

Hell and Eternal Punishment

Is Hell Real, Eternal and Hot?

A Position Paper © 2018 by Jay McCarl

A few years ago, Rob Bell, former pastor of the Mars Hill megachurch in Michigan, released *Love Wins*, a controversial book that implied a God of love would not condemn anyone to eternal punishment in hell. More recently, Pope Francis made a similar declaration, defying a standard of Catholic church tradition. Logically, such a deduction seems to make perfect sense—after all, God is love, and He said He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. The problem is, not all will come to repentance—and the God of the Bible is not deduced logically. So, what ultimately happens to the unrepentant—how will they be judged and what will be their final sentence?

Hell isn't often mentioned in the Old Testament; "the grave" (Sheol) is occasionally mentioned, most obviously by David. But the lack of references in the OT isn't a problem, mainly because Jesus abundantly clarified the subject for His disciples and for us who live on this side of the cross.

The Bible is a revelation—a *revealing*—but not necessarily an explanation. This is important, because it reflects the thinking process and logic of the people who wrote the Bible and those who first read it. Peasants, farmers, herdsman, women and even children—largely illiterate people—it was read to them and understood every word of it (though they didn't always see where it was pointing). God gave us the Bible to understand, not hide, Himself—to the extent He wanted to reveal Himself.

Hebrew logic wasn't at all like our non-contradictory view of the world—it was "eastern", very concrete and quite literal as opposed to our analytical western logic which is Greco-Roman—we are highly analytical, good at abstractions and obsessed with filling in the blanks that God intentionally left in His revelation—and He definitely omitted much.

For instance, an age-old debate has been raging in the church about whether God is absolutely sovereign or whether man has a choice in his own destiny. The controversy has split thousands of churches and divided Christianity into two warring camps—Calvinists vs. Arminists. The conflict is about two apparent contradictions: God is definitely sovereign

over everything—He said so—and man has to make a choice whether or not to serve Him—He said so. Our Greek minds say, “That’s a contradiction—and since we all know there are no contradictions in the Bible, we are tasked to solve the problem.”

Do we? That’s western logic at work. But the Bible is a *Hebrew* book from Genesis to Revelation—written entirely by Hebrews (with the possible exception of Luke) with an assuredly Hebrew logic. Of the controversy, a Hebrew would say, “What are you talking about? God said He’s sovereign, so He is! God says man has a choice, so he does! What’s your problem?” In other words, we weren’t tasked by God to figure Him out but to look in awe upon His revelation of Himself (Scripture, Jesus, the Holy Spirit), and worship Him. That’s not the western way, but it *is* Hebrew logic—and it’s the logic of the Bible and the teaching style of Jesus. Filling in blanks that God deliberately left out would be condemned by the Hebrews because words were being forced into God’s mouth.

God’s revelation gave us sketches of heaven and hell—never the full picture—but the sketches are more than adequate to tell us, along with innumerable uneducated peasants, what’s coming at the end of the world so that nothing would be misunderstood. Our problem is we so overthink the ‘mysteries’ of the Bible that we forget that the Hebrews understood them at the most basic level—which is where all the gold is mined.

According to Jesus, eternal punishment was a fact and taught it as such. This may seem inconsistent with God’s loving nature (Exodus 34:6, 7; 1 John 4:8-12, etc.), but God’s love does not negate or contradict eternal punishment. Instead, it clearly reveals that God’s holy nature demands perfect justice, or His love would be mere sentiment that could wink at sin. Just because my brain can’t reconcile God’s love and God’s justice doesn’t mean He cannot dispense eternal punishment—in fact He must because He said so, despite human mental gymnastics. So here’s what we know...

The Hebrews, from the beginning believed in a place called ‘death’. To them it wasn’t just a state of non-existence but a state of body (decay, etc.) and a state of being (the eternal existence of the soul/spirit apart from the body. A few passages in the Old Testament reveal this belief among God’s people (Saul and Samuel at Endor, etc.). Jesus told His disciples (and us) exactly what He heard from His Father, so whatever He revealed about

death, Hades, Sheol, Gehenna, the grave, eternal burning hell and everlasting torment must be considered as coming directly from His Father. This also means that these revelations must be consistent with God's nature, whether I can reconcile them or not. Remember—there's no contradiction here in a Hebrew mind.

