

# What Jesus Says About Hell

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## Introduction

Hell has fallen on hard times. The most frequent reference to it nowadays is as a term of cursing, swearing, or deprecation. Others use it in a weak attempt at levity: "I want to go to Hell; after all, that's where all my friends will be." Many moderns have tried to take the murky-gray road of claiming at the same time to believe in the existence of Hell but professing to know of no one who does anything sufficiently evil to go there. It is historically demonstrable that outright denial of Hell to any great degree, or its companion, loss of belief in Hell, are phenomena of relatively recent times. How has this come about?

## A Brief History of the Deconstruction of Hell

For sixteen centuries the doctrine of eternal punishment of the wicked at the hands of a Just God was a matter of certain conviction almost universally throughout Christendom. In fact, this was the prevailing view even in the intertestamental period which preceded Christ and His doctrine: "Everlasting punishment of the wicked was and always will be the orthodox theory. It was held by the Jews at the time of Christ, with the exception of the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection."<sup>1</sup> The only significant voice among the ancients who dissented from the orthodox view of Hell was Origen in the third century and he was later condemned by two ecumenical councils for his heresy. However, with the approach of the Renaissance, the shift of man's emphasis moved from theo-centric to anthro-po-centric. Humanism, with man at its center as the be-all, do-all, and end-all, began to displace God. The further man moved himself up, the further he pushed God down. Man was so valuable and so precious, even to the "theistic humanist," that he could not abide the thought of eternal punishment or retribution, or of a sin serious enough to warrant it.

From the sixteenth century on, God's judgment was a constant target for attack by humanists both within and outside the church. Hell and humanism didn't mix; they can't mix and never will mix. It just won't do to have highly exalted man experiencing the torments of hell eternally. First, it is presumed that the precious creature couldn't possibly do anything bad enough to warrant such punishment. And even more significantly, the humanists are convinced that God could not bear the eternal loss of even one of these marvelous man-creatures.<sup>2</sup>

Certain radical liberal theologians have become outspoken deniers of Hell and have influenced other clerics. A good example of such blasphemy is John A.T. Robinson, Bishop of the Church of England. As long ago as 1949 he wrote:

Christ, in Origen's old words, remains on the Cross as long as one sinner remains in hell. That is not speculation; it is a statement grounded in the very necessity of God's nature. In a universe of love, there can be no heaven which tolerates a chamber of horrors, no hell for any which does not at the same time make it hell for God. He cannot endure that—for that would be the final mockery of His nature—and He will not.<sup>3</sup>

Only eighteen years later he wrote as though the destruction of Hell had already been fully accomplished: "There are still a few who would like to bring back hell, as some want to bring back birching and hanging. They are usually the same types who wish to purge Britain of horror comics, sex, and violence."<sup>4</sup>

Another of Robinson's ilk is Emil Brunner:

That is the revealed will of God and the plan for the world which He discloses, a plan of universal salvation, of gathering all things into Christ. We hear not one word in the Bible of a dual plan, a plan of salvation and its polar opposite. The will of God has but one point, it is unambiguous and positive. It has one aim, not two.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, Brunner read the Sacred Text through tinted or dirty glasses: Aside from the insistent Biblical theme of judgment against and eternal punishment for transgressors of God's will, the very existence of a plan of salvation necessarily implies "its polar opposite," damnation. The will of God is "unambiguous and positive" all right, but about the **existence** (rather than non-existence) of a final Judgment and of eternal retribution for sin in a place called Hell.

As is often the case, those who were once considered radicals have gradually become almost mainstream. The seminaries have now for a century or more been filled with professors who are theological liberals of the rankest sort, most of whom have no stomach for (among other things) anything unpleasant, "negative," or foreboding connected with their brand of religion and their concept of God. This posture, as a primary assumption, all but categorically ignores Divine Justice and its necessary implication, Divinely administered punishment for sin. These schools have turned out tens of thousands of infidel ecclesiastics over many decades who have spewed their message of unbelief out week after week in denominational pulpits across the land. At the heart of their theology is an over (and pseudo)-emphasis on the love, grace, mercy, kindness, and longsuffering of God. This has been accompanied by a decided de-emphasis, if not total avoidance and denial, of the balancing traits of God's justice, law, wrath

against sin, and the corollary implication of these verities — Hell as retribution for impenitent sinners. The Biblical “orthodoxy” of centuries has been so watered-down that even so-called “evangelical” churches nowadays are freely accepting such things as divorce for any cause, sexual indulgence, and social drinking as compatible with a “Christian lifestyle” and the hope of Heaven.

