

Is hell real?



I had been anticipating the conversation since meeting Dan at the gym several weeks before. We exchanged emails and scheduled a time to get together and talk about God. Dan was eager to begin reading the Bible with me and to investigate its teachings. About halfway through lunch he leaned forward and said, “So let me get this straight: *you believe there really is a hell?*”

I had mentioned in passing something about how we needed to have faith in Christ, and how Jesus was the only way, and Dan pounced on it.

I gave him a profound theological answer that was sound, biblical and concise.

I simply said, “Yes.”

But while the answer was true and admirably brief—it was not sufficient. A question this big requires some careful and faithful nuancing. There needed to be some spadework done, some dirt turned over, before a flag could be squarely planted in the answer.

Before I go into how I would answer this, let me ask



you a question. How would you answer Dan? Where would you begin?

As we have already seen, any conversation about hell requires biblical fidelity in both truth and tone. We need to have the right content communicated with appropriate concern.

So, let's get to work.

A growing understanding

As we turn to Scripture for our answer, we must remember that the Bible, while it is a unified book with tremendous continuity, is also a collection of many smaller books written by over forty authors spanning over 1,500 years. And like any good story, the Bible develops its concepts, themes, and plot over time. Theologians refer to this as “progressive revelation.” Simply put, this means that God reveals more details about particular subjects as the Bible progresses. God doesn't tell us everything we need to know in the early chapters of Genesis. What God may have revealed in seed form early on comes into full bloom in the later books, particularly with the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. A familiar example of this is in the Christmas story, where the angels announce to the shepherds:

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Luke 2 v 11

At long last, the promised son of David has come and is in the city of David (Micah 5 v 2). But this announce-

ment only has such tremendous weight because it has been so extensively “trailed” throughout the Bible story. The promise of a Savior sent by God has been fermenting since Genesis chapter 3 when Adam and Eve first sinned (Genesis 3 v 15). God had promised a son from the line of Eve who would crush Satan and as a result bring relief from the curse that was feared and felt on that fateful day.

This broad promise of a Savior would narrow throughout the Bible as God progressively revealed more and more details about his promised King. So, in addition to learning that it is Eve’s offspring who will crush the serpent’s head, we discover that he will also come from Abraham (Genesis 12 v 1-3), Isaac (22 v 15-18), Jacob (28 v 13-15), Judah (Genesis 49 v 9-10), and David (2 Samuel 7 v 12-16), and that he will be born in the city of David or Bethlehem (Micah 5 v 2). The tiny acorn of an idea in Genesis grows slowly into the budding oak tree in Luke chapter 2.

And on the subject of hell, we see the same slow revelation over time. Surveying the entire Bible, we see progressive revelation at play, shaping and informing our understanding of hell.

Old Testament teaching

The Old Testament writers use the Hebrew word *Sheol* to describe the grave or the place of the dead (e.g. Genesis 37 v 35; Job 17 v 13-16; Psalm 6 v 5; 16 v 10; Isaiah 14 v 11). This dark and shady place has little detail attached to it; it seems at first, that this is simply a catch-all description of “the place where dead people go.” But



careful readers will notice the concept of some kind of separation between those who are “unrighteous” or “wicked” and “the assembly of the righteous”—those who belong to God’s people, as they instead are experiencing God’s judgment.

But if the Lord creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.” And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. And all Israel who were around them fled at their cry, for they said, “Lest the earth swallow us up!” And fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250 men offering the incense.”

Numbers 16 v 30-35 (ESV)

The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.

Psalms 9 v 17 (ESV)

Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart.

Psalms 55 v 15 (ESV)



For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness. *Isaiah 38 v 18 (ESV)*

For as the new heavens and the new earth that I make shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your offspring and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, declares the Lord. And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. *Isaiah 66 v 22-24 (ESV)*

At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. *Daniel 12 v 1-2*

While not as developed as the bigger picture we discover in the New Testament, nevertheless, the concept of hell is there, and bears a striking similarity to the developed teaching of punishment, banishment, and destruction later in the Bible.



