

BACKGROUND READING

HELL

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INTRODUCTION

Isaiah, the grandest of all prophets, the most far-reaching in vision and eloquent in expression, having focussed more and more on the end of all things as he approached the end of his prophecy, concludes on a curious, even shocking note – with not only the new heaven and new earth, but hell, in his vision:

As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me, so will your name and descendants endure...And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind. **66/22,24**

Jesus, the Son of God and the Man of Love, concluded all of his teaching with the same shocking juxta-position: one day he, the King, will say to some, Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world; but to others, Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels...Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. **MW 25/34,41,46**

And the final pages of the Bible juxtapose the same irreconcilable shocking opposites: (Re 20/10) And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (v15) If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (21/8) But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and all liars – their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death. (22/15) Outside are the dogs, those who practise magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.

Eschatology is the study of the Bible’s teaching about the last (end) things. With heaven and hell we reach it’s teaching about the end of the end, what theologians call the final state. Following his return, and the subsequent resurrection of the dead and the judgement of mankind, Jesus introduces the final state – the new heaven and new earth, and hell – and sends each person to the eternal destiny revealed in that judgement.

One doesn’t *want* to speak on hell. It’s difficult: it is a sad and terrible subject; it seems to contradict/compromise God’s love; it presents doctrinal & apologetic, pastoral & evangelistic, emotional, intellectual & spiritual difficulties; it is completely contrary to the spirit of the age; it is scorned by the world and even questioned by many in church (or we use euphemisms like ‘a lost eternity’, which the Bible never uses).

But we *need* to teach on hell, because: (1) it is part of God's Word/revelation/truth and we must preach the whole counsel of God (Ac 20/27); (2) it is of vital importance to every human being, and we would not be innocent of their blood if we failed to preach it (Ac 20/20,26f cf. Ek 3/17-21, 33/2-9); (3) it is currently being neglected in the church's preaching (when did you last hear [how often have you heard] a sermon on hell?); (4) it is a current/topical/hot/controversial issue, even (especially) in the church, with many questioning/ doubting or diluting/rejecting the biblical doctrine and teaching heretical doctrines instead.

[There is currently] both massive repudiation of the historic teaching of eternal punishment and a strange neglect of preaching on this subject by those who claim they do believe in hell.

So I'm teaching on it. It could be taught as part of Eschatology, Contemporary Issues or (as here) Evangelism/Mission (part of our motivation for reaching the lost). I don't teach on it often: this is only the third time in 23 years – once in each church. Some have struggled when I've taught on it and fallen away (e.g. Mike X); others have been saved or got serious with God for the first time in their life (e.g. Mark Y). Indeed, preaching on hell has often been key in bringing about salvation and revival (e.g. Jonathan Edwards).

But in doing so I'm not reacting/responding to any one or more of the writers or preachers that have stirred controversy in recent years by their false teaching on hell (cf. my teaching on grace). It would be exhausting and unnecessary to answer each heresy on hell that emerges. Prevention is better than cure: if we can just be grounded in what the Bible teaches about hell, it will immunize us against any false teaching when it comes.

I: THE DOCTRINE OF HELL (WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH ABOUT HELL?)

There is a widespread rejection of the concept of hell today, even amongst Christians, and the more palatable doctrines of universalism (the God of Love saves all men, except perhaps the extremely wicked minority) or annihilation (a God of Love cannot eternally punish the wicked so he simply annihilates them) have in many quarters replaced the traditional understanding of hell as the ‘place’ of the eternal punishment of the wicked.

The aversion to the doctrine of hell is natural and understandable, but if the doctrine is biblical it has to be embraced like any other. Many struggle to identify hell with the God of Love but Jesus, the Man of Love, had more to say about hell than any other person – he had more to say about hell than he did about heaven.

We must start with the text/Scriptures (what does the Bible say, regardless of how shocking this may seem) and *not* with our emotion/reason (this doesn’t feel nice/good to me, this doesn’t seem to agree with the God I’ve been told about). *Every* dilution or dismissal of the doctrine today has this faulty starting point.

We must be guided by close textual study of Scripture, not by sentiment, emotion, human wisdom, the spirit of the age, etc. Some reject the doctrine because it seemingly is inconsistent with the revelation of God as a God of love. This is effectively to deny Scripture in favour of our picture of God. But this is meaningless: we only know God from and in Scripture. Thus we must let Scripture reform our understanding of God (and love!) rather than allow our understanding of God (distorted and limited as this is by our finiteness, fallen-ness, the influence of the world and the deception of the devil) to put blinkers/presuppositions on our reading of Scripture. To be biblical (evangelical) is to be submitted to the authority of Scripture in advance: we are already submitted to what it will teach us even before we begin to study it (cf. Jn 7/17).

What Hell Is

The word “hell” occurs 14 times in the NIV, but hell is referred to using other language many times (e.g. in all the passages quoted at the outset). 12 times it is the translation of *gehenna*, once each of *hades* & *tartaroo*.

{*geenna* [GK1147](12): hell (12); *hades* [GK87](10): Hades (5), depths (2), grave (2), hell (1); *tartaroo* [GK5434](1): sent to hell}

The main NT word translated “hell” (the word most correctly translated “hell”) is *gehenna*, the Greek form of the Aramaic *gee hinnom*, meaning “Valley of Hinnom”, a valley south of Jerusalem where: (i) the city’s refuse burnt in an unending fire; (ii) parents sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god, Molech, during the evil reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh (2 Ki 16/3, 21/6, Je 7/32, 19/6, 32/35). In time the valley became a type/symbol of sin and woe, and its name a designation for the unending fire of the final place of punishment.

Gehenna should not be confused with *hades* (the Greek/NT equivalent of the Hebrew/OT *sheol*), the shadowy ‘place’ where the dead are held, awaiting resurrection and judgement at the end of time (but already a place of provisional punishment: “to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement, while continuing their punishment” [2 Pe 2/9b]); *Hades* is thus sometimes also a personification of Death and its power. *Gehenna* is correctly translated “hell”; but because there is no other English word for translating *hades*, *hades* is sometimes (especially in older translations) unhelpfully and confusingly translated “hell” also (e.g. Mw 16/18 KJV [NIV fn]). Normally, *hades* refers to the intermediate state of the unrighteous; *gehenna* to their final state. The former is sometimes also likened to a “prison” (*phylake*, 1 Pe 3/19). Some fallen angels are also held in an intermediate state of provisional judgement awaiting their final destiny in hell (2 Pe 2/4, Jude 6) – in 2 Peter 2/4, the word *Tartarus* (it’s only NT occurrence) is unhelpfully translated “hell” (see NIV fn).

As already indicated, Jesus spoke more about hell than any other person (12/14 “hell”, 11/12 *gehenna*). Jesus used the word *gehenna* on numerous occasions to denote the eternal punishment of the unrighteous.