The theistic humanism produced by the Renaissance has spawned at least five schools of Hell-denial:

1. **Universalism** — the doctrine that Hell could not exist as an eternal state because God is too loving and benevolent to allow anyone to suffer forever in such a place.
2. **Annihilationism** — the doctrine that the wicked cease to exist at death.
3. **Atheistic Humanism** — the exaltation of man as the ultimate form of life and a corresponding denial of the existence of God. What brings pleasure, happiness, and joy to man is all that matters. He lives only in this life. There is no God, no absolute right or wrong, no Judgment, no Heaven or Hell.
4. **Liberalism** — A term here loosely applied to the idea that while Hell may exist and some may go there, no sin is bad enough nor sinner wicked enough to deserve it. This line of thought differs little from Universalism in its final outcome.
5. **The New Age Movement** — One of its primary emphases is “self-esteemism.” The root of all human problems to New Age devotees is lack of or low self-esteem. In turn, they blame all such on the “traditional” (by which they mean “Christian”) view of things. In the mind of the New Ager, “Acknowledging oneself as a sinner destroys a human being. His solution to this is simply to define sin out of existence and declare man sinless.”<sup>6</sup> This, of course, also defines Hell out of existence.

Very few, if any, among us could be classified as outright Universalists. Likewise, few have imbibed annihilationism.<sup>7</sup> However, the number among us is already many and is ever increasing, who, in their loose and latitudinarian approach to grace, baptism, the identity of the church, fellowship, worship, the nature of God, and Biblical authority in general are **practical** universalists and annihilationists. By this I mean that these brethren will hardly identify any doctrine as heresy or any practice as sinful. They will not oppose or expose any teacher or preacher as false or his/her doctrine as damnable, regardless of how foreign or contrary to Gospel Truth it may be. They would embrace in their fellowship those who are not in fellowship with God. They have found ways of contorting the Scriptures and redefining ordinary words so as to grant approval to adulterers, homosexuals, and drunkards and to heretics of every stripe and hue.

Shall we surrender the existence of Hell to the infidels, the skeptics, the liberals? Without question, the denial or at least the mitigation of Hell is very appealing. If we are guided by human lust and selfish indulgence alone, who could not be attracted to the doctrine that there is no such thing as consequential sin, no ultimate accountability for behavior, no code of conduct

imposed by a Supreme Being/Creator, and no final, inescapable, horrible retribution for rebellion against His law? Undeniably, multiplied millions, in one way or another, have dismissed the reality of Hell.

### **What Did Jesus Say About Hell?**

We will come back to this later, but I will raise another proposition right now: The existence of Hell cannot be denied without denial of Christ Himself. Thus, the crucial issue concerning belief in Hell is the even larger issue—**belief in the Christ Himself.**

In the face of all the denials of Hell, there still remains the stubborn, nagging, undeniable fact that Jesus had much to say about Hell and eternal punishment. I have never counted but have long heard (and do not doubt) that He said much more about Hell than Heaven. When correctly perceived, every warning about the Judgment, every prohibition of evil, every encouragement to righteousness, and every declaration about sin has the concept of eternal damnation behind it and embedded in it. Otherwise, they are meaningless, empty words. In fact, the necessity of Jesus' earthly sojourn and the purpose of His coming are rendered vain and unnecessary apart from the reality of the eternal damnation of the souls of men because of their sins. Indeed, setting aside the plain teaching of Jesus about Hell for the moment, the coming of the Christ from Heaven to earth and the sacrifice of Himself upon the cross for the sins of mankind are the ultimate arguments for the reality of eternal damnation—Hell itself! Now, let us survey the teaching of Jesus about Hell.

