whatever the priesthood asked of them.



Later, around 1517, during the Reformation, people began to realise that salvation came purely by grace from God. In that sense, the church could not contribute to their salvation. Jesus was the only way. Yet the images we still have today often come straight from that early period.

What is hell according to many people?

Many people think hell is the domain of Satan. Satan is said to rule there as king over the souls of dead people. Together with his demons, he tortures them day and night. According to many people, hell would already be in use right now. People sometimes make strange statements such as: *"It is better to rule in hell than to serve in heaven."*

Above is an image many people have of hell and some even hope it is reality. Satan (in the foreground) together with his demons (left behind) are hurting people.

Most Christians do know that hell was made or is being made especially for Satan and his

demons. Christians also believe that unbelievers will eventually end up in hell too. So this is pretty much what is known.

The Word 'Hell' in the Bible

The Bible does not give us that much information about hell. The Old Testament does talk about the kingdom of the dead. In Hebrew it is *Sheol*. In our older translations of the Bible, this word is translated as hell.

In the New Testament, the kingdom of the dead also occurs (in Greek *Hades*) and this too was consistently translated with the word hell. Among the pagan peoples, the kingdom of the dead was also known as *Tartarus* (2 Peter 2:4). *Tartarus* is a deep abyss also called a bottomless pit in which fallen angels are confined by God while awaiting the final judgement. In addition, the New Testament also speaks of the *Gehenna*. In newer translations the mostly only translate this word with hell (*Shéol* and *Hades* are simply translated with realm of the dead). Some other translations does not translate the word *Gehenna* and thus simply call it *Gehenna*.

Just to list the terms:

- *Sheol* = Hebrew for realm of the dead
- *Hades* = Greek for realm of the dead
- *Tartarus* = Greek for the deepest abyss of the realm of the dead
- *Gehenna* = Valley of Hinnom just outside Jerusalem



Besides these terms, the pronunciation 'lake of fire and sulphur' or 'lake of fire' is also used. You can understand that a lot of confusion can arise due to the translations. Actually, the word 'hell' itself does not appear in the Bible. The word hell is a generic term for the place where God's adversaries will eventually come.

Kingdom or Realm of Death

I want to leave aside the realm of the dead for now. This is for the simple reason that little is known about it. From Jewish tradition, the kingdom of the dead was seen as the abode of the wicked.

Jesus Himself told the criminal on the cross that he would be with Him in paradise today (Luke 23: 43). This statement by Jesus is perfectly consistent with the prevailing ideas that the dead saints would reside with God in paradise (heaven). It is likely that God has made so little known about the kingdom of the dead to us because He does not want us to engage in this realm.

Leviticus 19:31; 20:27

Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I *am* the LORD your God.

A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death: they shall stone them with stones: their blood shall be upon them.

We see in revelations that the kingdom of the dead is not an everlasting thing. You could say in legal terms that the kingdom of the dead is a place of provisional detention. This place will no longer be needed when judgement is passed.

Revelation 20:13,14

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Gehenna

Gehenna is more interesting to us because Jesus himself uses this term in his teaching. He uses the word mainly to warn us about something, for example in Matthew.

Matthew 5: 29

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell [*Gehenna*].

What would He be warning us about? To find out, we need to know what the *Gehenna* was. The *Gehenna* was a valley just outside Jerusalem. This valley is also called the 'valley of hinnom.' This valley was quite deep and had steep sides. Sunlight could not reach the deepest part of this valley. The *Gehenna* was used to dump all the city's waste.

Anything digestible was left to the worms and the rest was burnt. This place was ideal for this as the stench was stopped by the steep walls. The dung gate ran into this valley and was only used to transport waste through. To handle all the waste, the fire was constantly stoked. The stench had to be terrible because all the organic was just lying around rotting. This place was also used to dump the crucified criminals without any burial. The ultimate shame for a Jew was to have his body left unburied. This could have happened to Jesus too, were it not for Joseph of Arimatea giving Him his own tomb. The *Gehenna* was also known by another gruesome history.



Click on the image for a larger format

2 Chronicles 28:1-3

Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem: but he did not that which was right in the sight of the LORD, like David his father: 2for he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for Baalim. 3Moreover he burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.

So, in this valley, children were sacrificed to the God Moloch. Another nasty detail is that while one could see the city from this valley, there was no view of the valley from the city.

Meaning of this Pun

Most Jews knew that at the end of time there would be judgement on all people. The saints may then live with God forever but the profane would be thrown into a place of judgement.

Isaiah 66:15-16

For, behold, the LORD will come with fire, and with his chariots like a whirlwind, to render his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire and by his sword will the LORD plead with all flesh: and the slain of the LORD shall be many.

Revelations 20:11-15

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

The lake of fire, which Revelation 20 talks about, is an unending torment. The Jews could not imagine a picture that did enough justice to it. The similarity between the *Gehenna* and the fire pool of God's final judgement was all they could think of. The Jews were horrified at the very thought of the *Gehenna*. This was a most unholy place for them. They also knew that the final destination for the wicked would be much worse (than the *Gehenna*).

What Will it be Like in Hell?

Hell will be a place where there is nothing of God's goodness. People will thus experience total spiritual death. They cannot communicate with God simply because they are cut off from Him forever.