MW 5/22 *anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement...anyone who says ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell. Hell is clearly paralleled with, i.e. is a form of, judgement.*

MW 5/29F *It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell... It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. That the “whole body” can “be thrown [go] into hell” indicates the physical resurrection of the unrighteous before their entry into the final state.*

MW 10/28 *Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. That God “can destroy both soul and body in hell” has the same implication. (The Greek word translated “destroy” is apollymi, an important word to which we will return later.) || Lk 12/4f: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more...Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him.*

MW 18/8F *It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire...It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. That the fire of hell is “eternal” indicates eternal, not temporary, punishment.*

Mw 23/15&33 (to the Pharisees): You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of **hell** as you are...How will you escape being condemned to **hell**?

MK 9/43,45,47F *It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out...It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell...It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (q Is 66/24). The eternal nature of hell’s punishment is again asserted, as well as the internal and external anguish this punishment involves.*

On other occasions Jesus didn’t use the word *gehenna* but his use of the imagery of fire links these texts with those above and shows that he was speaking of hell:

Mw 13/30&41f (the parable of the weeds): First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned...his angels will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the **fiery furnace**, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” indicates both suffering and bitter, hopeless remorse.

Mw 13/49f (the parable of the net): The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the **fiery furnace**, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ditto.

MW 25/41,46 *Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels ...Then they will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life. The same word is used to describe the duration of the punishment of the wicked and the blessing of the righteous: both are eternal.*

Cf. Mw 3/12 – The idea of fire implied in the word *gehenna*, and the imagery of fire used in other texts about hell, show retrospectively that John the Baptist was speaking of hell when he said of Jesus: His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with **unquenchable fire**.

On yet other occasions Jesus employed neither the word *gehenna* nor the imagery of fire, but other imagery – “outside”, “darkness”, and “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (some of which occurred in the above texts) – show that on these occasions also he was speaking of hell:

Mw 8/12 (after the centurion’s faith): But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. “Thrown outside” indicates exclusion, isolation and separation; “darkness” indicates lostness, hopelessness and fear.

Mw 22/13 (the parable of the wedding banquet): Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ditto.

Mw 25/30 (the parable of the talents): And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ditto.

When we move from Jesus’ teaching on hell to that of the apostles, we see the same thing. Many NT texts speak of the judgement and eternal punishment of the unrighteous, denoting hell even if the word is not used.

RO 2/5,8F,12 *you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgement will be revealed...there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress...All who sin apart from the law will also perish [apollymi] apart from the law and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. (3/8) Their condemnation is deserved. (See whole periscope 1/18 – 3/20)*

RO 9/22 *What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction [apoleia]?*

GA 1/9 *If anyone is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!*

PP 3/18F *many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction [apoleia]...*

2 TH 1/8F *He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord..."*

2 TI 2/12 *If we disown him, he will also disown us. (Cf. Mw10/33, Mk 8/38: disown, ashamed.)*

HE 10/26F,29,31,39 *If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God...How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?...It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God...But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed [apoleia]... (See v26-31)*

HE 12/25,29 *See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?... 'for our God is a consuming fire'.*

2 PE 2/3F *Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but sent them to hell [Tartarus, prison], putting them into gloomy dungeons to be held for judgment...[9]if this is so, then the Lord knows how...to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgement, while continuing their punishment... [17b] Blackest darkness is reserved for them.*

Jude 4-7: For certain men, whose condemnation was written about long ago [or men who were marked out for condemnation]...the Lord delivered his people out of Egypt, but later destroyed those who did not believe...these [angels] he has kept in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgement on the great Day. In a similar way, Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding towns gave themselves up to sexual immorality and perversion. They serve as an example of those who suffer the punishment of eternal fire. [13] These men are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved for ever. [23] snatch others from the fire and save them...

Finally, there are the verses in Revelation quoted at the outset (20/10,15, 21/8, 22/15), plus:

RE 19/20 *the beast and the false prophet...were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulphur.*

RE 20/14 *Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death.*

RE 14/10F *he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for [them]...*

The Bible is absolutely clear that hell is real (it exists), it is eternal, it is eternal punishment.

What Hell Is Not

The Bible is thus equally clear about what hell is not: it contradicts various wrong ideas about hell.

8 things hell is not: this life; reincarnation; purgatory; limbo; universalism; annihilation; empty; temporary.

I will restrict myself to brief comments on 3 of these and then make a full response to annihilation, the most common idea being promoted in some 'Christian' circles today. (See K&T p285-9 for their response to all 8.)

Universalism – the belief that all men are saved. How much time should I waste on this one! You have to be reading a different Bible to even contemplate this! The Bible is quite clear that not all men are saved. I could list literally thousands of verses that contradict this. Try just about every text quoted in this talk for starters. Such an idea is not only unscriptural but illogical – it would make God and all of life meaningless.

God is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost? The fact that it is not God's will that any perish does not mean that none perish. It is not God's will that any sin either, but we do sin. This verse does not refute hell; it refutes a double predestination, a God-willed reprobation, a God who *wants* some to go to hell.

Purgatory – the traditional Roman Catholic belief that the wicked are sent to purgatory for a 'season' of refining and purifying, where they can prove themselves to be fit for heaven (a kind of heavenly reform school). This amounts to salvation by works, denies the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross, and contradicts the Bible's teaching that man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement (He 9/27).

This life - hell is the worst aspects of what we experience in this life, or a subjective experience of life. We thus don't have to fear any other hell in the hereafter. Again, this flatly contradicts the Bible's teaching that hell follows death (or Christ's return), resurrection and judgement. It also dilutes the horror of hell: *nothing* anyone experiences in this life (objectively or subjectively) comes close to the reality of hell. We are not helping ourselves or others when we say of anything in our life or this world that it's 'like hell' – it's *not*!

Annihilation – by far the most prevalent of the wrong concepts in our day, at least among some Christians.

Yet the case for it is flimsy, and the many textual and logical arguments against it are overwhelming.

Annihilationists make much of the Greek verb *apollymi* (and its noun, *apoleia*), which they claim means “to destroy” or “to perish”, and which thus indicates annihilation rather than eternal punishment. So, for example, God “can destroy [*apollymi*] both soul and body in hell” (Mw 10/28) means he annihilates the whole person. Again, Jesus said those who believe in him “shall not perish [*apollymi*]” (Jn 3/16); conversely, those who do *not* believe simply perish – they are annihilated.

But *apollymi* [GK660] has a range of meaning and its 90 occurrences in the NT are translated in various ways: lose/loses/lost (33), destroy/destroyed (17), perish/perishes/perishing (14), kill/killed (12), ruin (3), drown (3), die (2), bring to end (1), executed (1), starving to death (1), spoils(1), vanished (1), wasted (1). Of all these translations, only “destroy” (1 out of 13 translations, 17 of 90 occurrences) could possibly mean annihilation. Five others (kill, drown, die, execute, starve to death) indicate physical death – but this (as Mw 10/28 makes clear) is not annihilation.