#### ***Man Has an Immortal Soul***

For there to be a Hell for man he must survive death, in other words, he must have an immortal soul. Jesus taught unequivocally that man is more than flesh and blood: "And be not afraid of them that kill the body but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mat. 10:28; cf. 16:26).

#### ***There Is a Realm in the World of Spirits Called "Hell"***

Jesus clearly referred to Hell in Matthew 10:28, quoted above, in such a way as to indicate his fullest confidence in its reality. He threatened "the hell of fire" for those who pronounce "thou fool" upon their fellows (Mat. 5:22). He referred to Hell as a real entity and place into which the body would be "cast down" as retribution for sin (Mat. 5:29-30). One who causes another to sin will be cast into "the hell of fire" (Mat. 18:9). The Lord referred to Hell as the final abode of the wicked no fewer than eleven times.

What is Hell, as referred to by Jesus? What did He mean by it? Although there will be thorough word studies in other chapters of this book, a brief definition is appropriate here. Note first that the KJV often uses “Hell” when, in fact, “hades,” (from *hades*, “unseen,” referring to the unseen realm of the dead, i.e., departed spirits) (e.g., Mat. 16:18; Acts 2:27). The English word “Hell” is correctly translated from *gehenna*, which appears twelve times in the Greek New Testament (used eleven times by the Lord, once by James). *Gehenna* derived from the Valley of Hinnom (also, “the valley of the Sons of Hinnom”) just outside of Jerusalem. It is first mentioned in Nehemiah 11:30. Its history includes use as a place where idolatrous Jews burned their children in homage to the pagan god, Molech (2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6). Josiah, the righteous, restorer king of Judah, caused this practice to cease and the valley thenceforth became a place of abomination and abhorrence. As early as the second century B.C., uninspired Jewish literature used *gehenna* as a figure to refer to final, eternal punishment of sinners. The Son of God applied this word in the very same way, using the name of the literal valley of abomination and abhorrence to refer to the place of ultimate abomination and abhorrence beyond the Judgment.

### ***Hell Is Awful and Dreadful Beyond Imagination***

1. The original application of *gehenna* related to the fire that was used in sacrificing children to Molech. Jesus perpetuated this element by describing the final, eternal hell as a place of fire. He twice called it “the hell of fire” (Mat. 5:22; 18:9). He twice referred to it as “the furnace of fire” into which the evil will be cast after the Judgment (13:42, 50). He twice called it a place of “unquenchable fire” (Mark 9:43, 47–48). We correctly identify the Hell the Lord thus describes with “the lake of fire and brimstone” and “the lake of fire” into which the devil, the beast, the false prophet, and all those not found written in the book of life were prophetically cast for eternal torment (Rev. 20:10, 15; 21:8). John appropriately called it a “baptism” (dipping, plunging, overwhelming) in unquenchable fire (Mat. 3:11–12).
2. The Lord used an even stronger description than *fire* but coupled it with *unquenchable* fire. He described Hell as a place “where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark. 9:47–48).
3. Jesus described Hell as a place where those cast therein would be “destroyed” (Mat. 10:28). The annihilationists argue that this passage supports their contention, that “destroyed” equals “annihilated.” However, even the simplest Greek word study proves otherwise. The word translated “destroyed” is from *apollumi*, which is used in numerous passages in which “annihilation” cannot possibly be the meaning. For example, it is rendered “burst” (Mat. 9:17), “lost” (Luke 15:4–9), “perish” (Luke 15:17). Neither these nor numerous other such passages can bear the idea of annihilation as the meaning of *apollumi*. Joseph Henry Thayer was a Unitarian who did not believe in eternal punishment, yet his knowledge of the meaning of this word forced him to define *apollumi* as “to be delivered up to eternal misery.”<sup>8</sup> Robert Morey concludes, “In every instance where the word *apollumi* is found in

the New Testament, something other than annihilation is being described. Indeed, there isn't a single instance in the New Testament where *apollumi* means annihilation in the strict meaning of the word."<sup>9</sup> The idea of being "destroyed" in Hell is that one will suffer utter, irreclaimable loss, and do so forever. Jesus also used the noun form of this word in reference to Hell (Mat. 7:13).

