

Hell

1) *What is hell?*

A) The English word “hell” is used in the New Testament to translate three different Greek words: tartarus, hades and gehenna.

(1) Tartarus. The word tartarus is found only once in the NT: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (tartarus) and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment;” (2 Peter 2:4, ESV).

(a) This word describes a place where fallen angels are being kept until the judgment. We know almost nothing else about this place of imprisonment (see also Jude 1:6 which seems to be speaking of the same place).

(2) Hades. The word hades occurs ten times in the NT, and it is the normal referent of the English word “hell” (see Luke 16:22–31).

(a) It is the place where the spirits of sinners go after physical death (16:22).

(i) Human beings will not spend eternity as bodiless spirits. Each person, sinner and saint, will receive a new resurrected body that will last forever—either on the New Earth or in the Lake of Fire (Luke 16:22; John 6:40; 1 Corinthians 15:35–50; Revelation 20).

(b) It is a place of fire, flame and unbearable heat (16:24).

(i) Some have argued that the flames of hell cannot be literal (how can spirits be burned with fire?) but this argument misses the point. Whatever they are, the flames are most certainly real, and the spirits in hell, although they do not have physical eyes, ears and hands, are still capable of sensation and pain. That pain is described in “bodily” terms to facilitate our understanding of the torment being experienced.

(c) It is a place of darkness.

(i) Jesus spoke of sinners being “cast into outer darkness” (Matthew 25:30). Although fire and darkness seem mutually exclusive, Scripture is clear that Hell is a horrible combination of the two. Hell’s fire burns and sears but gives no light to those trapped within.

(d) It is a place of memory and regret (16:25).

(i) The rich man had full memory of his former life on earth. He could remember his wealth and luxury. He could also remember the many chances he had to repent, and he would spend the rest of eternity wishing he had obeyed God.

(e) It is a place of torment and agony (16:23, 24, 28).

(i) Jesus’ repeatedly warns us that hell is a fearful place of agony and pain. The fire of hell not only burns but also creates an intense feeling of what is described in physical terms as thirst (v. 24).

(f) It is a place of separation from God and the righteous (16:26).

(i) The parable uses imagery that underscores the complete separation of the wicked from God and those in Heaven.

(g) It will be cast into the lake of fire (gehenna) at the end of the Millennium.¹

(i) John said, “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not

¹ Christ’s future thousand-year reign on this present fallen earth.

found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:11–15, NASB).

(3) Gehenna. The word gehenna occurs twelve times in the NT, and it refers to what is commonly called “the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14–15). The term gehenna is derived from the Valley of Hinnom which was used as a burial place for criminals and for burning garbage.

(a) It was created for the Devil and his angels, and is the final destiny of all who reject God and practice wickedness (Matthew 25:41).

(b) It is a place of unquenchable, eternal fire and brimstone (Mark 9:43–45), and those who burn there will weep and wail and gnash their teeth (Matthew 8:12).

(c) It is a place of eternal torment and death for both body and spirit (Matthew 10:28). This is why it is called the “second death” (Revelation 20:14).

B) To summarize: hell is a place of torment and regret where the spirits of wicked men and women await their final day of judgment. At that day, they are reunited with their resurrected bodies. Then they, along with the Devil and his angels, will be thrown into the lake of fire where they will burn forever in torment and agony.

2) Where is hell?

A) Various theories on the location of hell have been put forward. A traditional view is that hell is in the center of the earth. This view comes from passages such as Luke 10:15 which says, “And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust down to hell” (KJV). We should note, however, that this passage is not concerned with the geographic location of hell. Capernaum’s being thrust “down” is better understood as a reference to its being condemned rather than being pushed in a certain direction.

B) In the King James Version, Ephesians 4:9 says that before Jesus ascended into heaven, “he also descended...into the lower parts of the earth.” Some Christians take “the lower parts of the earth” as a reference to hell, where they say Jesus spent the time between His death and resurrection. However, the New International Version gives a

better translation: “he also descended to the lower, earthly regions.” This verse is simply saying that Jesus came to earth. It is a reference to His incarnation, not to His location after death.

C) Scripture does not tell us the physical location of hell. Hell is a literal place of real torment, but we do not know where it is. Wherever it is, the location of hell is far less important than the need to avoid going there.

3) Does the punishment of the wicked last forever?

A) Scripture is clear—there is no hope of ever escaping the endless torment of hell. Matthew 25:46 says, “These [the wicked] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (NASB). Note that the judgment for both groups of people is “eternal.” If eternal life is never-ending, then it follows that eternal punishment is never-ending.

4) How can a loving God send people to a place of eternal torment?

A) Remember this important truth—God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, and He is not willing that any should perish (Ezekiel 33:11; 2 Peter 3:9; John 3:16–17).

B) However, we must understand the true magnitude of sin. The penalty for sin is death and God, because He loved us, sent His only Son to die in our place. If we reject so great a salvation, we are rejecting the life and blood of the infinite, eternal Son of God. What punishment is just for such a crime? The eternal torment of hell and the lake of fire is the only fitting punishment (Hebrews 2:2–3).

C) C. H. Spurgeon was right when he cautioned, “When men talk of a little hell, it is because they think they have only a little sin, and believe in a little Savior. But when you get a great sense of sin, you want a great Savior, and feel that, if you do not have Him, you will fall into a great destruction, and suffer a great punishment at the hand of a great

God.” We must preach the exceeding sinfulness of sin, the fearful punishment of hell, but an ever greater and more merciful Savior.

5) If a righteous person turns from God and does evil, will they go to hell?

A) Consider what Ezekiel 18:24–26 says, “But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die. Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear, O house of Israel: Is my way unjust? Is it not your ways that are unjust? If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin, he will die for it; because of the sin he has committed he will die” (NIV).

B) The eternal destiny of each person does not depend on whether they did enough righteous things during their life—rather, it depends on the spiritual condition of their heart when they die. That is why we must live each day in love and faith and submission to the Holy Spirit.

6) How should the reality of hell affect the way we live?

A) We should fear God and hate sin (Matthew 10:28; Psalm 97:10).

B) We should be willing to make any sacrifice, no matter how great, in order to escape the fearful torment of hell (Matthew 18:8–9).

C) We should carry a burden for the lost and do all we can to save them.