



“The present heavens  
and earth are reserved  
for fire, being kept for  
the day of judgment  
and destruction of  
ungodly men”  
(2 Peter 3:7).

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## The Battle Over Hell

By Keith W. Stump

**I**t was my first visit to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. I was standing before *The Last Judgment*, a painting by the 15th-century Dutch artist Jan van Eyck.

On the floor, directly in front of the painting, lay a sheet of paper bearing a few hastily written words. An earlier visitor had placed it there, and it had not yet been removed by museum personnel. The words, large and in quotes, were intended as an alternate title for the painting. They were chilling in their impact: “The Case Against Christianity.”

They stopped me cold. What had prompted the visitor to level such a charge?

I took a closer look at the painting. At the top of the canvas, in heaven, sits an impassive Jesus, surrounded by a host of angels and an adoring multitude of the saved. At the bottom, in hell, is a writhing mass of the damned, suffering brutal torture at the hands of hideous demons.

The contrast between the rather prim majesty of heaven and the harrowing nightmare of hell is striking. And – as the note-writing visitor had intended – It poignantly frames an age-old question:

How can the concept of eternal suffering in hell be reconciled with a God of mercy and love?

For many, this is indeed a case against Christianity. They want nothing to do with a Christian God who could sit back and watch his children roast for eternity in a subterranean chamber of horrors. A deity of such cruelty and vindictiveness, they feel, could not be the true God.

### **Hot debate**

Non-Christians are not the only ones who have problems with the idea of hell. Hell is one of the hottest debates within the Christian community today.

Most Christians believe in hell as the fate of those who reject God. But one Christian's idea of hell may not be another's. While most Christians agree that the essence of hell is separation from God, the in-house debate is over the specifics – where hell is, when it is, how hot it is and how long it is.

Why? Because the Bible offers little detail. Hell is a doctrine about which there is no clear and dogmatic teaching in Scripture. The interpretation of biblical statements and the imagery they employ is beset with difficulties.

As hell appears to be a harsh doctrine, many Christians today choose to explain it in ways that soften its impact. The modern trend has been to replace the traditional fire-and-brimstone concept of hell as a place of eternal torture with a more politically correct portrayal of hell as a condition of spiritual anguish caused by separation from God. In other words, hell is not a *place* but a *state*.

Polls reveal that while nearly two-thirds of Americans believe there is a hell, the majority of them think of it as a state of existence or a condition rather than a literal blazing underworld.

Likewise, growing numbers of Christian scholars are speaking out against what they regard as the folly of relying on purely literalist readings of scriptural statements about the sufferings of the damned. They object to interpretive methods that fail to recognize the textual context, the literary genre of the passages, their historical setting and the broader theological context of Christ's saving work and God's love for humanity.

Conservatives, on the other hand, denounce as revisionists those who advocate a more figurative view of hell. In *watering down* the *reality* of painful retribution in an eternal fiery hell, these liberals are undermining an important biblical doctrine, conservatives believe.

### **Not a Core Doctrine**

Though some portray the issue of hell as central, history tells another story.

The doctrine of hell evolved long after the core doctrines of the historic Christian faith were established. The views of the early Church fathers about hell were far from unanimous. It took the Christian community hundreds of years to come up with a consensus on the issue. The majority view – that hell is a place of eternal fiery torment – emerged only after a long debate within the Church.

By the Middle Ages, the concept of a fiery underworld had become a dominant element in people's minds. To the medieval faithful, hell was a place of suffering and despair, of wretchedness and excruciating pain. The medieval Church used fire-and-brimstone rhetoric to its fullest to keep believers under control. The Church considered hell a useful prod to piety, a strong incentive to refrain from evil.

### ***The Inferno***

Though criticism was raised by some churchmen against the over-dramatization of hell, the brutal imagery of medieval theology tended toward ever-more-vivid portrayals of hell's horrors. And nowhere were those horrors so dramatically depicted as in *The Inferno*, the first part of *The Divine Comedy*, an epic poem by the Italian author Dante Alighieri (1265-1321).