Jesus also presented numerous pictures of hell, torment, Sheol and more. Here are just a few of them:

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

This parable—perhaps an account—is a revelation of how the afterlife worked before and after the cross. When the rich man and the beggar Lazarus died, they both ended up in Hades, which, as Jesus indicated, was divided into two distinct sections by a chasm: “Abraham's Side/Bosom” and burning Hades. Abraham's Side was a place of comfort for the righteous dead who thus far couldn't enter heaven because the atoning work of Jesus on the cross hadn't yet happened. The burning section was a place of torment for the souls of the unrighteous dead. When Jesus died on the cross, His “dismissed” spirit descended into the “lower parts of the earth” (or Hades, indicated by its location “in the earth”) to “preach freedom to the captives” (1 Peter 4, Ephesians 4) where He subsequently “led captivity in His train”.

There is much controversy about this event, but the simplest picture seems to be the ‘peasant’ version: Jesus dismissed His spirit on the cross, descended into Hades to preach freedom to the righteous dead who died in faith under the Law, so that they could now go to heaven. Jesus effectively freed them from their captivity in Abraham's Side so that their souls could finally ascend to heaven. Today, Abraham's Side is empty, while the burning side of Hades is still filling up with lost souls.

Jesus, in several places, spoke of a place of eternal punishment beyond the typology of Gehenna—a burning garbage dump in a notorious valley south of Jerusalem—including the parable of the sheep and goats (Matt. 25) and the parable of the unmerciful servant (Matt. 18).

The Resurrection of the Dead

The resurrection of the dead—the great overlooked doctrine of the Bible in our rationalistic world—clears up a lot of confusion. Both Old and New Testament people anticipated the resurrection of the dead, including Jesus, His disciples and Paul. This “first resurrection” began with Jesus as the first person ever to rise from the dead never to die again, which is the main difference between a resurrection and someone miraculously raised from the dead—the latter went on to die a second time. The righteous people of the Bible—Old and New testament—loved the thought of the resurrection of the dead—an event where, like Jesus, the bodies of all the righteous dead will be raised, remade and reunited with their souls (which, at that time, would be residing in heaven). When this resurrection occurs, we all get a “new body” like that of the risen Jesus—one that will never die again.¹

But John wrote in Revelation 20 that there will be a Second Resurrection—one that we definitely don’t want to be part of, that occurs at the conclusion of Jesus’ thousand-year reign on earth following His physical return. Just before the fallen earth and cosmos are destroyed by God, the unrighteous dead are raised from their torment in Hades to receive their eternal resurrection bodies (Rev. 20:5-6). This is the famous Last Judgment, at which the souls of the unrighteous dead, now united with their eternal resurrection bodies, are judged and sentenced by God Himself. When they are found guilty and condemned, John tells us of their sentence: “death and Hades were thrown into the eternal lake of fire.” This is not annihilation—the tormented prisoners of Hades, the institution of death along with Satan himself—are thrown into the eternal Lake of Fire, a terrifying place not associated with the then vaporized earth, but eternally removed from the presence of God. Its burning never ends, and its residents never die, forever.

The Bible reveals this and more plainly enough for a peasant to grasp the whole story. Is such a scenario inconsistent with God’s nature of love? Our human logic often interferes with the clarity of God’s vividly declared nature. He is love but He is holy and just, and His justice is rooted in His exclusive ability to know absolutely every man’s motives and works, making Him the only one in the universe qualified to declare a person guilty and sentence

¹ When Paul preached the resurrection of the dead, a question commonly arose: “What if I’m alive when that happens? What happens to me?” That is what the church calls the rapture—something of a resurrection contingency.

him perfectly. Without justice can there be love? Without holiness can there be justice? If God is love and eternal punishment exists, then even that terrifying thing is an expression of His love.

How? The Bible is a revelation, not necessarily an explanation: Heaven and Hell are real, eternal, just and perfect. He said so, and He put in writing. Personal logic and presumption only succeed in putting God on trial at the bar of one's own brain, which can never diminish the tiniest truth of Himself and the eternal plan revealed through His unchanging Word.