

**Systematic Theology**  
**What the Bible Really Says About Hell**  
**Selected Scriptures**  
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We come to the end of the last things, what the Bible has to say about what is yet in the future. And all that remains of our study of eschatology is what theologians call the eternal state. With the destruction of the current heaven and earth and the great white throne judgment which occurred together—when that is complete, God will make a new heaven and a new earth for us. And we'll look forward to studying that together, Lord willing, beginning next week. But the Bible is equally clear that there is an eternal state for those who have rejected Jesus Christ, refused to accept God's gracious offer of salvation, and that is eternal hell. This week it is our solemn and somewhat somber duty to study their fate.

Perhaps no doctrine in all of Scripture is more hated than the doctrine of hell. In contemporary language, to call someone a hellfire and damnation preacher or a fire and brimstone preacher is an expression of the worst kind of ridicule. It usually carries with it the idea of someone who is proud and heartless and cold. In addition, usually it also carries the connotation of someone who is simple-minded and backward, out of step and out of touch with contemporary thought. Well of course, sometimes this doctrine is preached out of an ignorance of what the Scripture really teaches. And if this doctrine is preached out of proper proportion to its occurrence in Scripture or if it's preached with the wrong attitude or with the wrong spirit—that is, the spirit of love and concern and compassion—then it is right to question the motives of those who teach it.

But the problem for the most part is not that. The problem is that most contemporary people cannot countenance the possibility that there may in fact be a place that God has designed for the eternal pain of those who have rejected His Son. This is a hard thing. It's hard for me to teach. It's hard for you to hear. It's hard for us to speak of with others. Many Christians are even ashamed of this doctrine, try to avoid it when it's brought up. Why is that? Well, I think David Wells was very insightful. He said,

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The church for nineteen hundred years has believed in the uniqueness of Christ, the truth of His Word and the necessity of God's judgment of the impenitent. And we have to ask why, in the late twentieth century [when the book was written], some or all of these beliefs now seem to have become so unbelievable. Is it that new exegetical discoveries now cast doubt upon what the church has always believed? Are there new archaeological finds? Is it that the church has simply misread the Bible and done so consistently over a long period of time? No, these truths today have become awkward and disconcerting to hold not because of new light from the Bible, but because of new darkness from the culture.

Whether we like it or not, this is what the Bible teaches.

As C.S. Lewis said, "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this if it lay in my power, but it has the full support of Scripture and especially of our Lord's own words." And he's exactly right.

So tonight, we have to ask ourselves, what does the Bible really teach about hell? Now, we have to begin by saying that there are differing views about what happens after death for those who do not believe. One view embraces what we could call the mortality, not the immortality, but the mortality of the soul. This view would say that there really is no life after death or at least probably. We can't know for sure because nobody's been there and come back which of course isn't entirely true because our Lord has. But there are those who would say that. That, of course, is contrary to the basic teaching of Scripture. I don't even need to spend time defending against this view.

A second view that has only become common more recently in some aspects of Christian circles is universalism. This is the belief that we don't have to worry about hell because everyone without exception will eventually be saved and ultimately go to heaven. There are a variety of ways that that happens and differing ways that people embrace this view. But this too runs contrary to the absolutely clear teaching of Scripture that we've looked at time and time again and to historic Christian doctrine. So, we don't need to spend much time here either.

Then there is a view called second probation. This view holds that there will be a second chance to believe in Christ after death. We dealt with this when we dealt with what we called the intermediate state—that is, the state between our death and the resurrection. And so, I'm not going to spend time to do it now. Suffice it to say that the Scripture states that one's eternal state is fixed at death. Jesus said to those in His day, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and you will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come." No second chance after death.

Another view of what happens to the unbeliever after death is annihilationism. This view says that unbelievers, all unbelievers, are ultimately destroyed. There are a couple of different expressions of this view. One of them teaches that immediately upon a person's death, an unbeliever's death, or another view is that not upon their death, but after they have died and then endured the penalty of God's wrath from the time of their death until the time of the final judgment. One of those two is true. And at that point then, whichever one of those is true, God will completely destroy them in the sense that they will entirely, body and soul, cease to exist.

