

UNDERSTANDING HELL

SUNDAY 20 SEPTEMBER 2026 • 08:00 • CITYHILL CHURCH

As early as #1 I mentioned hell as the final and most serious consequence of sin.

In #3 I said the reality of hell was part of the forgotten backdrop (to the gospel).

In #6 I spoke about the certainty of judgement, with its implicit reference to hell.

And now I must talk about this most difficult of subjects.

One doesn't *want* to preach on hell: it's 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 questioned even by many in the church (we use euphemisms like '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 / have you ever heard a sermon on hell?); (4) it is a current, topical, controversial issue, even in the church, with many questioning/doubting or diluting/rejecting the biblical doctrine and teaching heretical doctrines instead.

So I'm preaching on it. But I understand there is a risk to doing so. When I've taught on hell before, very occasionally someone finds it so difficult they drift away. On the other hand (and much more often), it has led to people receiving Christ or for the first time getting serious with God [eg]. May that happen today.

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 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 (indeed, he said more 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 a 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/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, fallenness, 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***

The idea of hell emerges in the OT: Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life; others to shame and everlasting contempt (Da 12/2). 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

But it is the New Testament (not the Old) that gives us the fullest revelation of hell. Jesus concluded all his teaching with the same shocking juxtaposition as Isaiah: 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: 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. (Re 20/10) If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (v15) 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. 21/8 CF. 22/15

The word “hell” occurs 14 times in the NIV NT, but hell is referred to using other terms many more times than that. 12/14 times it translates [all 12 occurrences of] *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 unending fire; (ii) parents sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god, Molech, during the evil reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh. In time the valley became a 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 equivalent of the Hebrew *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: cf. 2 Pe 2/9) – despite *hades*, due to there being no equivalent English word, being sometimes unhelpfully translated “hell” in some Bibles (the 13th “hell” in the NIV). *Hades* refers to the intermediate state of the unrighteous, *gehenna* to their final state. (Ditto *tartaroo*, the 14th “hell”.)]

As already indicated, Jesus spoke about hell more than any other person (12/14 “hell”, 11/12 *gehenna*).

He used the word *gehenna* on numerous occasions to denote the eternal punishment of the wicked. These texts tell us that hell is a form of judgement and indicate the physical resurrection of the unrighteous before their entry into the final state. Several of them speak of ‘the fire of hell’, which ‘never goes out’, ‘is not quenched’ and is ‘eternal’: the eternal (vs temporary) nature of hell’s punishment is asserted, as well as the external and internal anguish this punishment involves.

On other occasions, Jesus didn’t use the word *gehenna* but his use of the imagery of fire (‘fiery furnace’, ‘eternal fire’, ‘unquenchable fire’) links these texts with those in which he did and shows that he was speaking of hell.

On yet other occasions, Jesus employed neither the word *gehenna* nor the imagery of fire, but uses other imagery (‘outside’, ‘darkness’, ‘weeping and gnashing of teeth’) which also occurred in the first 2 groups of texts – indicating that he was referring to hell here also.

When we move from Jesus’ teaching on hell to that of the apostles, we see the same thing. Many texts speak of the judgement and eternal punishment of the unrighteous, denoting hell even if the word is not used (in Ro, Ga, Pp, 2 Th, 2 Ti, He, 2 Pe, Jx & Re): ‘wrath...judgement...perish...condemnation’; ‘the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction’; ‘eternally condemned’; ‘punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord’; ‘judgement and raging fire which will consume the enemies of God’; ‘blackest darkness’; ‘eternal fire’; ‘fiery lake’; ‘second death’; et al.

IN SHORT the Bible is absolutely clear: hell is real (it exists), it is eternal, it is eternal punishment.

Despite this clear witness of Scripture, men (including Christians) never cease their attempts to deny or downgrade hell to fit in with their emotion, reason, lifestyle, ‘theology’ (view of God), culture or world.

Of all the contemporary efforts to deny or downgrade hell, the one that is most widespread and influential is **annihilation**, so it is worth briefly evaluating it. It claims plausible arguments – but the case for it is flimsy and the textual and logical arguments against it are overwhelming. Here are 5 (of 10) arguments against it.

[1] The Gr vb *apollymi* (nn *apoleia*) means “destroy”; this indicates annihilation, not eternal punishment.

(i) Apollymi occurs 90 times and is translated 13 ways: lose (33x); destroy (17x); perish (14x); kill (12x); ruin, drown (both 3x); die (2x); bring to end, execute, starve to death, spoil, vanish, waste (1x each). Of all these translations, only “destroy” (1/13 translations, 17/90 occurrences) could possibly mean annihilation. Five others indicate physical death – but this (as Mw 10/28 makes clear) is not annihilation.

(ii) In only one of the 13 passages in which Jesus talks about hell is “destroy” used (Mw 10/28); in none of the other 12 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 Lk 12/5 simply has “throw you into hell”, which does not suggest annihilation.

(iii) Apollymi never denotes annihilation when applied to other things in the NT: the sheep, coin and son are “lost” but not annihilated; the wineskins are “ruined” (or “become useless”) but are not annihilated; Herod sought to “kill” the infant Jesus – but Mw 10/28 makes it clear that killing is not annihilation; the perfume poured on Jesus was (to some) a “waste” – but that is hardly 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 (like a wrecked car is a write-off, a waste – but not annihilated).