2 Thessalonians 1:9

who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power;

There will be a very depressed atmosphere. Those there, according to Jesus, will grit their teeth (from anger?) and weep (from sorrow?).

Mark 9:48

where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched

Some take this literally but it can also be taken as imagery. In the latter case, you could say: a constant 'gnawing' feeling of "If only I had...", and the 'burning' desire for affection.

Matthew 24:51

[...] and shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

All the filth of the whole world and of all times will be there (demons, serious criminals, perverts and so on).

Revelation 21:8

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.

People will be lonely. All good standards like love, mercy, compassion, helpfulness are attributes of God. We will not find these qualities in hell.

James 2:13

For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.

Who were Jesus' warnings for?

Surprisingly, most of the warnings Jesus gave were addressed to His own disciples. We can get that from the context in which His warnings are given. He never addressed sinners directly about hell. Of all His warnings, only twice did He give a warning to the scribes and Pharisees.

Matthew 23:15; 23:33

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves.

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell

Possibly Jesus already assumed that sinners were on the road to hell anyway.

Matthew 7: 13-14

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

Some clear warnings to His own disciples are found in Matthew 5. Jesus is teaching His disciples about living as His disciple. Jesus is not speaking here to unbelievers as many people claim, but to His own disciples.

Matthew 5:13; 5:20; 5:22; 5:29-30

Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.

For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.

And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell [Gehenna].

Once Saved Always Saved?

In other words, if you have chosen for Jesus once, you are sure to live with God for eternity. This is a slogan often shouted when it comes to hell. At first glance, this sounds logical! Yet there are a few snags in this statement. It would suggest that you can say yes to Jesus once, and then you can live as you want again. The text which is often cited as evidence is:

Romans 8:34-39

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's go verse by verse and see what it actually says:

Verse 34

This verse says that Jesus pleads for us before God the Father himself. That's a great thought. But what some people forget to tell us is that we must make it possible for Jesus to intercede for us. Indeed, Jesus warns us in:

Matthew 10:28

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna].

Why? Well because He also says we should not deny Him (deny that we know Him) because then He will also deny us to God the Father.

Matthew 10: 32-33

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.

Verse 35

As long as we continue to trust Jesus, external matters will certainly not be able to separate us from His love.

John 15:9-10

As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

But just a little before this text, Jesus says the following:

John 15: 4-6

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.



Verse 37

Jesus gives strength through His Spirit to endure all problems in our path.

2 Timothy 1:7

For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind.

Thanks to His Spirit, it is possible for us to persevere to live holy to the end.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.

Verse 38 and 39

Paul gives a list of things that cannot separate us from God's love. Note that he only lists things that are beyond us. The only thing he does not list is ourselves.

What does this mean for us?

Jesus says:

Matthew 5:48

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.

You may be thinking now, *"I can't be perfect at all! Maybe a little but certainly not like God the Father!"*. Of course, God knew this too. It was not possible for anyone to be saved.

Romans 3:10-12

as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, There is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; There is none that doeth good, no, not one.



Rescue!!!

Because we do *and* are wrong in God's eyes, we have earned eternal punishment. This is because God cannot allow imperfect people into His kingdom. If He did, His kingdom would no longer be perfect. Moreover, it would go against His just nature. Sin carries punishment and that punishment must be borne, no matter what. Jesus, God's own son has took that punishment for us. He could do that because He was the only human being who was perfect in God's eyes. Jesus died in our place to bear the punishment in our place.

Colossians 1:12-23

giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: The Supremacy of Christ Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for

by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister;

Do not take this lightly. It really cost Him everything. Many people think that Jesus went to hell during His death. In the Bible we can read that He was in the kingdom of the dead. So when was He in hell?

Matthew 17:45-46

Now from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Jesus felt the separation between man and God. A hallmark of hell is the absence of God. No one there will even notice God. Imagine what that must be like.

John 19:28

After this, Jesus knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, saith, I thirst.

Jesus cried out that He was thirsty. Consider the story of the rich man and the poor man Lazarus in Luke. Again, we may wonder whether we are dealing with imagery here or not. The fact remains that we can see from Jesus' reaction that He experienced the full agony.

Luke 16:24

And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.

The good news of it all is that Jesus became alive again after three days. With that act, He conquered both death and Satan. So do we never die again if we believe in Him? Yes, we still die. But! We do not remain so. Our soul will go to God at our death. There we will then remain until the day God decides that Jesus must return to earth. At that time, all deceased believers will be given a new body. Those believers who are still alive will get a changed body in an instant. He will then go and establish His Kingdom on earth and we may dwell there with Him forever.

What to do next

Are you already a Christian? Have you already put all your trust in Jesus Christ? Good for you! That's the most important thing you need to do, put your trust in Jesus. Do you have certain things in your life that you know God cannot be pleased with? Then deal with them as it says in the first letter of John:

1 John 1:9

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Stay obedient to Jesus and do not go your own way.

Colossians 2:6-8

As ye have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk ye in him: rooted and built up in him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.



Do what He says! That includes baptism.

Acts 2:38

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Ask Him for His Spirit. Without His Spirit you will find it difficult to persevere.

Luke 11:13

If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?

Hang in There Until the End!

Hebrews 10:36

For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.

Colossians 3:24

knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.

Revelations 22:20-21

He which testifieth these things saith, Surely I come quickly. Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.