The first variation here, that is, immediately upon their death, is called conditional mortality. All that simply means is they say, "Listen, nobody was created immortal. We were created potentially immortal. And if those who reject Christ die, then they will not receive this capacity to live forever. It's only believers, those who come to believe in Christ, that at death receive the capacity to live forever. So, our immortality is conditioned on whether or not we believe." So, unbelievers, they would say, ultimately cease to exist rather than being punished forever.

Now these two approaches, or let's take it as a whole. When we look at annihilationism, whichever of these variations it is, has been taught only by a few characters in the history of the church, very few. In modern times, it's held by Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. More recently however, some evangelicals have embraced annihilationism—men like John Stott. John Stott, who has written some excellent books and who I quote from time to time, has however said this,

Emotionally I find the concept [i.e., of the historic view of an endless hell] intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either

cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain. . . . We need to survey the Biblical material afresh and to open our minds (not just our hearts) to the possibility that Scripture points in the direction of annihilationism, and that “eternal conscious torment” is a tradition which has to yield to the supreme authority of Scripture.

This view or a similar one is shared by Philip Hughes, who’s written some commentaries that I have in my office and that are helpful, and by Clark Pinnock, who at one time was an evangelical, but has since slid into all kinds of error, this being one of them.

Closer to home and more problematic I think in our day is the Emergent Church movement. You’ve heard me speak of that before. It’s a movement that is somewhat amorphous. You can’t really get your arms around it. It usually has more to do with methodology than theology. In fact, there isn’t a lot of theology to it. However, the leading spokesman for the Emergent Church (and there are, by the way, several here in our area, in our city) and the leading spokesman for this movement, Brian McLaren, has written a couple of books, one called *A Generous Orthodoxy* (you can gather where that’s going), in which he takes on this whole issue of eternal punishment. This particular quote comes from an interview that he did that I have come across. He said, speaking of hell

This is one of the huge problems, in the traditional understanding of hell. Because if the cross is in line with Jesus’ teaching then—I won’t say, the only, and I certainly won’t say even the primary—but a primary meaning of the cross is that the kingdom of God doesn’t come like the kingdoms of this world, by inflicting violence and coercing people, but that the kingdom of God comes through suffering and willing, voluntary sacrifice.

You say where’s he going with this? Well, listen to what he says, “But in an ironic way, the doctrine of hell basically says, no, that’s not really true. That in the end, God gets His way through coercion and violence and intimidation and domination, just like every other kingdom

does. The cross isn't the center then. The cross is almost a distraction and false advertising for God."

Brian McLaren has denied the reality of eternal hell. That's not the greatest of his problems, however.

What are the arguments? Why would men, particularly men like John Stott, embrace annihilationism? Well, there are four primary arguments. They would say, "Well, first of all, consider the fact that the Bible speaks of the destruction of the wicked." And that's true. You will often read, "God will destroy them." They say that implies that they cease to exist, and they point to a number of passages like Philippians 3:19, First Thessalonians 5:3 and so forth which use language similar to what I just used. That's one argument they would use.

A second argument they would use is they would say that eternal punishment is inconsistent with the love and goodness of God. This is one you'd be more familiar with.

Thirdly, they would say God would be unjust to punish temporal sins for eternity, finite sins for an infinite amount of time. That would be unjust of God. I have to stop and comment on this one. I like what David Kingdon said, "Sin against the Creator is heinous to a degree utterly beyond our sin-warped imaginations' ability to conceive of." That's exactly right. He says, "Who would have the temerity to suggest to God what the punishment should be?" That's exactly right.

Of course, from Thomas Aquinas' time on, the argument has basically been this in response to this third point: the severity of the sin is not measured by the sin itself, but the person against whom it is perpetrated. As Aquinas argued, if you hit a friend, it is of a wholly different order of magnitude than if you hit a head of state. And imagine how infinitely great it is when the offense is aimed at the eternal, infinite God.