4. Jesus referred to Hell as a place of "eternal punishment" (Mat. 25:46). The word rendered "punishment" (*kolasis*) means torment, torture, suffering, chastisement (cf. Luke 16:23, 28; Rev. 14:10-11).
5. The Hell which Jesus believed in and described is a place of separation from God, Christ, and the redeemed and banishment from Heaven. The lost are "cast into hell" (Mat. 5:29). Jesus will say, "Depart from me" to the lost at the Judgment (Mat. 7:23). He taught that Hell is a place of "outer darkness" (Mat. 8:12; et al.) At the Judgment He will say to impenitent sinners, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire . . ." (Mat. 25:41). He said that the wicked would see themselves "cast forth without" the eternal kingdom of God (Heaven) (Luke 13:28). Paul wrote that the lost will be banished eternally "from the face of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 The. 1:9). Just as evil men are those now "having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12), if they do not repent, they will find themselves forever hopeless and without God (Rev. 22:15).
6. The Lord teaches that Hell is a place where one will be with Satan and all the evil men and women of all time. While the fire of Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels, the lost will at the Judgment be consigned to the same place (Mat. 25:41). John echoed this same doctrine (Rev. 20:10, 15; 21:8). Imagine being imprisoned forever with the most evil men and women of all time with no relief or hope of escape!

### ***Hell Is Everlasting, Eternal, Forever***

Jesus not only teaches the reality of Hell, but the eternity of it. However long Heaven lasts, so long lasts Hell. To conclude His description of the Final Judgment, He said: "And these shall go away into eternal punishment: but the righteous into eternal life" (Mat. 25:46). The fire of Hell is "unquenchable" fire (Mat. 3:12; Mark 9:43, 48). The "hell of fire" of Matthew 18:9 is referred to as "eternal fire" in verse 8. Paul continued this thought by describing the damnation of those who "know not God, and . . . obey not the gospel" as "eternal destruction" (2 The. 1:8-9). John wrote that the lake of fire and brimstone is characterized by torment "day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10). No one can believe the words of Jesus and believe in the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory or any other concept of temporary punishment for the unredeemed after the Judgment!

### ***Jesus Tells Us the Populace of Hell***

1. Self-righteous, egotistic children of God who deprecate others as lower and less worthy than themselves: "But I say unto you, that every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of

the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell of fire" (Mat. 5:22).

2. Those who are unwilling to give up whatever causes them to sin or to sacrifice whatever will keep them from serving God (Mat. 5:27-30).
3. Those who confess Christ, but do not respect God's authority, even though they sincerely claim to work by the authority of Christ:

Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by thy name, and by thy name cast out demons, and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity" (Mat. 7:21-23).
4. Those who reject the messengers, thus the message, of Christ (Mat. 10:14-15).
5. Those who persist in unbelief in the face of overwhelming evidence of the authenticity of the Christ (Mat. 11:20-24).
6. Those who are hypocrites, who profess one thing and practice another (Mat. 23:13-36).
7. The wicked, wasteful, murmuring, blaspheming, lazy servants of Christ, as seen in the Parable of the Talents and the Parable of the Pounds (Mat. 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27).
8. The selfish, stingy, cold, unkind, uncompassionate, unsympathetic servants of Christ (Mat. 25:41-46).
9. False teachers (Mat. 15:13-14).

Other inspired writers also define the populace of Hell:

1. **Paul** listed the full gamut of wickedness, evil, immorality, worldliness, and unrighteousness, which constitute the fulfillments of the "lusts of the flesh" and said that those who behave in such ways (whether Christians or alien sinners) are Hell-bound (Rom 1:18-32; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:19-21). He also mentioned as future residents of Hell the "lawless one," those who receive not the love of the Truth, those who make "shipwreck concerning the faith, those who succumb to the deceitfulness of riches, and those who are heretics or factious (2 The. 2:4-12; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; 6:9-10; Tit. 3:10-11).
2. **Peter** identified those **brethren** who are false teachers, who themselves are overtaken by evil and who entice others to follow their wicked doctrines and practices, as those who will be lost in Hell (2 Pet. 2:1-22).
3. **John** consigned not only Satan, the beast and the false prophet to Hell, but also all men who had followed them in wickedness, evil, and immorality of all sorts and whose names are therefore not written in the book of life (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8; 22:15).

