

THEOLOGY ROUNDTABLE

HELL



PENINSULA BIBLE CHURCH
MARCH 2014

INTRODUCTION

The topic of hell is one of the most difficult and painful in all of Christian theology. In a culture where judgment is considered cruel and unfair, the idea that a divine being would inflict judgment on his creation is offensive. The bulk of the offense is caused by a combination of misunderstandings about the nature of judgment, false notions about human nature, and incorrect assumptions about God. However, even in the context of healthy theology, the reality of eternal judgment is a frightening and sobering idea. It should not be discussed lightly.

When discussing hell, the first question is usually, “Does hell exist?” That question is essentially a mirror to the question of “Is everyone saved?” We will not be addressing that question. It will be addressed at a later time under the topic of whether believing in Christ is the only way of salvation. For the purposes of this Theology Roundtable, we will assume that not all humans are saved. That is, some people at the end of their lives end up being judged by God. The question we will be addressing is “What form does that judgment take?”

As with most theological issues, this question has been discussed for centuries with many different solutions proposed. This discussion will focus on three categories of views. The purgatorial or **limited** view holds that the unredeemed experience redemptive suffering which allows them to respond to an offer of salvation after death. The annihilationist or **conditional** view holds that unredeemed people eventually cease to exist. The **traditional** view holds that the unredeemed suffer eternal conscious torment.

Whenever biblical and theological issues are discussed, we must be careful to determine the importance of the question as well as the content of the question. Is this a question that is fundamental to pure doctrine of the Christian faith or is it of secondary concern?

Regardless of your individual convictions, our goal is to discuss these views objectively and fairly. We want to foster a spirit of unity and love, even amidst theological disagreement. Our own convictions may be changed or affirmed by the discussion.

Finally, any discussion of theology should ultimately lead us to God Himself. Our goal is to understand God and His ways more fully. Any convictions that we come to are only the best efforts of a fallen mind to understand divine nature and purpose. We must hold to all of our convictions with humility and dependence on God. In the end, God will do what God will do without checking whether it agrees with our interpretation of Scripture.

To God be the glory.

BIBLICAL TERMS

The English word “hell” occurs 54 times in the King James Version of the Bible, but only 14 in the English Standard Version. The reason for this is that more modern translations of the Bible leave untranslated certain difficult words that have in the past, been understood to refer to hell. There are four words that have, at least at times, been translated as hell. Those words are listed below with notes and references.

SHEOL

Sheol is the Hebrew Old Testament word often translated as “hell.” It occurs 65 times in the Old Testament.

In the earliest chapters of the Old Testament, the word often referred to the Jewish place of death without ethical distinction.

- **Psalm 6:5** “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in **Sheol** who will give you praise?”
- **Numbers 16:33** “So they and all that belonged to them went down alive into **Sheol**, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly.”
- **Ecclesiastes 9:2-3** “It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all. Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead.”

Gradually, Jewish thought began to include the notion of differentiation. That is, good and evil people ended up with different eternal destinies. This is evident in later portions of the Old Testament.

- **Daniel 12:2** “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”
- **Isaiah 26:19** “Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead.”
- **Ezekiel 32:21** “The mighty chiefs shall speak of them, with their helpers, out of the midst of **Sheol**: “They have come down, they lie still, the uncircumcised, slain by the sword.”

HADES

Hades is a Greek word that refers to the god of the underworld in Greek mythology, but grew also to refer to the place of the dead. In the Greek version of the Old Testament, it is usually used to translate the word *Sheol*. As with its Hebrew counterpart, its original meaning simply refers to the place of death. It occurs 10 times in the Greek New Testament.

Some New Testament passages use Hades to refer to the place of the dead.

- **Acts 2:31** “He foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to **Hades**, nor did his flesh see corruption.”
- **Revelation 1:18** “I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and **Hades**.”

Other New Testament passages use Hades in distinction with “heaven” to indicate a contrast.

- **Matthew 11:23** “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to **Hades**. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.”

The story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 10 is the only place in the New Testament where the word is used explicitly to describe a place of suffering.

- **Luke 16:22-23** “The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in **Hades**, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.”

Revelation speaks of Hades as being thrown into the lake of fire at the end of the age.

- **Revelation 20:13-14** “And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and **Hades** gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and **Hades** were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.”

GEHENNA

Gehenna originally referred to the Valley of the Sons of *Hinnom*, a ravine south of Jerusalem. According to Jewish popular belief, this was to be the place of God’s ultimate judgment. Some say that it used to be used as a trash dump: this is not verified in ancient documents, but originated from medieval rabbinical sources. It was a place where Baal was worshipped in ancient times.

In the New Testament, it became regularly used to refer to the location of God’s eternal judgment. It occurs 12 times in the Greek

New Testament. All but one are in the Gospels as quotes spoken by Jesus.

