

The Nature of Hell

By David Kidd

(KJV used throughout)

I once attended a Christian businessmen's meeting and the speaker confidently proclaimed that the everlasting torment of sinners in Hell (the traditional concept of hell) was a very clear teaching of the Bible. As we survey the Bible from Genesis to Revelation I would ask the reader to consider carefully whether such a teaching really is a *clear* Bible teaching.

Were Adam and Eve warned of eternal torment in Hell should they sin by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? Genesis 2:15-17 shows they weren't:

(v15) And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and keep it. (v16) And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: (v17) But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Notice from v17 that the punishment for their sin was *death*. Did they die immediately after they sinned? The answer is no. Adam died when he was 930. The consequences for them were twofold. Firstly their bodies became corruptible. God said to them in Genesis 3:19:

In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

What also resulted for Adam and Eve was that they were precluded from eating of the tree of life, which offered them immortality. God took away their right to eat of this tree, as verse 22-24 of chapter 3 says:

(v22) And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: (v23) Therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. (v24) So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. (our emphasis)

Hence, from the time Adam and Eve sinned until now, man certainly has had no inherent immortality, contrary to what many teach. This lack of inherent immortality is also consistently proclaimed in the NT. 1 Corinthians 15:53 says "this mortal must put on immortality". Romans 2:6-7 says "... God will render ... eternal life to those who ... seek for ... immortality" and 1 Timothy 6:15-16 says "... the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who alone has immortality". Jesus said in John 3:16 that only those who believe in God's only begotten Son shall not perish but have everlasting life. This presents a serious problem for the traditional view of the immortality of the sinner in hell as nowhere does it say that God has given or will give immortality to the wicked.

Renowned Bible commentator Matthew Henry states consistently with this that:

The penalty threatened [Adam and Eve] is death: Thou shalt die, that is, "Thou shalt be debarred from the tree of life, and all the good that is signified by it, all

*the happiness thou hast, either in possession or prospect; and thou shalt become liable to death, and all the miseries that preface it and attend it.” [3.] This was threatened as the immediate consequence of sin: In the day thou eatest, thou shalt die, that is, “Thou shalt become mortal and capable of dying; **the grant of immortality shall be recalled** ... (E-Sword, my emphasis)*

However, that old serpent, Satan, told Eve a different story. He told her “you will not surely die.” Who do you say was right – God or Satan? If unrepentant man ends up living forever in hell, doesn’t he have immortality?

The Old Testament presents no concept of eternal torment in hell

If you survey the OT you will find no concept of man experiencing the horrible suffering of hell *forever*. In fact, you will find that man is not once warned of this. *This is very significant given that the OT takes up about three quarters of the entire Bible and at least two thirds of human history*. If the kind of hell proposed by today’s traditionalists is in fact a reality don’t you think it would have been rather remiss of God not to have warned man of their possible tortuous fate in such a horrible place?

The word ‘hell’ appears about 30 times in the OT (KJV) and it is the Hebrew word ‘sheol’. It is defined as the ‘place of the dead’. The word ‘sheol’ is also translated ‘grave’ and ‘pit’ about 20 times in the KJV. If you check all the OT references to ‘sheol’ you will not find any statement that the wicked will consciously suffer there *forever*. In fact, perhaps surprisingly, you will find that not only the wicked go there, but also the righteous (see Gen. 37:35, 42:38, Job 14:13-14, Ps. 16:10 & Acts 2:27-31 (hades).

Rather than finding scriptures about the immortality of the wicked in hell, what we instead find in the OT is a host of scriptures emphasizing how the wicked perish, or are destroyed or burned up. The scriptures quoted below are prime examples:

For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave who shall give thee thanks? (Psalm 6:5)

But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the LORD shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away. (Psalm 37:20)

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. (Psalm 146:3-4)

The soul that sinneth shall die. (Ezekiel 18:4 & 20)

For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts. (Malachi 4:1-3) (our emphasis)

I suggest you also go through your own concordance and look up every reference to destroy, destroyed, destruction, devour, devoured, perish, perished and perishing.