[1a] Paul says that when Christ returns the ungodly will be punished with everlasting destruction [*olethros*] 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. In 1 Ti 6/9, *olethros* is translated “plunged into ruin” (i.e. loss, shame).

[2] The word *aionios* means eternal (without end) when applied to the final state of the righteous in multiple texts (eternal life, eternal glory, eternal house, eternal redemption, 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*: “eternal punishment ...eternal life”) – 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.

[2a] Re 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 lives for ever and ever. The eternal nature of the punishment of hell can no longer be in doubt.

[3] If hell is annihilation, Mw 26/24 is meaningless: woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born. To be annihilated means to be returned to non-existence, to what you ‘were’ before you were born. This text says God’s judgement will leave us worse off than if we had not been born, that hell is something worse than non-existence – i.e. eternal punishment, not annihilation.

(Similarly, Lk 17/2: It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied round his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. That is, it would be better for him just to die than to make himself liable to the punishment of hell.)

[4] 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.’

[5] If the NT writers wanted to make it clear that they meant annihilation, they could have used the Greek word for annihilation, *ekmedenisis*, which was in currency then. God used plain language elsewhere to indicate

something ceasing to exist: ‘the first heaven and the first earth had passed away’, ‘there will be no more death’. He could/would have done just the same here if that’s what he meant rather than mislead us.

IN CONCLUSION the teaching on annihilation is not just an alternative theological position that biblical Christians and churches can/should entertain as part of a healthy debate, but a seductive and deadly heresy. *Seductive* because it seems 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, so much less likely to cause offence; it puts God in a better light, it agrees with what I imagine him to be and with what I understand to be loving. *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 will contribute to populating the very place we’re talking about: hell!

If, contrary to this and other false teachings, we accept what the Bible teaches – that hell is exactly what Jesus called it, “eternal punishment” – then we may ask: **What is hell like?** There is not much we can say in answer to this question, firstly because the Bible does not say much (it is a roadmap to heaven, not hell), and secondly because what the Bible does signify is that it is terrible beyond imagining. Certainly the imagery Jesus (and others) used cannot be taken literally or it would be contradictory (e.g. “blackest darkness” vs “the fire never goes out”). Rather, each part of the imagery indicates some aspect of the spiritual, mental, emotional and (possibly) physical suffering (anguish, torment) of hell: “fiery furnace” indicates intense and unrelieved suffering; “weeping and gnashing of teeth” bitter and hopeless remorse; “thrown outside” exclusion, isolation and separation; “darkness” lostness, hopelessness (again) and fear. There is no light, no God, nothing good (all the things we take for granted in this creation, however fallen) in hell – no order, no harmony, no beauty, no righteousness, no love, no peace, no joy. Above all, no hope – Dante’s sign above the entrance to hell in his *Divine Comedy* is both apt and chilling: ‘Abandon hope all ye who enter here’. Much beyond this we cannot go – and do not need to: wonderfully we will never know.

Who goes to hell? Those who reject God’s only Saviour and salvation from hell: whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son (Jn 3/18). What of those who have never heard? All men are already condemned because of their lack of obedient response to general revelation (which is what makes mission so urgent and imperative). When we subsequently reject special revelation (the message of the gospel), our guilt is increased (rather than created) – note v36: whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath *remains* on him. Jesus’ parable of the servants who knew vs didn’t know their master’s will (but in each case failed to obey it) shows that there are degrees of punishment in hell just as there are of rewards in heaven (Lk 12/47f cf. Mw 11/20-24: unrepentant cities in which he performed his miracles will be judged more severely than cities in which he didn’t).

The Bible’s teaching on hell is clear but it can still be difficult for us to live with. So let me lastly add some thoughts that may make it easier for us to embrace its teaching. For the doctrine of hell (what does the Bible teach about hell? is it biblical?) should be complemented by the apologetics of hell (how do we live with this teaching? is it reasonable?). [10 issues at stake in the doctrine of hell – disbelief in hell entails consequences that destroy the whole Christian faith; 7 reasons for believing in hell; 13 objections to believing in hell]

If there is no reason for believing 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**, anymore 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 selfish-ness. 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 Jesus Christ. 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.

We must remember that in a very real way God does not send anyone to hell: we send ourselves there.

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’. That 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 for 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.

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.” (CSL, *The Problem of Pain*) In the famous painting of Christ knocking at the door of our souls, only from the inside can the door be opened – or locked. If we lock that door, our folly and crime is its own punishment.

The simplest of all arguments for hell is human free will. If we are really free to choose to respond to God’s marriage proposal 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 others 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.” (CSL, *The Problem of Pain*)

IN CONCLUSION hell is biblical; hell is reasonable. But it remains an awful, even overwhelming and incomprehensible reality. We should never speak of it except with broken hearts and with tears; we should never slander our Saviour and alienate unbelievers by speaking of hell glibly, still less vindictively. But we must speak of it, firstly out of honesty (because it is true, it is there) and secondly out of love and compassion, out of the fear that love generates that any precious soul end up there by not being warned. When we do speak of it, no matter how truthfully and lovingly we do so, we are likely to be scorned and mocked, if not reviled and loathed – as fools, sadists or manipulators – for believing and preaching hell. 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 the 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 person for whom Christ died. Hell exists – and a great many people are heading there. We must never believe otherwise or allow others to believe otherwise. The reality of hell gives the church’s mission absolute legitimacy and urgency. Without Christ we are heading not to A or R or (any) heaven – but hell!