{* *apoleia* [GK724](18): destruction/destructive/doomed-to-destruction (13); destroyed (2); waste (2); perish (1)}

Furthermore, of the 13 passages in which Jesus talks about hell (14, if we include John the Baptist's reference), in only one is “destroy” used (Mw 10/28: “destroy both body and soul in hell”); in none of the other 13 is there a word which suggests (or could even be stretched to mean) annihilation. And with respect to this single occurrence of “destroy”: the parallel text in Luke (12/5) simply has “throw you into hell”, which does not suggest annihilation (Mw 10 must be interpreted in the light of Lk 12 and all the other texts).

Apollymi never denotes annihilation when applied to other things in the NT: the sheep, coin and son are “lost” but not annihilated (Lk 15); the wineskins are “ruined” (or “become useless”) but are not annihilated (Mw 9/17); Herod sought to “kill” the infant Jesus (Mw 2/13) – but Matthew 10/28 makes it clear that killing is not annihilation. We would, therefore, not expect the word to mean annihilation when applied to the punishment of the wicked after death – unless such an abrupt shift of meaning was clearly indicated in the text. But not only do these texts not indicate such a shift of meaning, they exclude this possibility and assert the eternal nature of the punishment of the wicked. The word *apollymi* must thus be understood as indicating such, and we must not be misled by words such as “destroy” or “perish” used in translation. To be ‘destroyed’ in hell is to be eternally lost, perished, ruined, spoilt, wasted, useless – but not annihilated.

There is no use of *apollumi* in the NT that clearly indicates annihilation. You can interpret it that way if you choose to in some places, but one would not be likely to think of annihilation if they were not looking for it and wanting that meaning. If the NT writers wanted to make it clear that they meant annihilation they could have used the Greek word *ekmedenisis* (which clearly means ‘annihilation’) or *ekmedenizo* (‘to annihilate’) – words that were in currency then. Furthermore, there are times when *apollumi* (or the noun form) could not mean ‘annihilation’. For example, when some complained about the expensive perfume that was being poured on Jesus, they asked, ‘Why this waste?’ (*apoleia*, the noun form of *apollumi*). The perfume was wasted, they said. That is hardly annihilation. A modern equivalent is when an insurance company regards a wrecked car as a ‘write-off’. It is now waste. And, I have to say it with all love and honesty, that is what happens to the person who blows away the privilege that was theirs by not coming to the light. They will sadly be an everlasting waste. Forever. That is the meaning of the Greek word *apollumi* or *apoleia* when it is translated ‘destruction’ or ‘perishing’.

Paul says that when Christ returns the ungodly “will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord” (2 Th 1/9). “Destruction” here cannot mean annihilation as “everlasting annihilation” is meaningless. Also, an annihilated person can neither be shut in with nor shut out from the presence of the Lord. The word translated “destruction”, *olethros*, is used in 1 Timothy 6/9 as a parallel to *apoleia*: material

desires “plunge men into ruin [*olethros*] and destruction [*apoleia*]” – i.e. the ungodly (in 2 Th 1/9) suffer irreparable loss/ruin and permanent shame, not annihilation.

The word *aionios* means eternal (without end) when applied to the final state of the righteous...

MW 25/46 *Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.*

JN 10/28 *I give them eternal life and they shall never perish.*

2 CO 4/17 *our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*

2 CO 5/1 *Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.*

2 TI 2/10 *Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they too may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory.*

HE 9/12B *He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption*

HE 9/15 *Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.*

...and so must mean the same when applied to the final state of the unrighteous (in Mw 25/46 in the same *verse*) – unless there is clear evidence to the contrary. There is no such evidence; and so this word further confirms our interpretation of the cited texts to mean the eternal punishment of the wicked.

Revelation 14/10f says of the ungodly person: He will be tormented with burning sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever. Here the punishment of the wicked is said to continue “for ever and ever” (*eis aionas aionon*), lit. “to ages of ages”, *exactly the same expression* that is used to describe God’s eternal existence in 4/9: him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever. The eternal nature of the punishment of hell can no longer be in doubt!

Those who teach annihilation tell us that the traditional view of eternal punishment is largely based upon the Greek idea of the ‘immortality of the soul’. Many of us have taken for granted that the soul of the person, given to them by creation, is immortal; the soul lives on even though the body dies. This is based partly on the fact that we are made on the image of God (Ge 1/26f). He alone has immortality in himself (1 Ti 6/16) but he chose to bestow this on all the human race through creation. But we are now being told that this is only a Greek idea, not Hebraic, and that the Bible never taught the immortality of the soul in the first place. This makes it easier to accept the teaching of annihilation (a position taken by the cults over the years, including Jehovah’s Witnesses), which says the soul is not given immortality until the person is *born again*. The traditional view is that the person is given immortality by creation – by being *born* – so that person’s soul survives death. But if the person is not given immortality of the soul until they are born again, only the Christian’s soul survives the grave. The person who is not a Christian does not have an immortal soul; the person dies – that’s it; no immortal soul even to be annihilated. The person simply ceases to exist. (Some, however, teach that the unsaved will be raised to face judgement, and will be annihilated after that.)

I agree that the ‘immortality of the soul’ as per Greek dualistic philosophy (spirit is good and eternal, matter is evil and temporal) is not a biblical idea. But this does *not* mean (as per annihilationists) that the spirit dies at death (an idea contradicted by multiple texts): human souls are given immortality (created to live forever) by God, and thus the soul lives on after death (both before and after the resurrection of the body) / eternally.

The question I often put to people who know neither Greek nor ancient philosophy is this: if you merely read the teachings of Jesus without any bias whatever, what would you suppose *he* was teaching (even if you disagree with him)? And what do you really think his *hearers* perceived (even if they were ignorant and simple people)? Take the parable, or story, in Luke 16/19-31 as related by Jesus. Two people died. One of them (named Lazarus) went to Abraham’s side, the other (who was called a ‘rich man’) was found in hell. ‘In hell [Greek, *hades*], where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.’ (v23) Since the physical bodies of Lazarus and the rich man were still in the grave, one assumes it was the souls, or the spirits, of Lazarus and the rich man that are described. Whatever you want to call them, both men were very conscious after death; one was with Abraham (who apparently had been in that heavenly realm for hundreds of years), the other in torment. ...Of course, you cannot make a parable stand ‘on all four legs’ – which means you can’t make a doctrine out of every point in a parable that is basically teaching one truth. But in this account, even if eternal punishment *wasn’t* the main point (although I believe it was), Jesus would hardly have given

throw away comments about a matter so awful if the truth about conscious punishment after death was not an assumption in his thinking or inconceivable by his hearers. ...As for the immortality of the soul being a gift of the Spirit at conversion and not creation, how does one explain the rich man – obviously unconverted – who was in conscious torment in *hades* (which means either a place of punishment or the grave)? It wasn't his physical body in hell so it had to be his soul or spirit which survived the grave. What is obvious is that the man was in conscious torment. Jesus also indicated that the two states are permanent and unchangeable, both 'Abraham's side' (a metaphor for paradise or heaven) and *hades*/hell.