*The Inferno* records Dante's imaginary travels among the damned. His purpose was to warn his readers that reward or punishment would surely meet them hereafter.

According to Dante, hell is divided into nine rings or circles, descending conically into the earth. Within this multi-leveled chamber of horrors, souls suffer punishments appropriate to their sins. Gluttons, for example, are doomed to forever lie like pigs in a foul-smelling sty under a cold, eternal rain of filth and refuse. The lustful – driven by their passions during this lifetime – are forever whirled about in a dark, stormy wind.

Although the fruit of Dante's fertile imagination, *The Inferno* is generally in keeping with the theology of his age. His picture of hell as a gigantic concentration camp – a nightmarish place of eternal torment presided over by Satan – became fixed in the popular imagination. It continues to represent the thinking of some Christians to this day – and of some critics of Christianity who mistakenly assume that Dante's frightful imagery comes from the Bible.

### **Differing views**

If Dante's portrayal of the infernal regions is overstated, what do the Scriptures say about hell?

Anyone embarking on a study of the subject is confronted with a library of conflicting literature, daunting in its size. To further complicate matters, many of these diverse works are cogently argued, and seem to present compelling scriptural evidence. That should tell us something.

In the absence of a fully developed teaching in the New Testament, the fair-minded Christian should regard these competing views as worthy of investigation. Even if one ultimately disagrees with most of them, the study cannot fail to place the issue into clearer perspective.

A willingness to set aside our presuppositions – our denominational baggage – and carefully and prayerfully examine the merits of the arguments will add both to our understanding of the Bible and to our confidence in God’s justice and mercy.

Here, in brief summary, are today’s principal points of view on hell, though within each are variations beyond the scope of this article. (See Recommended Reading list at the end of this article.)

**A Blazing Underworld.** In this view, as previously described, hell is an actual place smoke and flames, where the souls of the damned suffer unending fiery torment.

This view is based on a literal reading of scriptures that characterize hell as “unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12), “the fiery furnace” (Matthew 13:42), “eternal fire” (Matthew 18:8), “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46) and similar descriptions.

**A Condition of Eternal Separation.** This metaphorical view also envisions eternal conscious punishment, but not in actual flames. Rather, the sufferings of the damned are translated into spiritualized terms. Hell is not an abode but a *condition -- a furnace of affliction*, so to speak, not a furnace of real flames.

The Bible uses symbolical language. According to this view of hell, fire is an image that is used figuratively, as a symbol of the pain of deprivation, the agony of hopelessness, the torment and despair of spending eternity without God.

The punishment of the wicked is the pain of knowing that they will never see God. Advocates of this view explain that the fate of the damned is called outer darkness (Matthew 8:12) because those in that condition will never see the light of God. They will be trapped in blackness forever, exiled to the private hell

of their own thoughts, isolated in a place they have created for themselves in their own darkened minds. It will be their free choice to live apart from God.

**A Place of Temporary Punishment.** This view envisions hell as punishment, but not necessarily forever. Hell is indeed real, but one's stay in it does not have to be eternal.

Proponents of this concept acknowledge that divine justice requires some sort of punishment for evil. But they argue that infinite punishment would be appropriate only for infinite evil. What kind of God, they ask, would repay a few decades of sin with an eternity of torture?

The sufferings of hell are therefore remedial, they reason. Even the worst sinners can be rehabilitated and ultimately find their way to heaven, though some few will persist in rebellion and choose to remain forever separate from God.

This view bears a resemblance to the Roman Catholic concept of purgatory, the reputed destination of believers who die in sin, where they are purified by suffering before being admitted to heaven. It differs, however, in that it sees even those who were unbelievers during their lifetimes as eventually making their way into heaven.

**Annihilationism.** This view asserts that the fate of sinners is not endless suffering but rather complete and utter destruction.

The souls of the wicked will not endure eternal punishment in hell but will be completely annihilated after the Last Judgment. The period of conscious punishment will thus be brief. They will then simply cease to exist – a far more merciful fate, say advocates, than everlasting torment.