- **Mark 9:43** “And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to **hell**, to the unquenchable fire.”
- **Matthew 23:33** “You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to **hell**?”
- **Luke 12:5** “But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into **hell**. Yes, I tell you, fear him!”
- **James 3:6** “And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by **hell**.”

TARTURUS

Tarturus was a place in Greek thought that existed below the realms of Hades. It was where divine punishment was distributed. The word occurs only one time in the New Testament, apparently to refer to a place of punishment, albeit temporary.

- **2 Peter 2:4** “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into **hell** and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment . . .”

SELECTED PASSAGES

Apart from passage that explicitly mention hell, there are many passages that seem to refer to God’s judgment after death. Some of those passages are listed here for reference.

Isaiah 66:24 “And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

Matthew 12:31-32 “Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. ³²And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

Matthew 13:41-42 “The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴²and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Matthew 25:41, 45-46 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. . . .’ ⁴⁵Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ ⁴⁶And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Luke 16:22-23 “The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.”

1 Corinthians 3:15, 17 “If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. . . . ¹⁷If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.”

Philippians 3:19 “Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.”

Thessalonians 1:9 “They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.”

Hebrews 9:27 “And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.”

2 Peter 3:7 “But by the same word the heavens and earth that now exist are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly.”

Jude 1:7 “. . . just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.”

Jude 1:13 “. . . wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.”

Revelation 14:9-11 “And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, ¹⁰he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.

¹¹And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

Revelation 19:3 “Once more they cried out, ‘Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.’”

Revelation 20:9-15 “And they marched up over the broad plain of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city, but fire came down from heaven and consumed them, ¹⁰and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever. ¹¹Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

LIMITED VIEW

The **limited** (or purgatorial) view involves judgment that is redemptive and temporary. In this view, the unredeemed experience judgment and suffering after death, but still have the opportunity to respond to the offer of salvation through Christ. In Catholic doctrine, the suffering undergone in Purgatory has the ability to purge the guilt of sin and restore relationship with God. In evangelicals versions, God's justice is dispensed, but within the framework of his continual loving offer of forgiveness and salvation. This view sometimes allows for people to eternally refuse salvation, which results in either eternal punishment or annihilation.

This view is primary held by Catholics, though some evangelicals end up with a view containing some aspects of this view, particularly the option for those who are suffering to repent and choose salvation.

Arguments:

- Fire as an image in the New Testament has a purifying effect
- Biblical doctrine includes development of tradition and church history. The question should be “Is it consistent with the Bible,” rather than “Is it taught in the Bible”
- Certain texts seem to indicate chances at redemption after death (Matthew 12:32, 1 Corinthians 3:15)

CONDITIONAL VIEW

The **conditional** (or annihilationist) view has experienced the most recent and popular resurgence. It is not a new theory, but has lately gathered significant support and following. Scholars who currently hold to some variation of this view include Gregory Boyd, Dale Moody, Clark Pinnock, John Stott, and John Wehnam.

This view often begins by criticizing the traditional view as sadistic, unfair, and inhumane. They argue that eternal judgment is incompatible with God's loving nature and inconsistent with Scripture.

The basic tenet of the conditional view is that immortality is a gift granted conditionally to those who respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Adherents of this view argue that the unconditional immortality of the soul is a component of Greek thought that was imported into early Christian thinking without biblical warrant. Thus, the victory over death achieved in Christ grants his followers eternal life and bestows upon them immortality. Those who do not believe are not given victory over death, but are completely destroyed by death.

Some variations of this view include a period of suffering prior to annihilation, but the ultimate result for those who don't believe in Christ is they cease to exist. Their existence is annihilated by death.

Primary arguments:

- The unconditional immortality of the soul is a Greek philosophical idea that was imported into Christian doctrine without sufficient Scriptural evidence
- Judgment in Scripture is often referred to using “destruction” rather than “punishment” language
- Jesus' frequent use of fire to describe judgment refers to fire that consumes whatever is put into it

TRADITIONAL VIEW

The **traditional** view describes the destiny of those who have not believed the gospel of Jesus Christ as “eternal conscious torment.” Each of these three words of this view carries an important part of this view. This view understands God’s judgment as resulting in suffering, or torment. That suffering lasts forever: it does not end and cannot be relieved by an offer of salvation after death. Finally, individuals are aware of their suffering. They do not cease to exist or lose their identity. They are conscious. This is the traditional view that has been held by the Orthodox Church for most of its existence.

This view is summed up well by the Westminster Confession: “But the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.”

This view of hell is rooted in several related theological concepts. It begins with God’s insistence on holiness and his inability to excuse sin. This leads to the justice of God demanding judgment for violation of his character. The Bible frequently uses the language of “eternal” to describe judgment. There is also significant emphasis on the opportunity to repent and believe in this life and no clear reference to opportunities after death to do so.