Some think the eternity of hell can be preserved without conceiving it as never-ending pain but instead as the annihilation of souls; the effect of annihilation would be eternal, thus hell would still be eternal punishment. But (i): it seems contrary to the plain words of JC; (ii) it would make hell to have an end, like purgatory: once you are annihilated, all pain ends. Thus it makes hell temporal and only its *effects* eternal. (iii) Souls seem to be intrinsically immortal, immortal by their essence, so that it would be as self-contradictory to have a soul cease to exist as to have a circle become square.

MW 26/24 *woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.*

If hell is annihilation, this text is meaningless. To be annihilated means to be returned to non-existence, to what you 'were' before you were born. This text says that God's judgement will leave us worse off than if we had not been born, that hell is something worse than non-existence, and indicates that hell is eternal punishment not annihilation.

1 Co 15/32 (q Is 22/13): If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'.

Isaiah was quoting the hedonists of his day, who were insisting on continuing to sin rather than heeding God's call to repent and not be judged (v12); Paul was pointing out that if there was no resurrection to heaven *or* hell (a lie, because there is), then it didn't matter how we lived here because there was no consequence either way in the hereafter. If hell (God's judgement on sinners) is annihilation, then for hard-hearted, 'contented' sinners there is little motivation to repent. "Yes, there may be a truly uncomfortable moment when we stand before God's judgement throne, but if all he's going to do after that is annihilate us, then that's exactly what my atheism/agnosticism already believes will happen to me, i.e. that I'll cease to exist. I live as I do now on that basis, and if the judgement you're telling me about amounts to the same thing, then I see no reason to change." What Isaiah meant as a condemnation, and Paul as a lie, becomes a straightforward statement of belief and ethic for the unbeliever: let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die – i.e. God will annihilate us.

When John the Baptist warned people to 'flee from the coming wrath' (Mw 3/7) – arguably the first message of the NT, and eternal punishment was exactly what he meant – his warning made sense. I doubt people would *run* from coming wrath with much concern if they knew in advance it meant only annihilation. Annihilation becomes the same kind of non-existence the unbeliever is [already] counting on when he dies. What perhaps worries me most about the promotion of the idea of annihilation is that it hands on a silver platter a *theological* rationale to unbelievers for precisely what they were hoping in the first place was true. They say, 'Why should I believe? Why should I give up my way of life? I will eventually end up [just as I thought I would] as though I never lived – no unending hell to fear.' The teaching of Jesus regarding hell was not meant to make us comfortable – it blasts us out of our comfort zone.

Resurrection texts also indicate what texts about hell do: that hell is eternal punishment. The resurrection and afterlife of the righteous and unrighteous are clearly paralleled yet contrasted, and if the former's is eternal so is the latter's. Also, it would be illogical for God to raise the wicked only to annihilate them – and vindictive (God is no more 'loving' in the doctrine of annihilation than in the doctrine of eternal punishment!)

DA 2/12 *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.*

JN 5/28F *Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.*

AC 24/15 *I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked.*

One of the most important principles for interpreting the Bible is to take the plain meaning of the text as the true and intended one. A straightforward reading of all the texts on hell would never arrive at the idea of annihilation. This has to be imposed on the text because of presuppositions one comes to the text with.

If God meant annihilation, he could easily have said so in plain language that didn't mislead all Bible readers through the ages (cf. "the first heaven and the first earth had passed away", "there will be no more death").

The universal church has understood hell to mean eternal punishment for 2000 years. You have to be very confident (arrogant?) to say that all Christians before you/us have got it wrong!

It is not coincidental that the greatest rejection of the true doctrine of hell amongst Christians, and the vogue for annihilation instead, has come in an era of (i) the most one-sided preaching and belief about God (and love, grace, etc – it doesn't matter how we live), (ii) the most unrighteous living among men (extreme evil is the norm, we become desensitized to it) and (iii) the tendency (now almost a 'doctrine') in both world and church to indulge and tolerate (rather than punish) wrong.

The teaching on annihilation that is currently spreading its lures about is not just an alternative theological position, something that true (biblical) Christians or churches can/should entertain as part of a healthy debate. There is only one way to describe this teaching: *it is a seductive and deadly heresy*. *Seductive* because it seems so nice, so much more attractive than the church's traditional teaching on hell, so much more politically correct and in keeping with the spirit of the age (sadly in parts of the church as well as the world), so much less likely to cause offence (in our hearts and minds or to others); it puts God in a much better light, it agrees with what I imagine or want him to be; in my understanding of love it seems more loving. This teaching is seductive because it gives us a soft way out, a way of retreat from that awful but true doctrine. *Deadly* because it is almost sure to decrease (it certainly cannot increase) our heart for, prayer for and action towards the lost; and because it will further dull the spirit and conscience of every unbeliever who hears our 'witness' of what hell is. In short, it may contribute to populating the very place we're talking about: hell!

What is Hell Like?

We don't really know – and, wonderfully, never will! If the Bible says little about it, that's because it is a roadmap to heaven not hell. Also, human language is unlikely to be able to convey adequately hell's horrors.

We need therefore to proceed cautiously (cf. the confident details of the scholastics, or the lurid descriptions of writers – parodied in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pp109-114, 117-124)

Divine revelation gives us much less information about hell than about heaven. This is what we should reasonably expect, for at least two reasons. (1) Hell is essentially the absence of heaven, 'the outer darkness'. Darkness is defined only negatively, as the absence of light; light is not the absence of darkness. Evil is the privation of good; good is not the privation of evil... (2) We were designed for heaven, not hell. The travel agent tells you more about the beach resort you are supposed to go to than about the swamp by the side of the highway that you are not supposed to fall into.

It *may* be a place, but this is not certain. The terms and imagery Scripture uses to describe hell do seem to indicate locality: 'cast into', 'throw outside', 'valley of Hinnom', 'fiery furnace', 'lake of fire', 'the Abyss' (Lk 8/31), 'prison' (1 Pe 3/19), '*Tartarus*...gloomy dungeons' (2 Pe 2/4). However, space and time may not exist in eternity, or be very different to the dimensions which we live in and know now; and human language may not be able to describe hell without using these locality-suggesting metaphors.

What *is* certain is that it is a state or condition – one of condemnation, judgement and punishment (with attendant suffering, shame and misery) which is just and eternal.

But how do we describe this condition? The images Jesus and the apostles use are clearly figurative: if they were literal they would contradict each other (e.g. fire v darkness). Both are symbols of punishment throughout the Bible and the NT writers simply make use of these symbols. Indeed, a great deal of language concerning heaven and hell must be read figuratively. For example, 'lake of fire' is clearly figurative as death and Hades are thrown into it, and figurative personifications cannot be thrown into a literal lake.

References to e.g. torment by fire are metaphors and are not literal...they refer to the pain of the soul that is unbearable in the light of missing heaven – which could have been one's eternal state.

What tells us more about hell than the images themselves are the spiritual, psychological and emotional realities they evoke. The texts already examined indicate: the existence of both body and soul-spirit in hell; internal and external sufferings; anguished but futile remorse and regret; anger, bitterness and rage; being ‘lost’, ‘ruined’, ‘useless’ and ‘destroyed’; – and all of this for all eternity.