Old Testament imagery

One further important thing to note from the OT on this subject is the imagery the inspired Hebrew writers use for total destruction. It is important to note this because the Hebrew authors of the NT often use the same imagery in relation to hell and the punishment of the wicked. *If such imagery is used in the OT to signify total destruction can we then confidently say that the same imagery in the NT signifies everlasting life in hell?* I suggest not. Please consider the OT texts below and then the similar NT texts and ask yourself if you would be confident to assert that the language of the OT texts relates to the permanent destruction of nations or cities (which they clearly do), but the NT texts do not relate to permanent destruction:

Then the LORD rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven; And he overthrew those cities ... And Abraham ... looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah ... and beheld, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. (Gen. 19:25-28) (Note that Jude 7 tells us that Sodom and Gomorrah were “set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.”)

[Concerning Judah’s destruction] Zion shall be redeemed with judgment ... And the destruction of the transgressors and of the sinners shall be together, and they that forsake the LORD shall be consumed. ... For ye shall be as an oak whose leaf fadeth, and as a garden that hath no water. And the strong shall be as tow, and the maker of it as a spark, and they shall both burn together, and none shall quench them.[note: this fire ceased burning, but it could not be quenched until it ran out of fuel] (Isaiah 1:27-31, our emphasis)

And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh. (Isaiah 66:24)

[concerning Edom’s destruction] For it is the day of the LORD'S vengeance, and the year of recompences for the controversy of Zion. And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever [note: Edom is not still burning]: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever. (Isaiah 34:8-10, our emphasis)

Now compare some of the common texts used for the traditional view of hell in the NT and note the similar terminology in them:

And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 13:50)

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:44-45)

The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name. (Rev. 14:10-11) [our emphasis]

**see also end notes*

When we pay due regard to the consistent imagery the Hebrew writers used in the OT and NT I think we may be excused if we do not see a *clear* presentation of the traditional view of hell in the scriptures immediately above.

Two final thoughts on the Old Testament's treatment of hell

Two final thoughts to ponder concerning the OT's treatment of hell. Firstly, since the OT does not present the traditional concept of hell and warns no one of it, how can modern day preachers such as the one at the meeting I attended with other Christian businessmen assert that it is CLEAR that hell is a place of eternal suffering for the wicked?

Secondly, the Hebrew OT scriptures provide no teaching about departed sinful men going *immediately* into the torments of hell after death. I am sure you will understand the plain and sure scriptural reason for this. The NT scriptures make it plain that the judgment of the wicked does not occur until the end of the world (2 Corinthians 5:10, 2 Tim. 4:1). What sort of justice system would impose final punishment before judgment. Just imagine if someone was arrested and remanded in police custody for an offence attracting the penalty of capital punishment. Then imagine that at the day of judgment the judge asks 'where's the perpetrator?' and the police say 'we executed him already'. What sort of justice system would that be? Clearly an unacceptable one. Of course God does not impose final punishment on people before they have been judged and sentenced either. You can be assured that none of your relatives are suffering in hell right now.

(note that some churches who hold to the traditional concept of hell actually teach that there is a waiting place for the dead until the day of judgment where they are conscious)

The New Testament

Now lets move to the NT. Since God is the same 'yesterday, today and forever' you would expect consistency on this important and eternal subject. Jesus does talk a lot about hell and He does mention the pain and anguish associated with it, but as you consider the first list of quotes from the Lord Jesus Christ below *I want you to honestly ask yourself whether the verses are clear as to the everlasting suffering/torment aspect of hell?* After considering these verses that believers commonly assume relate clearly to the traditional understanding of hell, then please consider the second list of texts from the NT which are entirely consistent with the OT treatment of hell.