I like Hodge's response to this third point that it's unjust. He says, "It's obvious that this is a question which can only be decided by divine revelation. No one can reasonably presume to decide how long the wicked are to suffer for their sins upon any general principles of right and wrong. What the infinitely wise and good God may see fit to do with His creatures is not for such

worms of the dust as we are to determine. If we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, all we have to do is to ascertain what it teaches on this subject, then humbly submit. What the great body of the competent readers of a plain book take to be its meaning must be its meaning.” That’s exactly right.

A fourth argument they would use is that if unbelievers continued to exist for all eternity, it will somehow mar the perfection of heaven and eternity.

Now those are the chief arguments for annihilationism. The chief arguments against it are the arguments for eternal punishment which we will consider tonight. The differing views: the mortality of the soul, there’s no life after death probably; universalism, everyone will ultimately go to heaven; second probation, there will be a second chance to believe in Christ after death; annihilationism, unbelievers are ultimately destroyed; and the final option, and the one that I believe is the Biblical option, is eternal punishment, eternal punishment.

In the rest of our time together tonight, I want us to examine the evidence for this position. Now let’s start with a brief history, starting even in the Old Testament. There’s very little about hell itself in the Old Testament. The Bible speaks in the Old Testament about the abode of the dead. A word is used which implies not only the abode of the dead, of all the dead, but sometimes it references those who are the wicked dead and who will suffer.

But there are a couple of passages that make this point very clearly. One of them is in Isaiah 66. Turn there for a moment. Isaiah 66, the last chapter of his prophecy. He’s talking about the new heavens and the new earth that God will make. Verse 22: “‘For just as the new heavens and the new earth which I make will endure before Me,’ declares the Lord, ‘so your offspring and your name will endure. [verse 23] It shall be from new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all mankind will come to bow down before Me,’ declares the Lord.” So, there are the righteous. God says I’m going to make a new heaven and a new earth and the righteous will come to worship Me. “‘Then [verse 24] they will go forth [that is, from worshipping Me] and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die and

their fire will not be quenched; and they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.” You recognize immediately the words that our Lord used on several occasions taken from this verse.

Get the picture here. Isaiah pictures believers gazing upon the corpses of God’s defeated enemies. The picture is a battlefield scene. Those who have rebelled against God have been slain by God’s warrior, the Lord Jesus Christ, as Revelation 19 describes it. And now their carcasses litter the battlefield. What follows this is so bad that the rabbis would not read this text as it stands but would reword it to speak only of future blessing when they read it publicly.

Notice what it describes. On occasion in the ancient world, those who were victorious in battle would leave the bodies of those who had been defeated on the field unburied. It was sort of the ultimate act of desecration. It wasn’t done all the time, but on occasion it was. Well, you can imagine, and I won’t go into any great detail, what a scene like that would be like after a week or two. What the birds didn’t eat, the worms finished. Here it’s described as “their worm will not die and their fire will not be quenched.”

Robert Peterson, in his excellent book called *Hell on Trial*, writes

In all other cases, the maggots would die when they had finished their foul work, and the fire would go out once its fuel was consumed. But in the prophet’s picture of God’s judgment of those who rebel, the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched. The punishment and shame of the wicked have no end; their fate is eternal. It is no wonder that they will be loathsome or an abhorrence to all mankind.

This is the key text for our Lord when He begins to explain this doctrine as we’ll see in a little bit in the New Testament.

Also in Daniel chapter 12, verse 2, we see it alluded to because Daniel says that there will be “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground who will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others [will awake—that is, be resurrected] to disgrace and everlasting contempt.” Again, not a full doctrine, but hinted at realities in the Old Testament.