The most essential thing about hell, however, is total and eternal separation, exclusion and banishment from the presence and blessings of God (see again 2 Th 1/9). “God is light” (1 Jn 1/5): so ‘blackest darkness’ is total separation from God. Mankind thinks they can live (and are living) without God, but so much of what even unbelievers enjoy in life – be it material (sunshine, rain, food, etc) or immaterial (love, order, harmony, etc) comes from God. In hell there will be a total absence of everything good, everything that comes from G.

If there is one other thing that expresses the awful essence of hell it is hopelessness. However terrible our situation here on earth may be, there is always hope that it may improve. In hell there is none. (Cf. Ep 2/12: “without hope and without God”.) Dante, in his medieval poem, *The Divine Comedy*, expressed this truth with chilling economy: above the entrance to hell stands a sign – “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here”!

To summarize what hell is like: (1) total absence of the favour of God; (2) endless disturbance of ‘life’ due to the complete domination of sin; (3) positive pains and sufferings in body and soul; (4) subjective punishment (e.g. pangs of conscience, anguish and despair).

Who Goes to Hell?

The unrighteous (or wicked), which is to say unbelievers, for only through faith in Christ and his work on our behalf can we be made righteous.

JN 3/16 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes on him shall not perish [apollymi] but have eternal life. Clearly, by contrast, those who don't believe do perish.*

JN 3/18 *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.*

JN 3/36 *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*

JN 5/24 *I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.*

1 JN 5/12 *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

If we do not believe, we remain in death and under God's wrath. Even if we are quite good people by this world's standards, if we do not believe we are not righteous; we are unrighteous and will go to hell. There is indeed bad news for good people! If this seems unfair, we must remember that in God's sight and by his standards, There is no-one righteous...All have sinned and fall short of what he justly requires (Ro 3/10,23).

Amongst those who've heard the gospel, the unrighteous are easy to determine: all those who did not respond to what they heard. Amongst those who've never heard the gospel, this is more difficult. There are 2 views. (1) Men are judged according to the light they've received (from general revelation, their culture, etc). Some respond to this light and are ‘saved’. In his perfect knowledge of what level of response amounts to salvation, or what would have happened if the person had heard the gospel, God justifies some. This is ‘nice’ – but problematic: if God is going to save the ‘righteous’ among the heathen anyway, why take the gospel to them?

(2) All men reject the knowledge of God general revelation gives and so are without excuse – under judgement and bound for hell (Ro 1/18 – 3/20). Their only hope is for someone to take special revelation (the gospel) to them in the hope that they will respond and be saved.

But, of course, there are degrees of punishment (just as there are of rewards).

LK 12/47F *That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving of punishment will be beaten with few blows.*

CF. MW 11/20-24 *Cities in which Jesus performed most of his miracles but which did not repent will be judged more severely on the day of judgement than cities which did not witness his miracles.*

Jesus is not here giving a random homily to masters on how to deal with their slaves. The context (v42-46) is about our being found busy (or not) with what he gave us to do when he returns, and with the reward (or judgement) that will follow. This may be a general truth about God's justice in disciplining/punishing men, but it certainly references the justness of the punishment that each will receive in hell.

There is also a possible relevance here to the matter discussed in the previous paragraph: those who've not heard the gospel and did not know their master's will, "will be beaten with few blows".

IN CONCLUSION this is what the Bible teaches about hell. There is still so much more to say, but already we've learnt enough to know that when we say our Creed it includes these solemn lines: "We believe...in hell."

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II : THE APOLOGETICS OF HELL (HOW DO WE LIVE WITH THIS TEACHING?)

Of all the doctrines in Christianity, hell is probably the most difficult to defend, the most burdensome to believe and the first to be abandoned. The critic's case against it seems very strong, and the believer's duty to believe it seems unbearable.

We have seen what the Bible teaches about hell. Nevertheless, it is a difficult doctrine to believe and preach. Apologetics shows that hell is not only biblical but reasonable (logical), and so can help us to embrace it.

Ten Issues at Stake in the Doctrine of Hell

Heaven (for example) is far more important than hell, we know much more about it, and it is meant to occupy our minds much more centrally. But, though other doctrines are more important than this one, this one is not unimportant or dispensable. In fact, it is important enough to make a tremendous difference.

Why is hell important? What difference does it make? What happens if we drop it?

Disbelief in hell involves 3 presuppositions and entails 7 consequences that destroy the whole Christian faith.

1. To believe there is no hell presupposes that both Scripture and the church lie, for both clearly teach the reality of hell. If they are wrong about hell, they could be wrong about anything and everything else.
2. If Scripture and the church do not lie about what Jesus said about hell, then it presupposes that *Jesus* is the liar. For he was far more explicit and adamant about hell than anyone else in Scripture.
3. If we drop hell because it is unbearable to us, that presupposes the principle that we can change whatever doctrines we find unbearable or unacceptable; in other words, that doctrine is negotiable. Christianity then becomes a human ideology, not a divine revelation; a set of humanly chosen ideas and ideals rather than propositional data...Doctrine becomes a nose of wax to be twisted into any shape we choose.
4. If there is no hell, life's choices no longer make an infinite difference...Drop hell, and heaven becomes a bland, automatic anything and everything for anyone and everyone. The razor-edge drama of life is blunted into a flat, safe plain. (Cf. the difference no hell makes to life in Hindu/Buddhist cultures; Western culture excels at drama, especially tragedy, because it has theological roots in the doctrine of hell.) CS Lewis said he never met a person who had a lively belief in heaven who did not also have a lively belief in hell. 'If a game is to be taken seriously, it must be possible to lose it.'
5. If salvation is universal and automatic, then ultimately there is no free will...It is no accident that those Eastern religions that do not teach hell also do not teach free will. Free will and hell go together; scratch the idea of free will and you will find underneath it the necessity of hell.
6. The same Eastern religions that teach there is no hell also teach there is no absolute morality, no real and objective opposition between good and evil (incompatible with pantheism). Morality becomes then only this-worldly and pragmatic...If everything is God, there can be nothing else, nothing anti-God.
7. If there is no hell to be saved from, then Jesus is not our Saviour but only our teacher, prophet, guru, model
8. If there is no hell, a religious indifference follows. If faith in Christ as Saviour is not necessary, we should recall all the missionaries and apologize for all the martyrs. What a waste of passion and energy and time and life! If there is no such thing as fire, fire departments are a distraction and a waste.
9. If salvation is automatic, Christ's sacrificial death was not what Christ himself said it was: necessary, planned, the culmination of his whole earthly life and his reason for coming from heaven to earth. Instead it was a stupid mistake, a tragic accident.
10. If there is no reason for believing in the detested doctrine of hell, there is also no reason to believe in the most beloved doctrine in Christianity: that God is love. The beloved doctrine is the reason critics most frequently give for disbelieving the detested doctrine; yet the two stand on exactly the same foundation.