New Testament teaching

By the time we reach the New Testament, however, a lot more detail has been filled in. There are three main Greek words that refer to the place of judgment, and are often translated as “hell” in our Bibles: *Hades*, *Tartarus*, and *Gehenna*.

Hades

Hades, is most often used the way *Sheol* is used in the Old Testament to refer to the grave—the place where the dead go (Luke 10 v 15; 16 v 23; Acts 2 v 27; Revelation 1 v 18, 20 v 13-14). *Hades* had a history in Greek mythology. He was the “god” of the underworld, where dead souls go, and his realm became known by his name. When searching for a way to express the truths in the Old Testament (OT) about life beyond the grave, the translators of the OT into Greek chose the word *Hades*. This doesn’t mean they agreed with Greek mythology and its “gods”—just that it was a word that people knew and associated with the afterlife and underworld.

Tartarus

Tartarus is a rare word, used only in 2 Peter 2 v 4, where it is translated as “sent ... to hell.” It refers to a literal place where its occupants (here fallen angels) are in chains and darkness while awaiting the final judgment. Again, *Tartarus* has its origins in Greek mythology. It was the part of *Hades* where the worst people were thrown—a deep abyss that was used as a dungeon of torment and suffering for the wicked. The Bible writers used these familiar words to represent a similar yet fundamentally

different idea of what happens at death. They clothed their teaching about God's just judgement in this familiar language as they reached out with the gospel to the Greek-speaking world.

Gehenna

Finally, there is the word *Gehenna*. This is by far the most common word in the New Testament, occurring twelve times, with the overwhelming majority of references coming from the teaching of Jesus. It is a word that had contemporary significance and provided a reference point to explain the coming judgment.

Gehenna, was a place in the valley of Hinnom on the south side of Jerusalem, where all rubbish from the city would be dumped and burned. The fire here was always burning. Perhaps as Jesus was teaching in the temple or elsewhere, he could point to the plume of black smoke rising in the distance. It is a powerful picture of rubbish that is thrown away and is being consumed by fire. The Lord Jesus uses this image to refer to a literal place of final punishment for those who reject God's word.

It is important to note that most of what Christians believe about hell comes from the mouth of Jesus. Many people contrast the teachings of Jesus with the teachings of the Old Testament. It's common to hear people speak of their preference for Jesus because he is "so much more loving" than the God of the Old Testament.

This perception about the Bible is simply not true.

There are wonderful promises of grace throughout the Old Testament Scriptures, like this one:



The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.

Exodus 34:6-7

And there are repeated and serious warnings of God's wrath in the New. If we study Jesus's teaching with an eye toward this topic we will find that he seems to be quite at home speaking about hell. It has been correctly observed that Jesus talked more about hell than heaven. Evidently he believed in the existence of hell and wanted others to also. In other words, the doctrine of hell was not only a settled matter for the Lord Jesus, but he also considered it vitally important for his hearers to understand. His warnings are uncompromising:

"But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

Matthew 5 v 22

He advocated people taking extreme measures to ensure that they don't go to hell:

"It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

Matthew 5 v 29

He cautioned against misplaced fear by urging people not to fear man who can simply kill the body but,

“Fear him who, after your body has been killed, has authority to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.” *Luke 12 v 5*

Among people who spoke as freely as we do today, he instructed them of the coming day of judgment when

“But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken.” *Matthew 12 v 36*

He portrayed the day of judgment as a time when a king will sit on his glorious throne to separate people based upon their deeds. The consequence for disregard of the king and his words is penetrating:

“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” *Matthew 25 v 41*

Jesus took the title of judge and applied it to himself, saying that he has “authority to judge” (John 5 v 27).

Jesus also believed and taught that there will be a physical bodily resurrection of all people:

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done



what is evil will rise to be condemned.”

John 5 v 28-29

Notice that Jesus is saying that *everyone* will be raised to life at the last day. At this point there will be a distinction made between those who have done good and those who have done evil. Those who have done good are simply those who have received the message of the gospel, putting their faith in Christ and repenting of their sins. The evil, on the other hand, are those who have died in their sins, rejecting God’s rule over them. Those who are forgiven inherit eternal life, and those who remain unforgiven inherit eternal judgment.

