

Introduction: In this series we've been asking the question: What happens to people when they die? What is the fate/destiny of every person who has ever lived?

In the first two weeks we established that Heaven is:

- **An intermediate place and state where disembodied believers dwell** in the presence of the Lord when they pass away.
- **A final place/state where God will unite heaven and earth** in the New Heavens and the New Earth—fusing the paradise of God with a renovated cosmos. And those of us who believe in Christ will be with the Lord forever. And he will be our God and we will be his people.
 - **We will be bodily resurrected** and impervious to sin or suffering.
 - **We will be spiritually perfected** no more inclinations toward sin or selfishness.
 - **We will be vocationally fulfilled.** Our vocation/service in the Kingdom will be perfectly matched with our nature and our wiring.

Transition: But what about that other place? It goes by many names. It is the single most **unsavory, unpleasant** thought a man can have in his life. Going there means one has failed in life—in epic fashion. Failed to respond to the life preserver of grace. A botched life that has squandered the free offer of salvation by faith alone.

When surveyed, the majority of people stated they believed in some kind of heaven (80%). But only 56% believe in the existence of hell.

Illus. When I was a kid, I burned the forest down behind our home, before Sunday school. The firefighters were invited that morning to our church to be honored by our pastor. And my mom could not have anticipated that the same firefighters being honored there in our church building would minutes later be standing in our backyard fighting a raging inferno that threatened to incinerate our yard and home.

Now I had been taken out to the woodshed before for setting small fires.

That is, until I burned the woodshed to the ground—nothing left but a pile of charred scree.

But this day. This beautiful sunny Virginia Sunday morning—there were no spankings. No yelling, no cursing. No verbal assaults hurled in my direction. And it's the last fire I ever set.

I could see the fear come over my father's face as he stood at the edge of our property watching the fire moving closer to our home.

And that one look was more powerful than any spanking or discipline he could have contrived for me. It was the look of **severity. Seriousness. A sober mind in the face of sure destruction.**

And when I look into the Scriptures I feel like I felt that day on the edge of my property with my earthly dad. I feel as though I am looking into the face of Father God who sees the threat of an all-

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consuming judgment on our threshold, at the door step of humanity—and his face is stern, sober, and serious. Because he knows its destructive power, and he knows it's inevitable and he's provided a rescuer—one who has taken the full brunt of the Father's wrath on a cross—one who has defeated that judgment of death by raising himself from the Dead bodily.

And God knows we can be saved. He desires for all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of salvation in repentance and faith.

But some men don't.

Some men just won't.

And God knows what awaits them and that there is no other way to avert it.

We'll unpack 3 things today:

- 1.) What the Bible says about the nature and duration of Hell.
- 2.) What are some answers to common objections about this doctrine?
- 3.) How can we escape this coming wrath?

1. What does the Bible teach about Hell?

The Bible as Progressive Revelation: Hell is a developing idea in Scripture. God's last word on a matter is his most relevant one. An unfolding doctrine that becomes more pronounced and defined the closer we get to Jesus—God's self-revelation to man.

Some Biblical Terms

- ***Sheol*** literally translated “the shadowy country” the OT word for the abode of the dead.
- ***Hades*** “the abode of the dead” where the dead congregate. Greeks developed the term further to include levels of hell such as tartarus (prison) and paradise—the abode of the righteous dead.
- ***Gehenna*** “the valley of hinnom”. A real place using vivid metaphors. Hell is not a metaphor. It is a real place. But the Bible uses all kinds of metaphors and word pictures to denote and define it.
- **Lake of Fire** “the sea of unending, unquenchable judgment”—technically a final abode of those who have partaken in the second resurrection—unto death. Death and hell are thrown into the lake of fire.

Those are the designations, now let's look at the descriptions. From Scripture we know that Hell is...

- **An actual place:** A furnace (Mt. 13:42; a lake (Rev. 19:20), a prison (1 Pt. 3:19; Rev. 20:7; Mt 5; 13; 18), a place where a partial body can be thrown (Mt. 5; Lk 12:5).
- **A Conscious state of mental anguish Lk 16:19-31; Mt. 25:30** “And throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” In Jesus' story of Lazarus and the Rich man, Hell was a real place and a state of mind, just as paradise was. It was an intermediate state between death and final resurrection—and something the Bible calls “the second death” which is that final state of judgment for those who have rejected Christ.
- **An irreversible Judgment Mt. 25:46** “eternal punishment”. This irrevocable idea is also in Rev. 20:11-15 “Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. ¹³ The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. ¹⁵ Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. Now let me say something about the nature of the lake of fire. Now surely it is in a context where **lots of symbolism** is being used. No doubt. Yet, at the same time I want to point out that symbols and analogies always **have literal referents**. That is, they always point to a literal reality. There is an actual point they are trying to make. So whether Lk 16 (rich man and Laz) is a parable or an analogy, or the lake of fire is a symbol—these are still pointing to a literal judgment—and often the language of analogy is an inadequate vehicle for the conveyance of truth. And the truth is that this punishment is unending, irreversible, and just a horrific state of affairs.

The next thing we note about this place is that it is a...

