

## Hell, Redux

*“the gate is wide and easy is the way that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many”*

Evangelicals today are questioning whether the Bible’s depiction of a place of eternal torment is real or not. It seems that we need some excuse for our deliberate refusal to evangelize the lost. So we appeal to God’s love for all His creatures, and then we make up theology based on that to exclude hell from our minds. The seculars of the Western world have already decided that there’s no such place, and they’re busy crafting legislation that would make any reference to a real hell punishable “hate” speech. Such laws may be coming to our country sooner than we think. So we’d better decide now whether we believe the Bible or not.

Unbelievers don’t get it. The issue isn’t that God condemns certain (or many, or most) people to eternal hell because He wasn’t pleased with their life. That’s what they suppose. (That’s what many church-going people and even some church leaders suppose.) No. People will have to be in hell because they rejected God’s gracious, generous and self-sacrificing offer of forgiveness of sins. Unbelievers want nothing to do with Jesus – except maybe (grudgingly) acknowledge that He existed and was a good teacher. We don’t live in the dispensation of the Old Testament. We’re in the dispensation of the Gospel. So in this unique era of the Son, we either receive God’s love-offer and enjoy eternal blessing, or we reject it and suffer eternal loss. In hell. See John 3:36.

The saints of the Catholic Church believed in a literal hell as described in Scripture. St. Faustina, for example, in her diary wrote that hell, according to a vision she was given, is a place of great torture, awesomely large and extensive. The tortures she saw included: Loss of God; perpetual remorse; permanency of the dreadful state; fire that penetrates the soul without destroying it; God’s anger; darkness and a hideous suffocating smell, yet the demons and the souls of the damned see each other and all the evils they perpetrated; the company of Satan; and despair, hatred of God, vile words, curses and blasphemies. Similar visions were had also by Saints Jacinta, Francisco Marto, Venerable Sister Lucia, and the children of Fatima. Most Catholics today however indulge in skepticism about such a place. So do many Protestants.

Scripture clearly refers to hell as a real place, a place of eternal torment and darkness. It’s a bottomless pit where the fires are never quenched, where there is gnashing of teeth. Think about it! God created us to live forever, so even though because of rebellion and disobedience we must die according to the oracle pronounced in Genesis 3, there also has to be a resurrection. All humans exist forever. The issue is, Where? In the presence of God, or not. If not, then where? Hell! Why the torment? Is God vindictive? No. God loves even those He sends to hell. The torment is necessary because of God’s justice. Love doesn’t replace justice. In perfect justice, the Son bore the punishment we deserve and that can be ours by entering into a relationship with Him. If we reject that, prior justly deserved punishment remains.

So there’s a “second death,” the punishment of hell, a state or existence of being forever apart from God. In other words, this present life is a test, a proving ground: Will we humbly acknowledge our sinfulness and embrace the Son (and all that comes to us because of the Son’s love, obedience and suffering), or in pride reject God’s stupendous, gracious offer. At the Great White Throne judgment, unbelievers will be judged on the basis of how their sins demonstrate their wicked, ungodly nature. Their sins will show that they are not fit to be in God’s holy presence. But it’s their refusal to enter into the blessings of the Gospel that they are there at that place of horrible judgment. It will be an inescapable, decisive, irreversible, final judgment. Tragic in the extreme.

No discussion of hell is viable without dealing with the issue of those in the world who never had the opportunity to hear and respond to the Gospel. Seculars shriek, “Unfair!” The problem wouldn’t exist if people understood that God is omniscient. That means He has exhaustive knowledge of everything – *everything!* He even knows counterfactuals. That means God knows what would result if something that didn’t really happen were to have happened. And so God knows what the response would be to the Gospel if those who never hear it were to hear it. *God is just in all His ways.*

The modern repudiation of a literal hell is really a rejection of final judgment. Unbelievers and probably most believers as well, don’t want to be held accountable for their lives. No one, however, can claim that there’s been no fair warning. All Scripture serves as the necessary warning: Be godly, or else! Godliness is the great purpose of all human life.

There’s another reason that hell is so starkly, so prominently there in the Bible. It’s this: What will we believers do about it? Ignore it? Theologize it away? Or do the one thing that love demands we do (if we have God’s love in our hearts), and that’s expend our lives warning everyone within reach that a hell awaits, but that escape from it also has been made freely available. “Testing” doesn’t end with receiving Jesus as Savior. We’re responsible to God for continuing His great work of salvation by extending the offer of it to all people everywhere. Let’s be faithful doing what really matters.