Why do we believe (how do we know) that God is love? Not by philosophical reasoning. What logic can prove that the perfect, self-contained, independent Reality, who has no needs, nevertheless loves these superfluous creatures of his so much that he became one of them to suffer and die for them? Not by observation of nature,

any more than by philosophical reasoning; ‘nature red in tooth and claw’ does not manifest love. Not by science. No experiment has ever verified divine love, or measured or weighed it or even observed it. Not by conscience, for conscience is ‘hard as nails.’ Conscience tells us what is right and wrong and tells us we are absolutely obliged to do right and not wrong, but it does not tell us we are forgiven. The King’s laws imprinted on the walls of our consciences do not excuse, but accuse, the lawbreakers. Only the King himself forgives. Not by history either. History does not move by universal love but by universal selfishness. In fact, history began to move only after universal love was dethroned in Eden. Before the Fall, what happened? Adam and Eve loved each other and God. Hardly headlines. There is one and only one reason anyone ever came to the idea that God is love, mercy and forgiveness – and only one proof that this idea is true. That reason is the character of God revealed in the Bible, culminating in JC. The exact same authority which is our only authority for believing God is love also assures us that there is a hell. Either we accept both on the same ground or reject both on the same ground, for they stand on the same ground.

The same may be said of hell and heaven. People sometimes say, ‘I believe in heaven but I don’t believe in hell.’ I answer: if there is no hell, there is no heaven. The two rise or fall together.

So, if hell is just our idea and not true, what about ‘God is love’, heaven or even God himself? Conversely, if God is just our invention, where on earth did the idea of hell come from?

Ludwig Feuerbach claimed that God is nothing more than man’s projection upon the backdrop of the universe. God does not exist; he exists only in our minds; we project a God who is ‘out there’ who will look after us – and take us to heaven when we die. Given that premise, I ask: whoever would have projected the doctrine of hell on the backdrop of the universe? What rational, normal and humane person would conceive of the teaching of hell? To me this is an appropriate question to put to the followers of Feuerbach. It disproves his theory, for no sensible human being would have come up with this teaching. This is not a God who only takes care of us or receives us into heaven but a God who is angry and who punishes in a manner no person would have conceived or wanted to believe. ...No human being would have thought this up.

Six Things Hell Is Not

In Part I we examined (and dismissed) 8 unscriptural views of hell, each of which sought to ‘soften’ hell. Conversely, there are wrong ideas about hell that make it worse (even more horrible than it needs to be). By correcting these misunderstandings/distortions, we can remove some of the difficulties with the doctrine.

1. Since there is a hell, God must be a God of wrath and vengeance and hate. But this conclusion does not follow from the premise of hell. It may be that the very love of God for the sinner constitutes the sinner’s torture in hell. That love would threaten and torture the egotism that the damned sinners insists on and cling to. A small child in a fit of rage, sulking and hating his parents, may feel their hugs and kisses at that moment as torture. By the same psychological principle, the massive beauty of an opera may be torture to someone blindly jealous of its composer. So the fires of hell may be made of the very love of God, or rather by the damned’s hatred of that love. ...God’s wrath refers to God’s holiness and justice, not a smouldering resentment; it is his wrath against sin, not against sinners. God practices what he preaches to us: love sinners, hate sins. For surgeons to love their patients, they must hate their patients’ cancers. The damned are those who refuse to disassociate themselves from their sins by repenting. Every sin must meet its necessary fate: exclusion from heaven. Only if we glue ourselves to our sins do we glue ourselves to that fate.

2. Hell is forced on the damned: they are thrown into hell against their will. This is contrary to the fundamental reason for hell’s existence: our free choice and God respecting it. The damned in hell do not enjoy hell but they do will it, by willing egotism instead of love, self instead of God, sin instead of repentance. There can be no heaven without self-giving love. The thing the damned wish for – happiness on their own selfish terms – is impossible even for God to give; it does not exist, it cannot exist. ...If hell is chosen freely, the problem then becomes not one of reconciling hell with God’s love, but reconciling hell with human sanity. Who would freely prefer hell to heaven unless they were insane? The answer is that all of us do at one time or another: every sin reflects that preference. The skeptic objects that if we freely choose hell over heaven, we must be insane; the Christian replies that that is precisely what sin is: insanity, the deliberate refusal of joy and truth. Perhaps the most shocking teaching in all Christianity is this: not so much the doctrine of hell as the doctrine of sin. It means the human race is spiritually insane.

3. How can the blessed in heaven have eternal joy if they know that friends they loved on earth are in hell? The blessed do not live in the past but the eternal present, their heaven-cleansed eyes seeing reality as it is, unclouded by earthly shadows; they do not see and mourn them. ...In heaven we will be more like God, and hell does not destroy God's perfect and eternal joy. However this is done, it *is* done: the divine joy, which we shall imitate or participate in, is not to be disturbed by hell. And this cannot be because of ignorance or lack of love, since God is all-knowing and all-loving. We may not know *how* God solves this problem but we know *that* he does. And we will too; for our heaven takes its cue from him, not from our present limitations.

4. Hell is a 'structural necessity' in the great scheme of things: if there is a heaven there must be a hell, for the height of the mountain is measured only by the depth of the valley. This is true only for us fallen creatures: for us, appreciation of good depends on contrast and on our experience of evil. But in Eden there was, and in heaven there will be, joy without sorrow, pleasure without pain, beauty without ugliness, as there cannot be here. This present limitation is not due to God's creation but to our fall. There did not ever need to be a hell. If angels and humans had all obeyed God's will there would never have existed any such thing. Hell is due to freedom, not necessity.

5. If there is a hell, justice has the last word, not love (or mercy, which is one of love's works). We think of mercy as the relaxation and compromising of justice, and justice as prior. But in God, love is more primordial than justice. Justice is simply a form that love takes. The very act of creation is pure love, for no creature was even there to justly deserve anything, not even existence, before it was created. Love is God's essence, justice is one of its works, and mercy is another. Justice is the structure of love; justice is like the skeleton, love is like the person. Hell is due more to love than to justice. Love created free persons who could choose hell. Love continues to beat upon the damned like sunlight on an albino slug, and constitutes their torture. The fires of hell are made of the love of God.

6. Perhaps the worst exaggeration of hell is the doctrine of a double predestination: God decrees and designs some souls for hell before they are born; God *wills* their damnation. This is contradicted both by Scripture (Mw 18/14 et al) and moral sanity – how could one love such a monster God?

Three Things Hell Is

This is not a repeat of material covered under the same heading in Part I. There we looked at what Scripture tells us hell is. Here we look at what reason tells us hell is – and thus that what Scripture says is reasonable.

1 PUNISHMENT

Punishments are either 'positive law' or 'natural law'.

A 'positive law' is a law that is 'posited' or made by a will that chose to make it and could have chosen differently. The punishments of positive law are not necessary but rather chosen by the punisher. They might be right and reasonable, but they are not necessary; they are changeable. (If you steal that cookie, I'll slap your hand; if you drive at 90mph we'll take away your license.) This is *not* the right way to conceive of the punishment of hell: as something God chose but could have chosen differently.