Annihilationism is also called the doctrine of “conditional immortality,” because, in this view, the soul is not by nature immortal. It is immortal only by the grace of God. God gives immortality to the souls of the righteous and annihilates those of the damned.

Annihilationists view hell – or gehenna fire (see sidebar) – as a fire that consumes. The wicked will cease to exist in gehenna fire – incinerated in the roaring inferno of the divine blast furnace. The fire is unquenchable, in that no one can quench or extinguish it until it burns up all the chaff.

This view is based on the statement that God can destroy both soul and body in hell (Matthew 10:28), and scriptures that speak of “everlasting

destruction" (2 Thessalonians. 1:9) and "the second death" (Revelation 20:14; 21:8).

**Universalism.** According to this view, everyone will ultimately be saved. No sinner will be consigned to eternal punishment. God will save everyone -- regardless. Universalism postulates the final restoration of all things (Acts 3:21), including the damned.

Hell is purgatorial in character, and, according to universalists, punishment ceases when the sinner has been purified. Ultimately, all human beings will enjoy God's presence.

Thus, if hell exists at all, it is only for a limited duration. Objecting to the notion of eternal affliction in hell, universalists point out that the Greek word *aion* -- often translated as *eternal* or *forever* -- literally means *an age*, a definite, limited period of time.

Eventually, "every knee" will bow before God; "every tongue" will confess to him (Romans 14:11). This universalist view goes back to the teachings of the 3rd-century Christian theologian Origen of Alexandria, who regarded the sufferings of hell as remedial, ending when the final restoration is reached.

Critics of this view assert that humans are free to make their own choices. God gives humans free will to trust him or not to trust him. He will not force anyone, and some will refuse his grace.

Whatever the specifics of their views, nearly all Christians share a common belief in some kind of separation from God as the fate of the wicked. Beyond that, the specifics are non-essential. The Christian faith does not make hell a core doctrine, nor is it something that Christians should divide over.

But we can continue talking about it. Speculation is appropriate, as long as we remember that we don't really know, dogmatically and definitively.

### **The intermediate state**

A further question pertinent to this issue is when the sufferings of hell begin. Is it immediately after physical death, or after the Last Judgment?

The interval between one's physical death and the Last Judgment is often termed "the intermediate state." The Bible says little about the condition of the soul or spirit during this period of time.

Some believe the soul sleeps during this interval – that it's *on hold* in the grave, awaiting the resurrection and the Last Judgment, which will fix its eternal destiny. Others believe that at death the soul goes immediately to its eternal reward in heaven or to its punishment in hell.

If the latter view is correct, would it not jump the gun by unwarrantably anticipating the decision of the Last Day? What, then, would be the purpose of the Last Judgment?

Dante put that question to his guide in *The Inferno*. How, he asked, will the punishments of souls change after the Last Judgment? The reply: Since all will be made perfect at that time, the punishment of the wicked, too, will be perfected – in other words, be made even more painful!

But an even more intriguing – and more plausible – possibility exists with regard to the intermediate state and how it relates to the ultimate fate of the dead!

### **Who will suffer?**

One of the main objections to the Christian concept of hell is the undisputed fact that the vast majority of humans have died without ever hearing the gospel and accepting Jesus Christ. Presumably they are – or will be – consigned to hell forever as a consequence.

Are the billions who did not accept the gospel before they died eternally lost? Are billions consigned to eternal flames because no missionary reached them before they died?

Putting it another way: Would God establish a salvation methodology that the vast majority of humans could not meet and then condemn them to eternal punishment because of it? Perhaps the entire question of hell can be put into clearer focus by addressing this troublesome issue head-on – the very issue that many consider to be a strong case against Christianity.

It is instructive to notice the variety of ways in which the damned – those who will suffer eternal loss (Greek, *damnum*) of the presence of God – are described by different theologians. Here are a few:

- “unbelievers”
- “the unsaved”
- “incorrigibly wicked”
- “enemies of God”

- “haters of God”
- “non-Christians”
- “the unredeemed”
- “the rebellious”
- “unrepentant sinners”
- “those who reject God”
- “those who have not accepted Jesus”

But, we might ask, are these all in the same class? Are non-Christians synonymous with the incorrigibly wicked? Are those who died without accepting Jesus enemies of God?