First list

But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 8:12) (no mention of how long the weeping etc lasts)

And shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. (Matt. 13:50) (again no mention of how long)

And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire. (Matt. 18:9) (again no mention of how long)

And his lord was wroth, and delivered him to the tormentors, till he should pay all that was due unto him. (Matt. 18:24) (note the underlined limitation)

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels ... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal. (Matt. 25:31 & 46) (does not specify the nature of the eternal punishment i.e. does not clearly say the punishment is conscious suffering. Everlasting destruction (being destroyed) could also be described as 'everlasting punishment', and indeed in the verse it would provide the appropriate contrast with the reward of the righteous – everlasting life)

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:44-45) (does not say the sinner dieth not, but only that their worm doesn't)

It is hoped that the reader will accept that it is reasonable to suggest that the texts above do not provide a clear and open and shut case for the traditional view of hell. Now please consider the second list which I suggest provides a picture consistent with the entire OT.

Second list

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat ... (Matt. 7:13)

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matt. 10:28)

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (Matt. 16:25-26)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him. (John 3:36)

My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish ... (John 10:27-28)

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. (John 12:25)

If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. (John 15:6)

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Rom. 6:23

Brethren, if any of you do err from the truth, and one convert him; Let him know, that he which converteth the sinner from the error of his way shall save a soul from death [in context this must be referring to the second death], and shall hide a multitude of sins. (James 5:19-20)

But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death. Rev. 21:8

(emphasis ours)

I suggest that these scriptures present a clear picture of the terrible prospect of the eternal punishment of death and destruction of the soul, while the scriptures used for the opposite view present a very cloudy picture of eternal torment in hell that is inconsistent with the Hebrew view of death set forth in the OT. Note, however, that it is consistent with the Greek, Hellenistic view of hell. We believe that there is a case for the hellenization of the world having been the cause of the development of the traditional view of hell.

Closing issues and comments

Deterrent issue

Some believers think that the eternal punishment of everlasting death is an insufficient deterrent or threat to cause sinners to be concerned about repentance and turning toward God. They think that sinners will just laugh and say “well if that’s all hell is, then cool; I’ll just live life to the fullest and then die a quick death in the fires of hell.” Even if this be so however, we should honestly ask ourselves if it is God’s way to win people’s love and admiration through the use of fear? Romans 2:4 says that it is “the goodness of God that leads man to repentance”, not His threats. Isn’t it the love of God which constrains us (2 Cor. 5:14) more than the terror of God.

Admittedly, the scriptures do see a role for the terror of God (2 Cor. 5:10-11), but don’t you think that facing Almighty God in His judgment and wrath, experiencing the terror of punishment by *fire* (even if only for a short while) and partaking in capital punishment is terrifying enough. If you don’t, just imagine if your local judge could impose the penalty of death by fire for a variety of offences. How strong a deterrent do you think that might be? Surely a very powerful one?

Ineffectiveness of the traditional hell as a punishment

Imagine if someone committed a crime against you, but the judge gives them a sentence that doesn’t deter them at all from re-offending, but instead provokes them to immediately commit the crime even more. Would you be happy with such a justice system? I think not.

I don't believe God would be happy with such a system either. However, that's what the traditional view of hell proposes. Sinners are sent to hell for sinning against God. God then inflicts relentless suffering on them for eternity. Unless they are suddenly converted in hell (of which scripture gives no hint) their ill-feeling toward God will only increase. They will hate God even more and curse Him in their hearts (if not verbally) all the more. God would have failed to prevent people sinning against Him. Rather, he would have perpetuated for all time one of the worst sins imaginable – cursing Him. Our God who hates sin and who is a 'consuming fire' (Deut. 4:24 & Heb. 12:29) would have failed to put an end to the problem of evil once and for all. He would have only exacerbated the problem of sin!

Can you now see why the traditional view of hell is highly questionable? Won't you open your ears to the words of our Lord:

And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.
(Matt. 10:28)

End notes

Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:19-31)

The story of Lazarus and the rich man is another of Jesus' parables. Note how it starts in a similar vein to the parable of the prodigal son. The former starts, "There was a certain rich man ...". The latter starts, "A certain man had two sons ..." (Luke 15:11). *Holmans Illustrated Bible Dictionary* at p1021 also confirms that it is a parable.

