

## The tormenting conundrum of Hell

Hell is a very touchy subject

Hell is a very misunderstood subject

**Is Hell real?**

A lot of people - a lot of "Christians" - don't believe in Hell anymore.

- As of 2009 (according to Pew Research Center), only 59% of "mainline" Christians believed in Hell

**What will it be like? What IS Hell?**

**Is it literal fire burning literal bodies literally every day forever and ever?**

**I think we're influenced more by Dante than by Christ**

- This painting in the Denver Art Museum shows a hell customized to your sin

**For some of us, our own ideas of hell have subtly changed**

- Hell fire and brimstone used to be big players in Sunday sermons.
- Now, we've softened it to "mental anguish" and "separation from God"
- A lot of people believe it's only an idea - not a real "place"

**What do I believe?**

- I believe in Hell the same way I believe in Heaven, but **don't** believe in LITERAL streets of gold
  - We seem to understand the figurative description of heaven, but want the descriptions of hell to be literal!
  - We want literal fire. Literal burning. Literal pain day in and day out.
- I believe in Hell so seriously that I want to get away from caricatures of hell that people don't take seriously
  - red devil poking us with a pitchfork, etc.
- **I think that we may have missed something in our traditional understanding of hell and its fires**
  - I think it has an effect on how we respond to the reality of it all.

**There's a lot we don't know about Hell, but...**

**There are 3 things about hell which are certain:**

1. It will be what it will be - we don't get a vote
2. It will be an appropriate consequence given by a righteous God
3. You don't want any part in it

**What else can we know about Hell?**

Well, we know that there's some kind of fire involved, right?

**So - let's talk about fire...**

## FIRE

### What does “normal” fire do?

- Fire can do a lot of things
  - scorch, burn, scar, and **CONSUME COMPLETELY**
  - **Just like we burn stuff on the farm!**
    - You put stuff in there and it’s consumed.
    - It’s not tortured. It’s not ongoing. It’s consumed. It’s gone!

### But what is the nature of the “fires” of hell?

- We’re talking about a spiritual thing here, so it’s not physical fire.
  - So it’s spiritual in SOME way...
- **But is it a fire which torments or a fire which consumes?**

### Let’s see what the Bible tells us starting with the OT (our schoolmaster).

We’ve discussed the fact that the OT doesn’t talk overtly about Hell

- But there’s a lot of punishment mentioned.
- God often used FIRE for that punishment.

## PUNISHING FIRE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### • Nadab & Abihu - Leviticus 10:1-2

- *“<sup>1</sup> Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. <sup>2</sup> So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and **consumed** them, and they died before the LORD.”*

### • Korah & his followers - Numbers 16:35

- *“And fire came out from the LORD and **consumed** the 250 men who were offering the incense.”*

### With these examples...

- Was the fire used by God as punishment? **YES**
- Did the fire have lasting consequences? **YES**
- Did God torture them with the fire? **NO**
- **The same language used for other enemies of God:**
  - Captain of Samaria & 50 men: 2 Kings 1:9-14

- *“Elijah answered the captain, “If I am a man of God, may fire come down from heaven and consume you and your fifty men!” Then fire fell from heaven and **consumed** the captain and his men”*
- Disobedient Israel & Judah: Hosea 8:14
  - *“But I will send fire on their cities that will **consume** their fortresses”*
- Philistines: Amos 1:7
  - *“Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom, I will send fire on the walls of Gaza that will **consume** her fortresses”*
- Ammonites: Amos 1:14
  - *“Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah that will **consume** her fortresses”*
- Damascus: Jeremiah 49:27
  - *“I will set fire to the walls of Damascus; it will **consume** the fortresses of Ben-Hadad”*
- Moabites: Amos 2:2
  - *“Because he burned to ashes the bones of Edom’s king, I will send fire on Moab that will **consume** the fortresses of Kerioth.”*
- Ar of Moab: Numbers 21:28
  - *“Fire went out from Heshbon, a blaze from the city of Sihon. It **consumed** Ar of Moab, the citizens of Arnon’s heights”*
- many more in the Old Testament.

### • Always “consumed”

## FIRE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

### It’s not just Old Testament that mentions “consuming fire”

- Hebrews 10:26-27
  - *“<sup>26</sup> If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, <sup>27</sup> but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will **consume** the enemies of God.”*
  - This is DEFINITELY not an unclear OT prophecy, this is straightforward
  - He’s clearly talking about what happens to those in Hell.
  - **Tortured? Tormented? No. Consumed.**

Okay - so we’ve established God used **consuming fire** in **ACTUAL** punishment and as a **METAPHOR** for punishment.

## NATURE OF THE FIRE

But talking about Hell, what is the NATURE of that fire?