The punishments of 'natural law' are intrinsic rather than extrinsic, necessary rather than chosen. (If you eat that cookie before supper you will spoil your appetite; if you drive over a cliff you will die.)

Take as an example God's command to Adam and Eve not to eat the forbidden fruit. If this is a positive law, it is like a mother threatening to slap her child's hand if he takes the cookie. If it is a natural law, it means that if we eat the forbidden fruit of disobedience to God's will, divorcing our will and spirit from God's, then the inevitable result will be disaster and death, for God is the source of all joy and life.

In a natural law ethic, virtue is its own reward and vice is its own punishment. Virtue is to the soul what health is to the body. It has its own intrinsic, necessary and unchangeable structures, such that all good deeds help the doer as well as the recipient and all evil deeds harm the doer as well as the victim.

The punishment of hell is inevitable, by natural law. Any soul that freely refuses the one Source of all life and joy *must* find death and misery as its inevitable punishment. We can "think of this bad man's perdition not as a

sentence imposed upon him but as the mere fact of being himself...He has his wish – to live wholly in the self and to make the best of what he finds there. And what he finds there is hell.” (CS Lewis, *Pain*)

In the famous painting of Jesus with a lamp knocking on a door (your soul), there is no knob on the outside of the door. Only from the inside can it be opened...[or] locked. If we lock that door, our folly and crime is its own punishment.

2 PAIN

Since the God to whom we choose to open and love and obey is the sole source of all the joy in reality, our refusal of this God must necessarily be joyless and painful. If God is joy, hell must be pain.

Pain can be thought of either externally or internally, but internal/spiritual pain (e.g. despair) is far worse than external/physical pain, just as internal/spiritual joys far exceed any external/physical pleasures. Therefore the old question of whether there is a physical fire in hell or not is a moot and pointless point. Yet if we deny the crude, old picture of hell as a physical torture chamber, we may be left not with a gentler hell but with a far more horrible and unbearable one.

The only premise we need to prove the conclusion that hell is supremely painful is the premise that the supreme joy is love (being loved and, even more, loving: Ac 20/35) and thus the supreme pain is lovelessness (“hell is the suffering of being unable to love” – Dostoyevsky).

Satan’s primary lie which deceives humanity and causes more suffering than anything else is that selfishness is fun and unselfishness is not. The origin of sin and suffering (Ge 3) is faith in Satan’s lie that life and joy come from disobedience to God. At the far end of that lie lies hell.

3. Privation – the deprivation of God.

Not that God shuts us out but that we shut him out, and thus are deprived of God by our own choice.

This aspect of hell is the cause of the other two. Only because hell is the *privation* of God – the source of all joy – is hell *painful*. And only because hell is the privation of God, the only God, the true God, ‘the only game in town’, is hell’s alternative to God the inevitable and just *punishment* for the folly of refusing this only game in town. The desire to be happy without God is doomed to failure, pain and inevitable punishment because God is not one among many sources of joy but the only ultimate source of all joy. Deprivation of the ultimate cause must mean deprivation of all its effects.

It is not a very popular idea – that God is ‘the only game in town’. Yet it follows from the much more popular idea that God is Creator. If everything [that exists] is either God or a creature of God, then there cannot be any source of good or joy that is not God or sourced in God. Everything in the world that gives us joy is like a sunbeam from a divine sun; however twisted or perverse, all joys are reflections of God. Therefore the privation of God is the privation not just of some joy but all joy. Of all hell’s aspects, this is the most terrible. “All your life an unattainable ecstasy has hovered just beyond the grasp of your consciousness. The day is coming when you will wake to find, beyond all hope, that you have attained it; or else, that it was within your grasp and you have lost it forever.” (CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)

Seven Reasons for Believing in Hell

3 arguments from divine authority (can neither deceive nor be deceived), 4 from philosophical reasoning.

1. The Bible assures us that there is a hell. If the Bible is God’s word, then to disbelieve in hell is to disbelieve God. To call the message a lie is to call its author a liar.

The usual way out of this argument is to interpret the Bible – or rather those parts of it that you do not want to believe – non-literally. The problem with this, besides the obvious dishonesty in foisting your own wants onto the data, is that although the *imagery* is not meant literally, the *reality* of the hell that is thus imaged is.

Jesus did not try to prove that hell existed – he only assumed it when he preached. He also taught that the only evidence for its existence [that we need / should seek] is to be found in the Bible. The rich man in hell pleaded that Lazarus be raised from the dead to convince his brothers who did not believe hell existed. Jesus replied that

they should believe the Word of God (Lk 16/27-31) – the only [yet sufficient] basis [living men have] for believing it [i.e. we should not rely on testimonies of people who claim to have gone to hell].

2. Christ himself. If you do not believe in hell, you deny the divinity of Christ, for only a man can lie, not G.

A Christian who does not believe in hell is a contradiction in terms, because a Christian is one who believes in Christ, and Christ is one who believes in hell. The only way to believe in Christ without believing in hell is to reconstruct Christ according to your own desires. (*He* wants to reconstruct you according to *his* desires!) Then the game begins: Christ the Marxist, Christ the capitalist, Christ the Democrat, Christ the Republican...

If there is no hell, Christ is not only a deceptive teacher but a wicked one, for he terrifies us needlessly, falsely and harmfully. Everyone knows the horrible abuses that have come from believing this doctrine – the private fears and the public manipulation of those fears. Unless there is a hell, and the other-worldly consequences of not believing in hell outweigh the very considerable this-worldly consequences of believing in it, it is a terribly harmful doctrine and its teacher is terribly at fault for laying this terrible and unnecessary burden on our shoulders. In fact, the kindest, gentlest, most loving and compassionate man who ever opened his mouth has warned us with the greatest seriousness, strenuousness and sternness about hell. That is the irrefutable argument for it.

3. The church has always taught, and dogmatically defined, hell. If the church is deceived or deceiving about this, why not about anything else – like heaven or salvation?

4. Justice demands punishment for evil. Justice means moral discrimination between good and evil, reward and punishment. Justice is not a human creation, and thus we cannot destroy it. It is as unchangeable as mathematics, because it is an attribute of God. Divine justice does not prevent God from forgiving, but it prevents him from treating final impenitence as if it were repentance. Mercy may go infinitely beyond justice, but it cannot destroy it or contradict it. Justice must discriminate between the repentant and the unrepentant, between those who accept the gift of mercy and those who do not. Not to do so would be like giving the Nobel Peace Prize to Stalin. God cannot tell such lies.

5. Hell follows from the exclusivity of God. If we were pagans, the god we worshipped could be dispensed with and exchanged for another. (If you don't like the Furies, choose the Olympians; if you don't like Zeus, worship Apollo instead.) But if God is the sole source of all life, light and joy, then to avoid him is necessarily to avoid life, light and joy forever. Those who deny hell fail to see this simple point: that God is the only God, and his heaven is the only heaven.

