

Is Hell For Real?

Let me ask you something. When's the last time you even thought about the concept of hell? Beyond watching some horror flick, do you actually ever think about the existence of a place called hell? When's the last time you've heard a sermon on hell?

Wilko van Holten writes: Though the doctrine of hell is one of the tenets of traditional Christian belief, at present it does not seem to enjoy much popularity among believers. One rarely hears the doctrine explicitly addressed in a Christian church these days, and if hell is spoken about at all, it is commonly referred to in rather vague and tentative ways. Indeed, it would be no exaggeration to claim that the average Christian believer finds it difficult to explain what function (if any) the doctrine of hell plays in his or her own faith. Even academic theologians find it difficult to account for hell in their talk about God and their exposition of the Christian faith. One well known theologian says concerning the idea of hell as eternal punishment that "there has always been a reluctance to engage in a deeper probing of this frightening conviction."

One of Satan's most effective strategies is to undermine the reality of hell by trivializing words like "hell" and "damn." People throw those words around without giving a second thought to their real implications.

Here's what's wrong with minimizing and down playing those words. Hell is real. Damnation is the most frightening concept anybody on the face of the earth could ever imagine. Asking God to damn someone or something is the most solemn calling for judgment that you could ever pronounce.

The Bible says that Satan is the great deceiver. He is the father of lies. The Scriptures tell us that Satan has a strategy and at the core of that strategy, the very nucleus of what he wants to do, is convince the world that he doesn't exist, and most importantly of all, there is no judgment on sin.

Let's begin this morning by opening up our Bibles to **Genesis chapter 3. Page 2**

The first 11 chapters of Genesis are like a key to unlocking so many of life's mysteries. Where did we come from? What is life about? Why are we here? What's wrong with us and our world?

In Genesis 3:1-4 we read this...

The very first lie recorded in all of history is here in verse 4. It's spoken by Satan to the woman whom God has created and look what it is!

There is no consequence for sin. There is no judgment for disobedience.

In fact, verse 5 read :

So here we are 6000 years later. Satan has not changed his strategy from day one. His message is still "You shall not surely die. Be your own master. Make your own decisions. Experience life to the fullest. There are no consequences. There is no judgment."

Now Satan has carried out his strategy and propagated his message in various ways. But one of the most effective tools that he is used is the vehicle of language.

If you can get people to laugh at, trivialize, joke about profound concepts, you can bring them to the point where they no longer take those things seriously.

And today in our supposed enlightened Western society that is exactly what has happened with weighty biblical ideas of hell and damnation.

Those words are so pregnant with meaning, yet they've have become trite, trivial jokes to the average person. In every Gallup poll, Americans respond in high percentages to questions like "Do you believe in a personal God? Do you pray? Do you attend some type of religious services fairly regularly?"

But when these same people are asked, "Do you believe in a literal hell?" "Do you believe in eternal judgment?" The percentages nosedive.

See, people believe in heaven. They believe that God is love. But what they just can't fathom is that there is eternal damnation and judgment awaiting anyone.

Is hell real? Is there a literal place of eternal damnation awaiting those who refuse God's plan of salvation?

The overwhelming answer, if we are going to even begin to take the Bible at face value is, yes.

Hell is real and God is not only a God of love but he is a righteous God who tramples out the wine press of the fierceness of his wrath. And those two ideas are not mutually exclusive.

I'd like us to look at three biblical concepts:

1. The reality of hell.
2. The nature of hell
3. The way to escape hell.

I. The Bible Presents The Reality Of Hell

How do we know whether hell is real or not?

Interestingly in the past 125 years in this country, we've had the rise of some very powerful pseudo-Christian cults in our country. There are actually hundreds but the 4 major ones, Jehovah's witnesses, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists and Christian Scientists, who together have millions of members, all deny a literal hell, in the sense of everlasting punishment. They believe in annihilation but not eternal punishment.

By the way, while I have met numerous people who have become Christians from reading the Bible on their own, I've never met a Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, or any other cult follower who ever became a member of that cult just by reading the Bible. They always need someone else to teach them. That should be a red flag right there.

From the cults, to unbelievers, to even some Christians, the reality of hell has been relegated to a myth.

So let's see what the Bible says. We need to begin to answer the question on the reality of hell by defining some terms.

The English word "hell" is found 32 times in the NKJV and 16 times in the NIV.