Primary arguments:

- The most consistently held view throughout church history
- Takes the gravity of sin and the judgment of God seriously
- The Bible speaks repeatedly of judgment as everlasting (Matt 25:41, 45-46; Rev 19:3)
- The Bible never speaks of a chance at redemption following death (Hebrews 9:27)
- The Bible speaks of conscious punishment in discussions about judgment (Matt 13:41-42, Luke 16:22-23)

HELPFUL THOUGHTS

This is a difficult topic because the doctrine of “eternal conscious torment” is terrifying. It is painful to think about people we know and love suffering in that way. To outsiders, the question, “How can you believe that?” is completely understandable. Even those who hold this doctrine often ask, “How can I believe this?” Here are some notes to help understand how this doctrine is compatible with the rest of the revelation of God and his ways in the Bible.

Love and Justice must go together

There is no love without anger.

A God of love without justice is impotent and incapable of truly loving.

Everyone wants justice when they are suffering, just not when they are comfortable.

Sin is a relational choice to live apart from God

Sin is rebellion against God—it is a relational choice to reject our creator, not a legal violation.

Not true to say “sin is so bad that it requires eternal punishment”—this is legal framework.

More helpful to say “if you want to choose to be apart from God, then go ahead.”

C.S. Lewis says,

Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others . . . but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop

it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God 'sending us' to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud. (Lewis, C.S., The Great Divorce, Geoffrey Bles Publisher, UK. 1945)

God is ridiculously committed to the free will of his creation

Biblical revelation and human history reveals the incredible priority that God places on his creation making autonomous choices.

Irreconcilable tension between free-will and the existence of evil
I don't want to be controlled.
I don't people to hurt me. (i.e. I want others to be controlled)

God is so committed to the free will of humans that he allows them to permanently reject relationship. At what point is it loving to let someone walk away forever?

We should respond to the doctrine of hell as God does

Grief

If we think it's hard to believe in this version of hell, what must God feel? He weeps over those who reject him.

Mission

God is motivated for mission by his love for the creation and the direness of their choices.

Love

God loves his creation so much to grant them life, offer them free will, sacrifice for their redemption, and work for their salvation. How much do we love?

PBC POSITION

The PBC Doctrinal Statement (accessible online at pbc.org/what-we-believe) has a reference to our view on judgment under the final category of "Concerning the Future." Though the statement does not use the phrase "eternal conscious torment," the doctrinal statement expresses a belief in the traditional view of hell. It reads:

We believe that all human beings will be raised from the dead, at their proper time, to participate either in eternal life prepared for those who have been redeemed, or to participate in eternal punishment reserved for the devil and his angels.

The pastors and elders of the church are required to confirm their agreement with the doctrinal statement every year. Regular attendees are not required to agree with every aspect of the doctrinal statement.

We want to be a spiritual community where questions are encouraged, difficult topics are explored, and people feel the freedom to develop and explore their understanding of the Bible. We would not consider the topic of hell to be an issue to break fellowship over. We know there is a wider variety of belief within our community and encourage thoughtful, biblical dialogue on what is a very tricky and complicated theological topic.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

ONLINE

The Importance of Hell, Tim Keller. An article explaining why the doctrine of hell is important. http://www.redeemer.com/news_and_events/articles/the_importance_of_hell.html

BOOKS

Four Views on Hell

An excellent introduction and summary of four dominant views on hell. The views presented are the traditional literal view which understands hell to be actual fire; the traditional metaphorical view which understands biblical images of fire to indicate judgment; the purgatorial view which understands a limited judgment for the purposes of redemption; and the conditional view which understands the finally unpenitent to be completely destroyed.

Hayes, Zachary H., Clark H. Pinnock, William Crockett, and John F. Walvoord, *Four Views of Hell*. Michigan: Zondervan, 1996.

Two Views of Hell

A summary of and response on the two most popular views on hell: the traditional view and the conditional view.

Fudge, Edward William and Robert A. Peterson, *Two Views of Hell*. Wisconsin: InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Hell Under Fire

A defense of the traditional view on hell by a collection of scholars, including Albert Mohler, Daniel Block, Douglas Moo, Gregory Beale, J.I. Packer, and others.

Morgan, Christopher W. and Robert A. Peterson, *Hell Under Fire*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2004.

Erasing Hell

Another defense of the traditional view on hell, with a particular emphasis on responding to the recently published

book *Love Wins* by Rob Bell.

Chan, Francis and Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell*. Colorado: David C. Cook, 2011.

Razing Hell

A criticism of the traditional view of hell that presents an alternative view of hell following the conditional view.

Baker, Sharon L., *Razing Hell*. Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

NOTES

NOTES

NOTES

Peninsula Bible Church

3505 Middlefield Road Palo Alto, California 94306
T: 650.494.3840 F: 650.856.3747 www.pbc.org
Office Hours: Mon-Thur: 9:00 am-4:00 pm, Fri: 9:00 am-1:00 pm