If each element of this parable of Lazarus and the rich man is meant to be taken literally and as teaching a doctrinal point about the nature of hell then it does present hell in a similar way to how traditionalists present it (*except note that there is nothing said about how long the rich man has to endure being tormented by the flame*).

If every detail is meant to be taken literally however, men and women (probably some of our departed loved ones) would be writhing and suffering in hell (even at this very moment) *before* the day of judgment has actually occurred, which we've already seen is not scriptural. Also if we take every detail literally those in heaven, such as Abraham in the parable, will be able to hear the cries of the tormented and their petitions from hell (v24). Such is not a lovely prospect for the kingdom of heaven where there is supposed to be no more pain or sorrow (Rev. 21:4). Verse 23, if literal, would teach that those in hell would just have to lift up their eyes and they would be able to see Abraham and others in heaven (would the reverse apply for those in heaven? How awful if that were so). Finally, if this story is providing doctrinal teaching about the nature of hell verse 26 would suggest that there are some in heaven who want to visit some of those (perhaps their loved ones) in hell. If this be so, would heaven truly be the promised paradise where no pain or anguish is experienced by its citizens?

Considering all of this I think you would agree that there is something seriously wrong with interpreting this parable literally and in gleaning rock solid information from it about the nature of hell.

Thankfully, we know that parables are not meant to be interpreted in such a literal way. If we understand the nature of parables and their use we might be willing to exercise caution in looking at this parable so literally and in using it as a clear plank in our arguments for the traditional view of hell. We might recognize that it is commonly accepted that:

parables utilize pictures such as metaphors or similes and frequently extend them into a brief story to make a point or disclosure. [Holmans Illustrated Bible Dictionary Revised, p1244]

In other words Jesus tells parables with the aim of making a strong point or points. In the case of the story of Lazarus and the rich man Jesus was sending a message to the Pharisees who were listening (v14). Verse 31 contains the very bleak message. Even if someone rises from the dead and warns them of God's wrath they, the religious leaders of Israel, will not listen. The message for us is to heed God now and to show love to those in need. It will be too late after we die.

The Beast and the False Prophet

And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever. (Rev. 20:10) Note the word 'are' is supplied. Such words in light font indicate expressions in the original language which require clarification by additional English words.

We know Revelation is the most symbolic book in the whole Bible and we would be wise to heed its symbols and the symbols of the Bible if we are to come close to understanding its meaning. We also know that beasts in the Bible represent nations, kingdoms or empires (e.g. Daniel 7:17-23). It would therefore be unreasonable to see 'the beast' here as being an individual person. If we will be consistent with our Bible symbolism we will see the beast as representing the civil powers of the earth and the false prophet as representing false religion. One might question, 'how can such institutions be cast into a lake of fire?' This is a very good question. If we will recognize though that 'death and hell' are also cast into the lake of fire and poetically described as experiencing the *second death* (Rev. 20:14) we might begin to acknowledge that the Revelator is indeed talking in very symbolic terms that we would be wise not to place our own literal interpretations on.

Note also from the KJV text above that in any event (even if you understand the beast and the false prophet to be individuals) it's only the devil who is explicitly stated to be tormented day and night forever in the lake of fire, not the beast and the false prophet. Further, if we would admit that there are clear examples in the Bible of the Hebrew writers using 'forever' in a more limited way than we would generally understand it, it's also probable that the devil will finally be annihilated too and God's victory over sin and farewell to sin will be complete. Most Bible commentators, pastors and Christians see Ezekiel 28:12-19 as teaching us about the origins and fate of Satan. If you notice v16-19

it talks of the destruction of the devil so that he “shall be no more forever”. (Note: I don’t agree that we can definitely say that Ezekiel is talking about Satan, as the king of Tyre is his focus throughout, but it’s possible there is a veiled teaching here about Satan and it is one consistent with his final annihilation.

Again, I hope the reader can see that Revelation 20:10 also does not present the traditional view with any definitive clarity.