Now that brings us to the New. Many of the New Testament writers comment on the reality of hell, but no one in the Scripture had more to say about hell than Jesus Christ. The word “hell” is used some twelve times in the New Testament. Eleven of those times are from the lips of Christ Himself. And no one was as graphic about the suffering of hell than our Lord was. His language is by far the most powerful and terrifying.

Take for example Luke 16. You remember the story of the rich man and Lazarus. There’s debate about whether that was an actual story or a parable. The point doesn’t change regardless. Jesus is reflecting the reality of life after death both for the rich man and for Lazarus. And the rich man is described in the intermediate state—that is, the state between death and the resurrection, but undoubtedly very similar to the eternal state. The key difference—let me explain this to you—the key difference between Luke 16 and the eternal state is that unbelievers now in hell do not have resurrected bodies. They are currently disembodied spirits. In Revelation chapter 20, as we learned a couple of weeks ago, at the great white throne they will be reunited with their bodies and the eternal state will involve body and soul.

Now when you come to the New Testament, the key New Testament word for hell is the word “Gehenna.” That is the Aramaic form of the Hebrew “Ben-Hinnom.” It’s also called “Topheth.” It means “valley or canyon of Hinnom.” Now you need to know a little bit of the history of the land of Israel to understand what this is about. It is an actual valley you can visit to this day in, just outside I should say of the city walls of Jerusalem, southwest of the city of Jerusalem. In the Old Testament, children in this particular spot, children were offered in the fire to false gods in this place called the valley of Hinnom. Josiah in his day desecrated that spot, set it apart never to be used. It became a sort of pariah to the Jewish culture once the people of God repented of their idolatry. By Jesus’ day, it was the garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem.

So, you can picture the scene. It was a huge dump, the city’s trash. A trash fire constantly burned there giving off a horrific odor because everything was dumped. Because of the trash, it was infested with maggots and other vermin. And so, it served as a profound picture of the eternal reality of hell. In addition to this, sometimes the bodies of criminals whom they wanted to



desecrate—they would simply instead of burying their bodies giving them an appropriate burial, they would throw the bodies of those criminals on the trash heap there in Jerusalem and they would burn along with the other trash. So, because of this, Jesus chooses to use this word, “Gehenna,” the valley of Hinnom, as a vivid, graphic word picture of the reality of the eternal state of those who reject Him. Remember, this is our Lord speaking and He says there are great similarities between what you see there in the trash dump of Jerusalem—with its fires constantly burning, with its maggots, with its trash, with all of its refuse—there is something comparable between that and the eternal state of those who reject Me.

John MacArthur puts it like this: “Hell will be God’s eternal cosmic dump. Its inmates will be burning as garbage forever.” As harsh as that sounds, that is the reality of what Christ taught. There is no question that He used this picture to describe the eternal state of the lost. And to reject eternal hell is to reject the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Now is this view what the church has taught? I’m going to come back, by the way, to more of what Jesus teaches about it, but let’s move forward in church history. Is this what the churches taught? I’m not going to spend a lot of time with these quotes but let me just hurry through them. Let’s take Tertullian, AD 155 to 230: “If, therefore, any one shall violently suppose that the destruction of the soul and flesh in hell amounts to a final annihilation of the two substances, and not to their penal treatment (as if to they were to be consumed, not punished) let him recollect that the fire of hell is eternal—expressly announced as an everlasting penalty.” No question about where Tertullian stood.

What about Augustine? Moving forward to the great church father, AD 354 to 430: “The phrases ‘eternal punishment’ and ‘eternal life’ are parallel and it would be absurd to use them in one and the same sentence to mean: ‘Eternal life will be infinite, while eternal punishment will have an end.’ [can’t be, he says] Because the eternal life of the saints will be endless, the eternal punishment also, for those condemned to it, will assuredly have no end.”

The first indication we have of annihilationism in church history, a voice that is recorded, is Arnobius in 304 to 310, a little-known figure whose friends and foes called him a careless

thinker. But he said this: “They are cast in, and being annihilated, pass away vainly in everlasting destruction.” He was the first to teach, in record of history, annihilationism.