- **Permanent exile from the presence of God** Mt 25: “Outer Darkness” **1 Thessalonians 1:8-9** “He (God) will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ They will be chastened with **everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.**” We see here that Paul tells the Thessalonians that those who go to this horrible place will be punished with everlasting destruction—which is tantamount to being exiled from the presence of the LORD and his glory in heaven.
 - **It is the absence from God’s presence.** Unlike heaven where we noted will be the full beam of God’s presence, this place is the opposite. The absence of God’s immediate and palpable presence. **Why is this important?**
 - **It is the absence of God’s glory at any level.** The earth, in a sense is heavenly. It is the consistent witness of Scripture that the world as we encounter it is suffuse, permeated with a kind of general glory of God.
 - **Psalm 19:1** “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”
- **Illus. 30 years ago the Nuclear site Chernobyl**—The USSR’s infamous steam explosion at a nuclear plant which killed all the workers and travelled down wind to kill nearly 30. Nearby town which housed many of the employees was Pripyat. Here’s a picture of Pripyat
- **(Pripyat Picture Here)**



One can actually book a nuclear tour and site see this town. And this is what you’d find. A dreary, colorless place that looks as though life has abandoned it. Nothing grows there anymore. Nothing lives there anymore. It is the picture of abandonment—absence of glory.

Hell is like that. A place without the life of God, the revealed presence of God—and no sense of the glory of God in creation—not on any level.

Like Pripyat, not a place you would want to spend a single day. Much less eternity.

Summary: Hell is a place where disembodied souls will dwell as they wait for God’s final judgment where they will be in unceasing anguish and torment over the absence of God’s presence and glory and never ending state of burning, unquenchable regret of the choices made or not made in this life.

2. Answering objections to Hell.

Answering objections to this unsavory and uncomfortable doctrine is necessary, considering that all men have objections to it (including some of us preachers). But just because we have questions or objections to it, doesn't mean the Scriptures aren't firm on this teaching.

Objection 1: Isn't hell a punishment that doesn't fit the crime? This bit of calculus fails to take into account a very important variable. And that is—when we appreciate:

- The gravity of our situation—the degree to which we are lost.
- The nature of his absolute holiness. The smallest infraction is an affront to his holiness and the order of creation.
- The depths of his loving kindness in Christ. When we fully appreciate the price that was paid for our sins—we understand that to reject the sacrifice made for that is a sin of infinite gravity.

To reject this sacrifice he's made is to reject life itself. This God who stretches out his hand to rescue the dying sinner drowning in a hell of judgment and sin—that sinner slapping his hand away in defiance.

It is a **sin of an infinite quality.**

That is deserving of **a punishment of an infinite nature.**

Jonathan Edwards put it this way, so eloquently

“The eternal holy God cannot tolerate even the slightest sin. How much more then, a multitude of daily sins in thought, word, and deed? This is all compounded by the fact that we reject God's immense mercy. And add to this man's readiness to find fault with God's justice and mercy, and we have abundant evidence of the need for hell. Therefore, if we had a true spiritual awareness we would not be amazed at hell's severity but our own depravity.” ~ **Jonathan Edwards**

Objection 2: Isn't the doctrine of hell incompatible with a loving God? If Hell is a cosmic system of incarceration, and if God is also just and if heaven is perfect civil society, then no. The doctrine is no more incompatible with a loving God than our prison system would be incompatible with a just and civil society.

Theologian JI Packer noted,

“The truth is that part of God's moral perfection is his perfection in judgment. Would a God who did not care about the difference between right and wrong be a good and admirable being? Would a God who put no distinction between the beasts of history, the Hitlers and Stalins and his own saints be morally praiseworthy and perfect? Moral indifference would be an imperfection in God, not a perfection. And not to judge the world would be to show moral indifference. The final proof that God is a perfect moral being, not indifferent to questions of right and wrong, is the fact that he has committed himself to judge the world.”

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How could a loving God allow the most egregious offenders of humanity to roam the corridors of heaven, to reside in the suburbs of that great city—threatening the peace and safety of his children? To refuse to judge between right and wrong would be moral imperfection in God.

Objection 3: Shouldn't we avoid this difficult teaching so that we can win more people with God's love? I wish this were possible. But the truth is that if our message of salvation is softened to a mere message of universalism where all dogs go to heaven—then what prey tell are we being saved from?

I need not rescue a man from the comfort of his lazy boy.

I need to rescue him from the side of a cliff. If we are being saved, then saved from what?

Objection 3: Don't people deserve a second chance? The Bible is silent as to second chances. But it also puts great emphasis on the finality of the judgment. God will have to judge each individual case, but our role is to proclaim the Good News of salvation. That call is above our pay grade. The Scriptures give us an urgency about this final irreversible reality.

Objection 5: Shouldn't we be motivated by our love and not our fear? Let me ask you: Do you love the outdoors. Do you also carry bear spray or a gun? The motivation of love for God and healthy fear of the consequences—these are not incompatible ideas. They are in no way allergic to each other.

Illus. My friend caught in an avalanche half drunk. He narrowly escaped and the cold air sobered him up and his first thought was “I forgot all my safety protocols” Snowmobiling the side of a mountain is great fun but not if you forget the power of that mountain to bury you in an avalanche.

Conclusion: When I study these passages, I feel as though I am looking into the face of God the Father—a loving God who has given everything for us.

I see the severity and seriousness on his face—a look of sobriety and sternness. Because he knows that the fire is coming. Wrath is coming on the world.

And he stretches out his hand to dying humanity and invites them to new life in Christ Jesus.

And this message will change the way we see our community, the way we see our neighbors and our world.

Giving us a sense of urgency for evangelism and our mission to proclaim the Good News of Salvation.