I take it that the Lord Jesus spoke so openly, plainly and clearly about hell is that he knew it to be real, and that he didn’t want *anyone* to go there. In fact, it is the very reason he was came—so that no one *need* go there.

The history of hell

Throughout the history of the church this view—death, then resurrection, then judgment, then division based on faith in Christ—has been the dominant belief held by Christians. It wasn’t until the modern period that this understanding of Jesus’ teaching began to be questioned. The main strands of disagreement came in three forms:

- **Universalism** believes that in the end all people will ultimately be saved—regardless of any lack of repentance and trust in Christ.
- **Conditional immortality** maintains that only

Christians receive the gift of immortality, while non-Christians do not (and as a result their existence ends upon their death).

- **Annihilationism** suggests that those who are not Christians will experience a season of suffering after death, but after a time they will be annihilated.

We will interact with each of these ideas a bit later in this book,¹ but for now, it is important to note that Jesus does not simply speak about heaven in eternal terms but also about judgment in hell.

“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Matthew 25 v 46

If we were to summarize and synthesize Christ’s teaching on the subject of hell, it would be straightforward and consistent with the rest of the Bible writers. The graphic pictures and language he used to describe it, show that Jesus believed hell to be a place of punishment, destruction and banishment. One writer sums it up like this:

Punishment is frequently portrayed as retribution, judgment, suffering and torment by fire. Destruction is often described as perishing, death, or the second death. Banishment is commonly pictured

1 See Appendix 1: Alternative views on hell



as separation from the kingdom of God, exclusion from the presence of God, or being cut off from something living.”²

Our instinct to draw away from what seems to us a harsh and uncompromising doctrine creates a problem. It is inconsistent for us to drop the clear biblical teaching about judgment and hell while maintaining its complementary teaching about forgiveness and heaven.

Many have wondered if they can dial down the severity of hell by adopting a Conditional Immortality, or Annihilationist viewpoint, but these views are hard to sustain from a plain reading of Scripture. It is clear that all people will be raised on the last day. We know that everyone will face judgment (Hebrews 9 v 27). And we know that the judgement day will be a horrific experience for those who have rejected Christ. *But what then?*

In Jesus’ story of the sheep and the goats, the same Greek word is used in both instances; the punishment of the wicked and the blessing of the righteous are both *eternal* (Matthew 25 v 46). The two are correlated. While I understand and empathize with those who are unsettled by this doctrine, I cannot find relief from the gruesome reality of hell by manipulating the clear teaching of Jesus. A true love for others is founded upon a love for God and his word; it cannot come at the expense of these.

2 Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell under fire: modern scholarship reinvents eternal punishment* (Zondervan, 2004).

Letting God answer our questions

Returning to the conversation with my friend Dan, what was clear is that he wanted straightforward, biblically-supported answers. While my initial answer may have surprised him a bit, he was also intrigued. He wanted to know more. He wanted to know what Christians believe and why. He was on a quest for truth. If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, don't be put off by answers that you may not agree with initially. Instead of dismissing them out of hand, investigate them more fully. Look at the original sources and study what they teach. Do your best to understand what the Bible says. I can assure you that this will not be a waste of your time.

On the other hand, if you are already a Christian, the Bible teaches that you need to be able to give a reasonable answer for what you believe and why you believe it (1 Peter 3 v 15). The mission of seeking truth does not end when you become a follower of Jesus. Instead, it has really begun in earnest. As disciples of Jesus, we continue to pursue biblical truth in such a way that we grow in knowledge and understanding of it (2 Peter 3 v 18). We do this out of love for God and others.

Whether you are seeking answers as someone who is still investigating the Christian faith or you are someone who is a Christian, this is a worthy mission to undertake. The Bible is a trustworthy guide. As we work our way forward, I pray that God would give you understanding and wisdom as you think through this important yet sobering doctrine.