What about moving forward? And again, I’m just picking a couple of samples to give you the great voices. Come to the medieval times and Thomas Aquinas and, with whom we wouldn’t agree on everything, but listen to his voice, AD 1224 to 1274, “We set aside the error of those who say that the punishments of the wicked are to be ended at some time.”

Moving to the Reformation, Martin Luther couldn’t have put it any more clearly: “The fiery oven is ignited merely by the unbearable appearance of God and endures eternally. For the Day of Judgment will not last for a moment only but will stand throughout eternity and will thereafter never come to an end. Constantly the damned will be judged, constantly they will suffer pain, and constantly they will be in a fiery oven—that is, they will be tortured within by supreme distress and tribulation.”

John Calvin says, “The phrase which he adds in apposition—eternal destruction from the face of the Lord—explains the nature of the punishment which he had mentioned. It is eternal punishment and death which has no end.”

Jonathan Edwards: “The Scriptures are very express and abundant in this matter, that the eternal punishment is sensible [that is, has to do with the senses] misery and torment and not annihilation.”

Moving to a different group, John Wesley in the 1700’s wrote “I believe God forgives all the sins of them that truly repent and unfeignedly believe in His holy gospel; and that at the last day, all men shall arise again, everyone with his own body. I believe, that as the unjust shall after their resurrection be tormented in hell for ever, so the just shall enjoy inconceivable happiness in the presence of God to all eternity.”

There is no question that when you look at and survey church history, it shows the doctrine of eternal punishment has been the nearly unanimous consensus of the church for two thousand

years. It's what Old Testament saints believed as well, but in less precise terms. It is fully embraced in the New Testament.

Now with that quick historical survey, let's talk about what this terrible place is like. First of all, let's look at the key biblical images that are used to describe it. The first and most obvious one is the image of fire. It's used more than twenty times in the New Testament to describe the reality of hell. In Matthew chapter 18, verse 8, our Lord says, "If your hand or foot [causes you to sin] causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than to have two hands or two feet and be cast into the eternal fire." By the way, Jesus is not encouraging physical mutilation here. You know what Jesus is encouraging? Be willing to become radical with your sin. Don't play with sin. Do whatever you have to to shut it out of your life. Take whatever radical measures it requires. Jesus said, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be cast into the fiery hell." Jesus used fire as an image to describe hell.

Matthew 13, verse 49, "It will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Matthew 25, verse 41: "Then [the judge] Jesus [Himself] will say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.'" But the people being judged here, by the way, or the ones being judged, are people. So unredeemed people will be there as well even though it was prepared for the devil and his angels.

Revelation 20:10: "The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Here, a lake of fire and sulfur—fire and brimstone.

The question is what does the fire refer to? Well, Jesus explains exactly what He means by the fire in the earlier parable in Luke 16. Turn there. In Luke 16, Jesus uses this image and gives us some idea of why He uses it. Of course, again, remember that this is the intermediate state—that

is, now. The rich man is represented here in disembodied form. It's not yet the last resurrection, but the picture's the same. Notice verse 23, "In Hades, [the rich man] he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom [now watch verse 24]. He cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'" Jesus used the image of flame to picture intense, unspeakable pain of that place.

You ask are they literal flames? Well, it's certainly possible, but we don't know and can't know for sure. Many orthodox scholars have taken the fire to be literal fire as we know it here on earth. Many others have believed it to be metaphorical in some way, but this much we know. At the very least, God chose the image for a reason. He chose an image from our world to help us picture the terrible reality of hell. There will be very real, intense physical and mental suffering. As John MacArthur writes "If the fire here is symbolic, the reality it represents will be even more horrifying and painful"—fire, unbearable pain.

The second image that the Bible uses to describe hell is darkness. In Matthew chapter 8, verse 12, Jesus says, "the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

In Matthew 22, the king said to the servants in this parable Jesus told, "Bind [this one who doesn't have a wedding garment] hand and foot and throw him into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." This same image occurs in other places. In fact, in Jude 13, it's called "the blackness."