The need for a more precise definition of the damned is indicated – and may well point to a solution to one of the more stinging objections to the concept of hell. The issue would seem to come down to how and when the damned are defined.

### **A plan for the lost?**

Such considerations have prompted some theologians to suggest that a dead but unsaved person may yet avoid the final fate of gehenna fire if he never had a full and unhindered opportunity to know and accept Jesus Christ during his physical lifetime. In other words, such an opportunity might yet be provided prior to the final judgment!

Might it be possible that their decision of faith, or non-faith, might take place in the realm of death?

In his novella *The Great Divorce* (1946), C.S. Lewis observed that God’s purpose for humanity is salvation, not damnation, and he suggested that God may have a plan to save even the lost. “I do not think that all who choose wrong roads perish,” Lewis wrote, “but their rescue consists in being put back on the right road.”

Is God powerless to put people back onto that right road merely because their physical lives have ended? Is it too much to say that God’s grace might extend even beyond the grave?

Might it not be possible that God will yet give all an opportunity to believe and repent – even after death? And that many will then recognize Christ as the deepest longing of their soul, and, at last, know and accept him?



Hell – whatever its character – makes considerably more sense if those who end up there are only those who, with full knowledge, willfully and deliberately reject God. And if that's the case, the alleged unfairness and cruelty of hell vanishes! No longer is hell a case against Christianity!

Only willful, continuing refusal to respond to God's grace and mercy can condemn an individual. God will send no one to hell unless they force him. Sadly, it appears that some will not accept the grace of God (Matthew 25:46; Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 15). Some will refuse to face the evil of their lives and repent.

As C.S. Lewis summarized: "Any man may choose eternal death. Those who choose it will have it. There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it."

### **The happy alternative**

God's plan includes all of his children. Somehow, someday, every person will have a full opportunity to hear the gospel and repent. The justice of God demands it. We may not know the specifics of how or when this will be accomplished, but we do know that a holy, just and loving God will make righteous provision for all.

God sent his own Son to suffer crucifixion and death to save us. Could such a God be other than just and merciful? To all but the closed-minded, the Bible is a book that leaves many issues open. For his own good reasons, God has not revealed all of the specifics of his plan for humanity. Many of his ways are beyond us (Isaiah 55:8). It's a reminder of our need for humility. And in the absence of those specifics, to speak dogmatically and inflexibly about hell is to hinder potential converts from accepting the love of God.

It is tempting to be manipulated by our biases and to think that our way is the only appropriate way to understand the afterlife. But God is bigger than our personal or denominational views. God is not willing that any should perish. He does not wish anyone to suffer in hell. He wants all to have eternal life (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). He is ever-ready to receive the repentant sinner who turns toward God and goodness.

None of us wants to be in hell – whatever and whenever it is. Happily, we need have no fear of it. Salvation is ours as a free gift when we acknowledge our need for God. We can refuse God – but he will never refuse us.

But God has also made humans free, and has given us the power to decide our own destiny. God will not turn his back on evil and injustice. If we force him, he will deal with evil in absolute, final ways.

The happy alternative is to live for God – not out of fear, but because we desire a personal relationship with the Creator of the universe. And if we make that choice, we'll reap rich benefits – both in this life, and forever in the life to come.

And that makes a strong case – for Christianity!

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## Which Hell?

Four different Greek and Hebrew words were translated by the single word hell in the King James Version of the Bible. This unfortunate rendering has been the source of considerable confusion through the centuries.

Any attempt to discern the biblical teaching about hell requires a careful analysis of these words in their contexts. The Bible speaks of not one but three hells:

**1. Hebrew Sheol/Greek Hades.** The ancient Hebrew name for the abode of the dead was *sheol*. Sheol literally means “grave or pit,” but the word was also applied, in the popular conception, to the dwelling-place of departed spirits. The ancient Israelites believed that the spirit of a dead person separated from the body and took up its abode in this sheol, a dim, shadowy region beneath the earth's surface.