6. The simplest of all arguments for hell is human free will. If we are really free to choose to respond to God's marriage proposals to our souls, if God is not a rapist but a gentleman, then we must be free to turn him down. And if our souls at death enter eternity in that state, after there is no more time for change and repentance, then we must endure the identity we have chosen eternally.

Even if there were time for second chances or reincarnations after death, what if one still refuses? If we are free, we can always refuse. If it ever becomes *necessary* that we accept God, that acceptance becomes unfree. In other words, if we say that enough second chances or reincarnations will infallibly guarantee that everyone chooses for God, then we say that after a sufficient amount of time, free choice turns into unfree necessity and determinism. But this is impossible; it is to say that, given enough time, a thing can lose its essence.

"If the happiness of a creature lies in free self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it), and he may refuse. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, 'All will be saved.' But my reason retorts, 'Without their will, or with it?' If I say, 'Without their will,' I at once perceive a contradiction: how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary? If I say, 'With their will,' my reason replies, 'How, if they *will not* give in?' ...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? They *will not* be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what he does." (CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*)

7. A final argument for hell is the argument from fear. A universal, innate, natural desire or fear always corresponds to a real object. There is such a desire for heaven and a fear of hell. Therefore heaven and hell must both be real. This desire/fear is inchoate and does not specify much of the content of heaven/hell, just that it is something better/worse than anyone ever gets on earth. The evidence for an innate fear of hell is both external

and internal. Externally, we find the fear expressed in many different times, places, cultures and religions, not just accepted on Christian authority. Internally, we can only appeal to deep honesty: is it not true that the deepest reason why we fear death is that something in us is not quite certain that there is no hell and that we could not possibly go there?

Thirteen Objections to Believing in Hell

The arguments *against* believing in hell seem very strong and simple, yet each can be answered...

[I have not drawn on this section of K&T (see pp298-308), but most of the objections – e.g. that hell seems contrary to God’s love or justice or power or purpose or final/total victory over evil, or to the morality of Jesus, or to human freedom or sanity or instinct – have already been answered in the material covered.]

Many passionate objections to the doctrine of hell are really objections to those religious teachers who have misused it. The objection comes down to this: hell was probably invented out of hate and fear and the desire to control and dominate people, since that is the fruit the doctrine produces. The same objection, however, can be lodged against the doctrine of heaven: that it is misused, produces an irresponsible lack of concern for this world, and manipulates people like a carrot on a stick. In fact, *any* idea, true or false, can be misused and abused. This tells us nothing about its truth or falsity.

Those who have been hurt by the misuse of this doctrine often seem to think that those who believe in hell: (1) want hell to exist (as if doctrines were not facts but desires); (2) want humans to go there (as if Christians could want what the devil wants!); (3) self-righteously exclude themselves from its dangers (as if Christians were Pharisees instead of saved sinners); (4) coolly and detachedly discuss this ultimate holocaust and horror (as if missionaries were making maps of the ocean instead of throwing out the lifeboat). All four assumptions are false, of course (or should be!); if Christians follow Christ they will give anything to save humanity from hell, because that is what Christ did.

CONCLUSION

All men are raised from the dead to live eternally: the only question is where we will spend it.

Scripture presents hell as both an ‘active’ punishment (God sentences/sends people to hell for their unbelief and wickedness) and a ‘passive’ result (God simply grants men what they have chosen – to live without him). God created man for eternity (Ec 3/11) and this is our unavoidable destiny. Thus, if at the time we die our choice is still to live without him, this becomes our eternal choice. Any existence without God is punishment, albeit self-inflicted; eternal existence thus becomes eternal punishment.

Hell is not annihilation but a continued – indeed, eternal – existence, separated from God and infinitely miserable. It is the final state (condition) of the ungodly, the ‘place’ of their eternal punishment.

It is an awful – even overwhelming and incomprehensible – reality, but we have no option but to embrace it as part of God’s infallible revelation. “The reality and eternity of suffering in hell is an element of biblical truth that no honest exegesis can evade.” (NBD) We must embrace it if we are to be faithful to God’s Word, if we are to preach the full counsel of God, and if we are to be truly loving towards the lost.

Some feel that the application of reason to the subject (as in Part II) removes any contradiction between the God of hell and the God of love. Others may still feel that hell “raises problems for our minds that in all probability we cannot solve. It is easy in such cases to produce a logical answer at the cost of one side of biblical truth”, but we must avoid this temptation (NBD). God and his ways are beyond our understanding.

Hell exists – and a great many people are heading there. We must never believe otherwise, or allow others (believers or unbelievers) to believe otherwise (v popular sentiment after deaths and at funerals). Whatever millions may believe – Let God be true, and every man a liar (Ro 3/4) – man without repentance and faith in Christ is heading for neither annihilation nor reincarnation nor heaven (Christian or any other)...but hell!

Why must we believe in and teach hell? *First*, for the only good reason to believe or teach anything: because it is true, because it is there. In other words, out of honesty. *Second*, out of love, out of compassion, out of the fear that love generates that any loved and precious soul end up there by disbelieving the warning signs, like children

drowning because the ice seemed thick enough and the warning signs were ignored. When there is real war, the *least* loving thing we can do is cry ‘Peace, peace when there is no peace’ (Je 8/11).

What does this mean to me? Even though we are not going to hell, it should mean everything to us! The reality of hell should profoundly impact every aspect of our lives.

But what if it is true? It makes all the difference in our outlook, our evangelism, our view of God and our sense of gratitude that we ourselves will not spend eternity in hell.

Heart: We should only ever think or speak of hell soberly, solemnly, awfully – and with pain. If we can (or do) speak of it glibly (such as is common in everyday speech), vindictively, or in a detached (academic) way, then we do not have God’s heart about it. Hell must never cease to appal us.

Belief: It imparts a mature knowledge of God, a correct attitude to sin, and a due appreciation of salvation.

Is your God too nice? Is your God One who would not punish? Is he One who lets you rest comfortably in your sphere of existence without any worries about the lost – or the state of your own soul?

Life: Love and awe at what we’ve been saved out of, an incentive to holiness (we realize seriousness of sin).

Preaching: We must preach the whole counsel of God if we are to be truthful and truly loving to the lost.

William Booth, in his address to the first graduation class of the Salvation Army, said that he felt like apologizing to them for keeping them for two years to learn how to lead a soul to Christ. ‘It would be better had you spent five minutes in hell’ because that way they could be effective soul winners on their own.

CT Studd: If we truly believed in hell we would crawl a hundred miles over cut glass to tell people of it!

Mission: It gives the church’s mission absolute legitimacy and urgency – the only hope of lost billions.

The doctrine of hell should add soberness to our preaching, urgency to our mission and passion to our prayer!

Those who preach this truth will be hated and feared, mocked and maligned, as fools, sadists or manipulators. So be it. Christians today are often more terrified of sharing their Lord’s holy unpopularity than of hell itself. (You don’t nail a man to a cross for telling you things you like to hear!) To be called a nasty name is a small price to pay for the privilege of possibly contributing one strand to the rope that saves an infinitely precious little one for whom Christ died.