Now what does this image refer to? Why is darkness an image of hell? It seems to be contrasting—the image of fire and the image of darkness. Well, remember that God is by nature defined as—what?—light. "God is Light, and in Him is no darkness at all." And when God shows up, how does He even manifest His presence? With blazing light. And Christians are called the children of light. The darkness undoubtedly speaks of permanent separation from God, from the people of God and from everyone else. There is, in the image Jesus uses of hell, the picture of utter, extreme isolation.

When I worked in the shipyards in Alabama during my school years, I had a number of discussions about the gospel with some of my coworkers. There was one man in particular who seemed to have some interest and we talked extensively about these things. One day however, his mind for whatever reason just seemed to turn. He seemed to reject everything we'd talked about. He turned away from it and when I tried to strike up the conversation again, this is what he said, "I've decided that that's where I want to be. My friends and I will have a good time together." Jesus says there will be darkness, extreme isolation. There'll be no party in hell.

Another image that is used is the image of weeping and gnashing of teeth, grinding of teeth. This image is used in a number of places. We saw it in several I just read to you—Matthew 8:12, Matthew 13:42 and so forth, a number of other texts. "Weeping" is a word that refers to a deep-seated sorrow, like the kind of sorrow over the death of someone you love. It's not a tear trickling down your cheek at a Hallmark commercial on television. It's a deep-seated agony of soul. It's wailing, sobbing, weeping.

Gnashing of teeth is a picture of extreme suffering or possibly of remorse, but it pictures the grinding of the teeth and intensity of feeling either with suffering or regret. Again, Jesus is driving home the reality that hell will be a place of unimaginable, unspeakable suffering and regret and remorse in isolation and in extreme, unimaginable torment.

Now those are the key images that the Scripture uses. What are the primary attributes? Well, first of all, we need to note that it's a real place. I've put a number of references up here not because I intend to read them all, but I want you to see that the Scripture refers to this place a number of different ways and in a number of different types of language. It is a real place or maybe I should put it differently. It is a reality. It is not imaginary. Scripture speaks of it as a reality.

Secondly, when we look at the primary attributes, we can say that it is eternal. It is eternal. How do we know it's eternal? Well, first of all, it's called eternal. Matthew 18, verse 8 describes it as "eternal fire." Second Thessalonians 1:9 "everlasting destruction." Jude 7 "the punishment of eternal fire." Jude 13 "wandering stars" (speaking of false teachers). By the way, that's a powerful image. What do false teachers think they are? Bright lights. But Jude, the half-brother

of our Lord, says no, they're like "wandering stars, for whom the blackest darkness has been reserved forever." Revelation: "forever"—notice is the key word there. Revelation 14, verses 10 and 11 "the smoke of their torment goes up" and notice the picture here. The Scripture only uses this expression to describe that which is endless "forever and ever; they have no rest day or night." Notice that the smoke rises forever. That means the fire never fully consumes its fuel. And "no rest" implies an ongoing existence.

So, it's called eternal and also images are used that picture endless duration. In Mark chapter 9, Jesus on several occasions quotes that passage from Isaiah 66 where it says, "their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." As I mentioned before, in our world when a maggot consumes its prey, it dies. And when a fire has burned up its fuel, it goes out. But in hell, the maggot doesn't die, and the fire never goes out. That is figurative language for the eternal duration of hell.

Jesus also equates the duration of hell with the duration of heaven. In Matthew 25, He puts the two in juxtaposition. Verse 46, "These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." He uses exactly the same word. This is the passage Augustine was arguing about that I read to you earlier. "Eternal" has to mean the same thing in both of those contexts. Whatever we will enjoy as the righteous for whatever period of time is the same period of time for which the lost will endure the penalty of hell.