What can we know except that it's NOT physical?

Thankfully, God gave us a very clear example of what that fire does:

- Sodom and Gomorrah
  - Peter reminds us: 2 Peter 2:6-9
    - "He condemned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them to ashes, and made them **an example** of what is going to happen to the ungodly"
  - Jude also says: Jude 7
    - "In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of **eternal fire**."
- If Sodom & Gomorrah are the icon you double click on to understand the nature of this "eternal fire", what can we learn?
  - The fire destroyed completely - it **consumed** them
  - **Were those cities reduced to nothingness?** Yes
  - **Was there pain and suffering?** Yes
  - **Was it ongoing torture and torment?** No
- **But isn't the fire "unquenchable"?** (Mark 9:43)
  - "And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire."
  - "Cannot be quenched" doesn't mean "unending"
  - It's a fire that you CANNOT stop from doing its job
  - You can't put it out.
- The "eternal fire" here is talking about its **NATURE** not **DURATION**
  - "eternal" as in "consequences last forever"
  - "ETERNAL" doesn't mean "really long time"

Jesus weighs in:

- Matthew 25:41,46
  - "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels.... Then they will go away to **eternal punishment**, but the righteous to eternal life."

- The point is **destination not duration**
- It's the kind of punishment (namely, destruction) not the length of punishment

So - what's the nature of the fires of hell?

- it's **eternal**: lasting consequences
- it's **unquenchable**: can't be stopped
- it's **consuming**: total destruction
  - **Nothing remaining. At all.**

So that's the scriptural description of the metaphorical fires of Hell.

Next, let's answer a real vexing question...

## IS HELL TORTURE OR DESTRUCTION?

### TORTURE?

#### What about the “weeping and gnashing of teeth”? Sounds like torture!

- **We’ve seen this terminology in this class already...**
- **Leading up to the Rich Man & Lazarus and Jesus teaching about not waiting until it’s too late:**
  - *“But he will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!’ 28 In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, **when you see** Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God **but you yourselves cast out**”*
    - (Luke 13:27-28 ESV)
- **WHY WEeping?**
  - **The pain and sorrow that “We missed it! We blew it!”**
    - It’s the look on a criminal’s face when judgement is being passed on them. It’s too late to turn back.
    - It’s the pain in the heart of the wife who just finds out her husband has been cheating on her for 20 years. That can’t be undone.
  - **Their name was not found in the book of life.**
    - **NOTHING MORE CAN BE DONE.**
- **WHY GNASHING OF TEETH?**
  - **A description of anger, not pain.**
    - Acts 7:54; Job 16:9; Psalm 35:16; Lamentations 2:16
  - Anger at whom?
    - Themselves? God? Both?
- **Can you IMAGINE the scene in Matt 7:22-23?**
  - *“<sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’  
<sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”*
  - **Can you IMAGINE being one of those people?**
    - There is NO DOUBT in my mind that there will be weeping.
- **We’re talking loss of self. Loss of identity. Eternal loss upon loss.**

There doesn’t seem to be any discussion of torture at all!

#### But won’t there be SOME kind of torture and torment?

*(Why do we want that so badly?)*

The strongest case for torture/torment: Revelation 20:10

- The ONLY passage using the word “torment” directly related to Hell
  - *“And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”*
  - **Sounds pretty convincing, doesn’t it?**
    - But we would take issue with anyone claiming the rest of that section as literal (1000 years, etc)
    - And - If we take this as literal about Hell, then we have to throw out the rest of the descriptions of Hell as being a destruction of the soul!
    - It’s apocalyptic language! Metaphorical for a reason!

#### Torture is out of character with God

- There is not a single instance of God torturing his enemies
- What does he do? Destroy them. Consume them with fire.

### DESTRUCTION?

- **The language of destruction is everywhere:**
  - destruction, blotting out, cutting off, death, perishing, consuming
  - Sodom & Gomorrah, enemies of God in the OT,
  - **2 Peter 3:7**
    - *“But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and **destruction** of the ungodly”*
  - **Matthew 7:13-14**
    - *“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to **destruction**, and those who enter by it are many”*
    - **Where does the broad road lead?**
      - to “destruction”
  - **2 Thessalonians 1:9**
    - *“They will be punished with everlasting **destruction** and shut out from the presence of the Lord”*

#### Hell is not just described as “destruction

The scriptural fact of a “second death” is tied to it...