Some authorities believe that this realm of the dead is referred to in Genesis 37:35 and Job 3:13-19, among other passages.

When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek (the Septuagint) in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., sheol was rendered as the Greek word Hades, in view of sheol's close resemblance to the Greek netherworld. In Greek mythology, Hades was the place of departed human spirits – a gloomy underworld where the dead have only a shadowy existence.

In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16), Jesus pictures Hades as an actual place of torment, not merely the grave. Some scholars believe Hades may be the place where the unsaved dead dwell consciously – and possibly in

some measure of torment – awaiting resurrection and the Last Judgment. Hades is never used in Scripture in the context of final punishment.

**2. Greek Tartarus.** *Tartarus* is mentioned only once in scripture, in 2 Peter 2:4, where it refers to a place or condition of restraint for fallen angels. Peter describes it as a “gloomy dungeon” (NIV). It is a hell that applies only to rebellious angels or demons -- not to humans.

In Greek mythology, Tartarus was located below Hades, and was the place where rebellious supernatural beings were confined – corresponding closely to the apostle Peter’s usage.

**3. Greek Gehenna.** Only *Gehenna* shares today’s popular meaning of *hell* as a fiery place of suffering. The Greek word *Gehenna* derives from the Hebrew *gaihinnom*, or Valley of Hinnom.

The rocky Valley of Hinnom is a deep, narrow ravine that runs southwest of Jerusalem. In Old Testament times, it was a place of abominable pagan rites associated with the idolatrous worship of Molech, including child sacrifice in a section of the valley called Tophet (2 Kings 23:10).

After the Jews’ return from Babylonian exile, the valley became the cesspool and city dump of Jerusalem. Fires burned continuously, feeding on a constant supply of garbage – and occasionally the bodies of executed criminals – thus providing imagery for the fiery hell of final judgment, into whose flames the wicked would one day be cast.

Gehenna was used by Jesus in Matthew 5:22; 23:33; Luke 12:5 and elsewhere to designate the place of final punishment, later described by John as a “lake of fire” in Revelation 19:20 and 20:10, 14-15.

Whether understood literally or figuratively, biblical references to Gehenna have little in common with the exaggerated imagery of medieval theology, such as the tortures of Dante’s *Inferno*.

## **Lazarus and the Rich Man**

Some regard Jesus’ well-known parable of Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16) as solid proof of the reality of eternal fiery punishment in hellfire.

A close reading, however, raises serious doubts about such an interpretation.

In what part of the afterlife is the parable set – immediately after death, or following the Last Judgment? Many interpreters believe the parable takes place in the intermediate state – the interval after physical death but prior to the resurrection and Last Judgment.

Notice: Jesus specified that the rich man was “in hell [Hades], where he was in torment” (Luke 16:23). Hades is widely viewed as the place where the unsaved dead go to await final judgment. Hades is not itself the place of final punishment; the word Gehenna is used for that (see sidebar).

The parable also contains the implication that the rich man’s brothers are still physically alive (Luke 16:27-31). But even this analysis may be pushing the imagery beyond Jesus’ intention. Lazarus and the Rich Man is a parable. A parable is a literary device. As such, it is not intended to be a precise blueprint, with all its details corresponding to actual reality.

The point of a parable is not in the specifics, but in the lesson. Behind the outward or obvious meaning lies a deeper spiritual truth. In Luke 16, that greater truth is a warning against a life of unrestrained avarice. The immediate context is covetousness and greed.

The parable may be telling us that, for some, torment is possible immediately following death. But there is no indication that it is speaking of the final destiny of those who die outside of God’s grace. Hell is not the topic of the parable. Jesus’ purpose was not to convey information about the afterlife, but to address the broader context of showing concern for one’s fellow man in this life.

### **Recommended Reading:**

*Four Views of Hell*, William Crockett (Ed.), Zondervan Publishing.

*Two Views of Hell: A Biblical & Theological Dialogue*, Edward W. Fudge, Robert A. Peterson, Intervarsity Press.

*The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis.

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