There's a fourth argument for the eternity of hell and that is the apostle John gives us an example of hell's duration. In Revelation chapter 20, verse 10, we read that "the devil who deceived [the people] was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." Now this is a fascinating passage because if you look back—in fact, turn to Revelation and look at chapter 19. Revelation 19 and look at verse 20, "the beast was seized [two of these characters from the tribulation—the political leader and the spiritual leader, the beast was seized], and with him the false prophet who performed the signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image; these two were thrown alive

into the lake of fire which burns with brimstone.” When does this happen? When Jesus returns. Notice the few verses right before it. It happens at the second coming. They are thrown into the lake of fire.

Then you have, at the beginning of chapter 20, the millennium that we studied, the thousand-year period of time. At the end of that thousand years’ time, Satan is loosed. He deceives the nations. There is war. And at the end of that, verse 10 says, “the devil was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone.” So, when the devil is thrown in with, notice this, with the beast and false prophet, they have already been there for—how long?—a thousand years unconsumed by the flame. And then it says, “and they” all three of them “will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” So, it will be eternal.

Another attribute of hell is that it will be conscious. Those who were there will be conscious. Matthew 8:12 describes it as a place where there will be continual weeping and gnashing of teeth. That implies regret, remorse, suffering. And it will continue to be that. So, they are conscious. Luke 16 that I read a few moments ago for you—the rich man is very much aware of his surroundings. In fact, he has sensations of suffering. He is aware of his circumstances. He has a memory of the past, his brothers that exist on earth. He has rational thought. He’s able to argue. And in this case, he even has communication with other spirits. We’re not sure that that’s permitted all of the time, but in the case of the story Jesus tells, He presents it that way. So, there is consciousness in hell. It is not soul sleep. It is not an unawareness, an unconscious state. It is eternal and it is conscious.

It is also suffering. It includes physical suffering as well as mental anguish. You remember Daniel 12 talked about the resurrection, the awaking of the unrighteous to everlasting contempt? In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus says, “Don’t fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; fear Him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.” So, it’s physical suffering. And of course, in Revelation 20, we discover that the lost are reunited with their bodies.

The suffering will not only be physical, but it will have degrees. Not every sinner will suffer like Judas Iscariot will suffer. There are clearly degrees of punishment in hell. Turn to Matthew

chapter 11. Jesus says this to the crowds there in the cities of northern Galilee, verse 47, or excuse me, verse 21 rather, “He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. [He said], ‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sack which’”—excuse me, let me say that again— “‘For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you [now watch what He says], it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you [they’re going to get off easy compared to you, Jesus said]. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.’” You see, the penalties in hell are going to be different than we tend to think of them here. We tend to look at gross sin like that of the homosexuals and imagine that that is the sin that is the most aggravated to God, but it’s not. Not that it’s not a terrible sin—it is.

But let me show you the sin that most offends God and will suffer the greatest punishment in hell. Luke chapter 12, theologians agree, is the most graphic portrayal of the degrees of punishment in hell. Jesus tells the parable and I don’t have time to go through the whole thing, but let’s get to the punch line. Verse 47, “that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.” You see what Jesus is saying? He’s saying this: the intensity of hell will be based upon the knowledge that person has of the will of God. This grieves my heart because this means that there will be people who sit in this church and hear the Word of God taught and who don’t embrace Jesus Christ whose pain and suffering in hell will be far greater than people who never darkened the door of this place.

What’s the source of the suffering of hell? Charles Hodge gives a brief list: he says it’s the loss of all earthly good; it’s exclusion from the presence and favor of God; it’s utter reprobation—



that is, the full and final withdrawal of the Holy Spirit from them; the consequent unrestrained dominion of sin and sinful passions. Revelation 22 says, “Let the one who does wrong, still do wrong; and the one who is filthy, still be filthy.” That hints that unbelievers will go on sinning as much as their circumstances allow even in hell—at least sins of the mind. There will be the operation of conscience. The worm that doesn’t die, some believe, may be a reference to the nagging of conscience. There will be despair. There will be their evil associates excluded from all that’s good and their external circumstances of intense pain and isolation. And the hardest thing will be what Hodge calls its perpetuity. It’s forever.