## SECOND DEATH

### • **IMPORTANT QUESTION: What's the opposite of eternal life?**

- **Torture?**
- **No - The opposite of eternal life is eternal death.**

### • **Ezekiel 18: 4**

- *"The soul who sins is the one who will die."*
- *"The soul that sins will be tortured forever"? NO!*

### • **John 3:16 -**

- *"...whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"*
- *"...whoever believes in Him shall not be tortured..."? NO!*

### **Destruction PRECISELY the terminology used by JESUS HIMSELF!**

#### **Matthew 10:28 - Jesus says...**

- ***"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell."***
  - **Doesn't he mean torture?** No. **DESTROY**
- This, to me, is the clincher.
- Jesus' words are clear - destroy soul AND body.

#### **We're all going to die twice:**

- **Either to yourself THEN physically**
- **Or physically THEN eternally**

#### **So...**

- In the OT and the NT, God's enemies are "destroyed" or "consumed"
- we have scripture after scripture describing God's punishing fire as "consuming"
- we have no scriptural evidence for torture in the afterlife
- we have no scriptural evidence for God being a torturer at ALL
  - that kind of behavior is detestable to us
  - that kind of behavior is out of character for a loving, just, God
- Jesus himself describes it as destruction

#### **So the question: is Hell Destruction or Torture?**

- **Hell, according to the Bible, is the DEATH / DESTRUCTION of the soul.**

### **Reactions I've heard to this teaching...**

- Where's the punishment?
  - But that's not good enough!
  - That's not scary enough!
  - Evil people should be tortured!
  - I want them to pay!
- 
- **Who of us, if God gave you the job of designing Hell, would make it this way?**
    - **Do you REALLY want people to roast and fry in torment forever?**
    - **How can that possibly be loving?**
  - **What on Earth gives us the notion that our God - our Father - enjoys torturing and tormenting his own children? His own creation?**
    - Probably sermons like Jonathan Edwards: "Sinners in the hands of an angry God"
      - *"The God that holds you over the pit of hell abhors you. You are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours."*

### **You mean there won't be any punishment?**

- Of COURSE there will be! Destruction IS punishment!
- There'll certainly be weeping and gnashing of teeth because you missed it.
- He's talking about "...the one who can **destroy** both soul and body in hell!"
  - **Nothing left. Gone. Consumed. Forever. In eternal fire.**

## **BUT THAT'S NOT SCARY!**

### **What about the fear of hell? Doesn't this remove that?**

- **NOT. AT. ALL.**
- When there is existence, there is hope.
  - Death row inmates. They FIGHT for life in prison.
- **Why do you think people are so afraid of death?**
  - Lack of existence is terrifying!
  - The idea that my entire life. My existence. Will all be gone
    - *"Take a moment to imagine that there is no afterlife. That there are no souls. That means that after you die... nothing. Absolutely nothing... When this hits you, it's one of the scariest feelings you can ever have."*
      - ([source](#))

- The prospect of being wiped from existence is actually a recurring theme in fiction - particularly sci-fi and horror.
  - **“It’s a Wonderful Life”**
    - The fear of never having existed
  - **“Ocean at the End of the Lane”**
    - the hunger birds eat things out of existence

## HOW DOES THIS CHANGE US?

### What we believe about hell says a lot about our concept of God and His nature.

- The “world” already knows this.
- The caricatured version of Hell many of us grew up with
- ...has been one of the BIGGEST reasons people are leaving the church.
- ...is a constant source of derision from atheists
- ...is, frankly, inconsistent with who God shows himself to be.

## LET’S SUM THIS UP

### Will there be Hell? YES

- We serve a righteous and a just God and there are consequences for rejecting Him.

### Will Hell be torture and punishment night and day forever? NO

- We serve a loving and holy God who does what he must, but is not a torturer

Once again...

### There are 2 things about hell which are certain:

1. It will be what it will be - we don’t get a vote
2. It will be an appropriate consequence given by a righteous God

### We serve a God who loves us

- He’s given us an entire LIFE to make this decision to return that love
- But if we choose the darkness, it’s our choice.
  - It saddens him, but light and dark cannot coexist.

## Let’s just say I’m wrong...

- **If I’m wrong about hell, then why aren’t we telling more people about it?**
- **If I’m right, then why aren’t we telling more people about it?**
  - **What’s the strongest drive of humanity?**
    - Self-preservation
  - **This is self-preservation on an eternal scale!**

**Thanks to Jesus, we don’t have to test out these theories whether right or wrong. We know where we’ll be.**

### Look at Paul: not ONCE does he mention “hell”

- he mentions “death” and “destruction” and even “everlasting destruction”
- but never torment or torture
- **How did he evangelize without fire & brimstone sermons?**

### And “separation” from God?

- Where can we go that God is not?
  - The separation in scripture is an eternal, final, destructive separation.
- **Christ cleansed the temple twice while on earth**
  - God is doing the same for his heavenly temple
  - *“Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” Rev 21:27*