All of the Old Testament references are a translation of the word *Sheol*. *Sheol* simply means "the place of the departed dead." Not the grave for their body but the place for their soul. Even the soul of Jesus went there.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.
(Psalm 16:9, 10)

Just to clarify that that's speaking of Jesus we have Peter's sermon in Acts 2:

Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing

that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in Hades, nor did His flesh see corruption. (Acts 2:29-31)

Originally there were two distinct aspects to *Sheol*. Both the believers and the unbelievers originally went there. But then there is a change that happens in the New Testament at the resurrection of Christ.

But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men." (Now this, "He ascended"--what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.) (Ephesians 4:7-10)

The Greek translation of *Sheol* is *Hades*. Jesus Christ descended into *Hades*, but then He left and ascended into heaven after a bodily resurrection. That's why the Apostle's Creed says, "He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead. He ascended into heaven."

Associated with that ascension was "leading captivity captive." From that time on the righteous dead would no longer go to *Hades*. He took those who were there with him to heaven and now since the cross, to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ. That means that today *Hades* is the home of the unbelieving dead only.

Most instances of the word "hell" are translations of the word *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was originally a Hebrew word meaning the Valley of Hinnon. The Valley of Hinnon was actually the garbage dump outside of Jerusalem in which rubbish and animal carcasses were burned. It was also the place that early in their history the Israelites joined the Canaanites in burning their first born children alive in sacrifice to the god Moloch. It was a cursed place, both by God and man.

And Jesus used it to describe a place of unending torment. *Where 'Their worm does not die, And the fire is not quenched.* (Mark 9:44)

When we are speaking of an eternal hell we are referring to what Jews called *Gehenna*. *Sheol* or *Hades* for the unbelieving dead is described as a place of flame and punishment. But it is not described as eternal.

**Turn to Revelation 20 page 723 Read verses 11-15
(Hold you place in Revelation 20 because we're coming back there again)**

Hades delivers up its dead for final judgment and the dead and *Hades* itself are cast into the lake of fire. The lake of fire, or *Gehenna* is the final, eternal place of those without God.

Now, some people read these verses and still say, "Hell is not real. God is love, He's fair. Here is no way that a God of love could send people into eternal punishment."

And you know there is a whole lot of people who believe that in the spiritual realm whatever they want to believe is ok. Kind of "whatever I wish to be true spiritually will be true. If I don't like hell that's OK. I don't believe it therefore it can't be true."

Remember something. In 10 out of the 11 times the word *Gehenna* is used in the New Testament it falls from the lips of gentle, loving, compassionate, meek and mild Jesus.

The Lord Jesus Christ, as he walked this earth talked about hell much more than he talked about heaven. People say, "We don't want to hear about judgment. We want to hear about the love of God. Give us the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. You know where the first found occurrences of the word *Gehenna* are? They come from the lips of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

Is hell real? Jesus said it is. The Bible says it is. That it is real, that it is a place and that it is the ultimate end of everyone who refuses to believe that Jesus Christ died for them.

- I. The Bible Presents The Reality Of Hell*
- II. The Bible Gives Us The Nature Of Hell*

What is the nature of hell? What's it like?

I think that it is important to realize that the Bible is very restrained in its language describing hell.

Most people's idea of hell doesn't come from the Bible though, it comes from medieval artists and writers. Like Dante or Milton.

So let's let the Bible speak for itself.

(Matthew 5:22) *But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause*

shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Jesus said there is fire in hell.

(Matthew 5:29, 30) If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Hell is so bad that if you could keep from going there by maiming yourself - going blind or being crippled it would be worth it.

(Luke 12:4, 5) And 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 show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!

Hell is such a dreaded place that nothing could be done to the body which could compare to what happens there.

(Matthew 8:11, 12) And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Interestingly hell is described both as a place of fire as well as outer darkness. It's also a place of torment, of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

(Matthew 25:41) Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

Here's another interesting fact about hell. Hell wasn't made for man. It was made for the devil and his angels. The reason people end up in hell is if they follow the direction of Satan. But also, hell is everlasting fire.

Go back in one more time to Revelation chapter 20 verse 10. Read verse 10.

This is after this age has run its course. It's after the 7 year tribulation period and after the 1000 year kingdom rule of Jesus Christ on this earth.

Satan is cast into the lake of fire. Now a thousand years before this in Revelation 19:20 the beast (anti-Christ) and his false prophet were cast in. Six times in Revelation 20 John stresses the 1000 years.

Now in verse 10 they are still there and they (devil, beast, & false prophet) will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Then, verse 15 all others not written in the Book of Life were cast in there with them.