Jonathan Edwards says:

We can but little conceive of this matter; but to help your conception, imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven or a great furnace where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a live coal, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter of an hour, full of fire, and all the while full of sense; what horror would you feel at the entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! And after you had endured it for one minute, how overbearing would it be to you to think that you had to endure the other fourteen! But what would be the effect on your soul if you knew you must lie there enduring that torment to the full of twenty-four hours! And how much greater would be the effect if you knew you must endure it for a whole year; and how vastly greater still, if you knew you must endure it for a thousand years! O then, how would your hearts sink if you knew that you must bear it forever and ever, that there would be no end, that after millions and millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, and that you never, never should be delivered.

What are the lessons for us who know and love Jesus Christ from such a horrible place? First of all, the sinfulness of sin. We don’t hate our sin enough. That sinners have to be sent to such an awful place helps us to grasp the level of rebellion against God that must be in every sin we

commit. We think very lightly of sin, but just think back to Adam's sin. What did Adam do? He disobeyed God's command to eat the fruit of a certain tree. And what was the result? God judged the entire human race because of it. Don't ever underestimate the sinfulness of sin.

There's also a lesson of the fear of God. Jesus says in Luke 12, verse 4, "I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear [you're going to fear somebody, don't fear the gangster that can kill your body. Don't fear the person who's going to break in your house and do you some damage. Jesus says, I tell you whom to fear]: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!" There is an extreme lesson in the message of hell about fearing God.

There's a lesson about the grace of God. I cannot contemplate the reality of hell as we have just studied it together without being absolutely born into the presence of God in praise that our Lord Jesus Christ, on the cross of Christ for six hours that Friday, endured my hell and I'll never, ever face it. Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now" what? "no condemnation to the one who is in Christ Jesus"—no judgment. Jesus says in Romans, or I should say, Paul says in Romans 5 that God has rescued us in Christ from—what? —the wrath that's coming. It's not ours. I'll never face it because of God's amazing grace.

And finally, there's a lesson on the importance of evangelism. You know, I think one of the most compelling passages in all of Scripture on evangelism is Luke 16. We looked at it earlier but turn there again. Luke 16—you remember the story that Jesus tells it. He says, the rich man, after he realizes that there's no way for him to be relieved of his own suffering, verse 27, he said to Abraham, "Then I beg you" that you send Lazarus "to my father's house—for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." An evangelist in hell, but there was a man who understood what was at stake. Now that you and I understand what's at stake, we must share the gospel with those who have not come to embrace Christ.

C.S. Lewis wrote this of hell. It's a horrible thing to contemplate and it's hard not to imagine some dark side of God that would allow this to happen. But C.S. Lewis writes, "I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside. In the long run, the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? [Lewis says' they do not want to be forgiven.] To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does." Let's pray together.

Father, these are very hard things for our finite brains, hard for us to fathom because we know You as the God of infinite grace and love. And You are, and yet You are also the God of infinite holiness and justice and righteousness against whom we have sinned with a high hand of rebellion. Father, I pray that You would work in the hearts of everyone here. Lord, I know that there are people here—there is someone sitting under the sound of my voice even now who is not in Christ and who is storing up judgment for themselves. Their suffering will be greater because they have sinned against so much light. Father, even tonight, draw them to Yourself. Don't let them go to sleep. May Your Holy Spirit pursue them like the hound of heaven. May they know no rest until they find themselves on their knees before You in repentance and in faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, who bore the wrath that our sins deserve.

Father, I pray for all of us who are in Christ, that You would help us not to think lightly of these things, but to really appreciate the gravity, the soberness, the seriousness of them. Father, help us to fear You and help us to praise You forever for Your grace. And Lord, help us to open our mouths and speak of that grace that's offered to others so like the rich man said, they would be warned not to go to that place. We pray that You would use this truth in our hearts. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.