Hell is real. It is just as real as heaven, Jesus Christ, and eternal life.

Hell is not a joke. It isn't a place where people go to party because all their friends are there. It's a place of loneliness and emptiness and darkness.

You know, when we hear someone tell someone else "go to hell" that ought to crush us. When we hear someone say "God damn you." (think about what those words mean) it ought to really grab us.

God forbid that any person in this church who claims to be a Christian can hear that kind of talk at work, or out on the street or in some form of entertainment and not be gripped by what is being said.

If it just becomes commonplace, if you can just tune it out, you've let Satan accomplish his purpose in you.

Satan's purpose for the world is to so trivialize the ideas of God's judgment that people never realize their need of Jesus Christ. And Satan's strategy for believers is to so anesthetize Christians to the realities of hell, that they never see the importance of sharing their faith.

Hell is real. And hell is punishment and eternal damnation.

You say, "Ed, that is pretty heavy stuff. If all that is true I need to know the way of escape. How can I be saved from hell?"

I. The Bible Presents The Reality Of Hell

II. The Bible Gives Us The Nature Of Hell

III. The Bible Alone Gives Us The Way To Escape Hell

Listen carefully to this. This is from a book called *Hell and Salvation* by Leslie Woodson:

The coming of Jesus into the world and the death of Christ on the cross demands a recognition of man's terrible plight, his tragic fate. Unless man was in desperate trouble, which was of eternal consequences, the coming of Christ and his crucifixion were of little significance.

The keystone of our faith is the doctrine of hell, because without this truth there is no justifiable reason for the necessity of the cross and the urgency of the preaching of the gospel to the whole world. Unless there is an eternal hell, the danger in which man exists is not grave enough to demand the sacrifice of God's own son. The atonement means absolutely nothing without the fact of hell.

The truth of eternal punishment and damnation takes us right back to the cross.

The description of hell that emerges from Jesus' teaching is fearful. It is the most horrendous thing we can imagine. But you know, what happened at the cross is a fearful thing too. The problem is it's so hard for us to understand that.

A lot of people have died as martyrs. A lot of people have suffered unspeakable things, but no one in all of human history ever suffered like Jesus suffered and here's why:

God is absolutely holy. His holiness is true holiness. It is perfection. When the prophet saw a vision of God he fell on his face and said, "*Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts.*" (Isaiah 6:5)

To understand the seriousness of what happened at the cross we have to understand the overwhelming majesty and holiness of the God. When we compare ourselves with Him then we see the seriousness of our sin.

God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. (I John 1:5) *God is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness.* (Habakkuk 1:13)

Isaiah was a godly man but when he looked in the holy face of God he said, "Woe is me!" All sin is an arrogant offence and flagrant insult against our glorious Creator.

We are under an infinite obligation to obey God and God is under an infinite obligation, demanded by his holiness, to punish sin. That punishment is an eternal hell.

But thank God, in the midst of the holiness and majesty and righteousness of God, God is also love. And in love he made a provision for our salvation.

Turn to I Peter 3 Page 704 Read verse 18

Jesus Christ didn't die for His own sins. He didn't have any. He was the last Adam. Adam in the Garden sinned and we fell in him. Adam was the representative of all humanity.

But Jesus came as our representative. He lived a sinless life and died in our place.

Look back a chapter to I Peter 2 Read verse 24

That little phrase *Christ died for our sins* is the key to the whole question of hell and forgiveness.

God, who is obligated by His holiness to punish sin in wrath, punished his innocent Son in our place. On the cross Jesus took the holy wrath of the Father for us. (II Corinthians 5:21) *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

The God who hates our sin sent His Son to die for our sins, to suffer in our place. The bond between the Father and the Son, which had never been violated for all eternity, was shattered for us. In agony the Son cried out to the Father, *My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?* (Matthew 15:24)

How can we escape the awful judgment of hell? There's only one way. All of the good works you could ever do, all the "churchy" religious stuff you could pull off couldn't pay for one sin.

It took the death of the sinless Son of God to do that.

And the Good News of the Bible is simply He died, was buried and rose again for you. In your place. As your substitute.

Would you trust Him? Would you believe? Would you bow your heart before Him today and say, "Thank you God. Thank you for Jesus Christ."

Sin is serious business. Hell is serious business. God is dead serious about hell. But God is serious about something else too. He's serious about forgiveness. He's serious about salvation. He's serious about mercy, grace, and life.

He's serious when he says, *Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation.* (II Corinthians 6:2) *Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden and I will give your rest.* (Matthew 11:28)