Surely, he who says his pleasure in fleshly lusts in this earthly life is worth the price of Hell in eternity knows not what he says.

## Conclusion

There you have it, straight from the mouth of the only begotten of the father, Jesus the Christ, and his inspired apostles. After quoting several passages in which the lord set forth the doctrine of hell as a place of eternal punishment for the ungodly, Braun observes:

Does any question remain as to whether or not Jesus declared the eternal punishment of the wicked? All the authority of the almighty God is present in the Words He spoke about hell. Jesus had more to say about hell than any other speaker or writer in the Bible. If He was mistaken in what He said, then the almighty, eternal, and everlasting God was mistaken. And that is not the case. Indeed, if it comes to a disagreement: "Let God be true and every man a liar." . . . What more could Jesus have said? There is absolutely no way the clear impact of His words can be brushed aside, and the assertion made that there is no eternal doom for the ungodly, unless of course, we join the critics who arbitrarily determine that Jesus didn't really say these things at all. . . . Those who maintain Jesus did not utter these severe sayings about hell are like gamblers playing a game they will surely lose. . . . Jesus, the One who is coming again to judge the living and the dead, expressed Himself clearly and without room for doubt about it. The rest of the New Testament writers followed His lead to the letter. Retribution for the ungodly is eternal, without end.<sup>10</sup>

Men must make their choice between the annihilationists, the liberal theologians, the Humanists, the Universalists, the New Agers, and all other no-hell advocates on the one hand and the Lord Jesus Christ on the other. **None can question that He taught the reality of Hell as a place of eternal punishment for the wicked.** Those who reject this teaching of His also thereby reject Him as the Son of God and the Savior of mankind (John 12:48).

Michaelsen, after quoting from various New Agers and their totally subjective denials of the existence of the devil, sin, and Hell, drew the following incisive conclusion:

Jesus, on the other hand, spoke of a place of eternal punishment: "the eternal fire, which has been prepared for the devil and his angels . . ." (Matthew 25:46, 41; 10:28). He speaks of hell as a "furnace of fire" into which "all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness" will be cast. He speaks of it as an unimaginably horrible place in which there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42). If hell is **not** a literal reality then Jesus was indeed a fool for going to the cross: The whole reason He did so was in order to save us from that place of eternal torment and separation from God. "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24). "I said therefore to you, that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you shall die in your sins" (John 8:24).<sup>11</sup>

Heaven and Hell stand or fall together, and reality and in duration. If Heaven is real, so is Hell. If Hell is denied, so must Heaven be. They both are as real as the God Who made us and Who gave us the inspired revelation concerning Himself, His Son, and their marvelous plan of salvation. In His great mercy this same God has warned us of Satan, sin, the Judgment, and Hell. God sent His Son into our world in the flesh that we might have a road through otherwise impassable territory to Heaven and to God (John 1:1-2, 14; 3:16; Phi. 2:5-8). Jesus the Christ is Himself that road and the only road that leads to God and Heaven (John 14:6). If we walk on that narrow, admittedly difficult way, it leads to life (Mat. 7:14). If we reject the Christ and His way, we have chosen the road (or one of countless roads) that leads ultimately to Hell (Mat. 7:13). Jesus' own simple summary of entering that road to Heaven is as follows: "He that



believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned” (Mark 16:16).

The picture of Hell in the words of Jesus is so frighteningly, horribly, terribly unimaginable that He boldly challenges all men to make whatever sacrifice is necessary to escape its horrors (Mat. 5:29–30; 6:19–25, 33; 8:18–21; 10:28, 37–38; 13:44–45; 16:24–26; 19:21–22; et al.). Surely, this is the course of wisdom!

### Endnotes

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1. Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1973), 2:606–07.
  2. Jon E. Braun, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Pub., 1979), pp. 35–36.
  3. John A. T. Robinson, “Universalism—Is It Heretical?” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (June 1949), p. 155.
  4. John A. T. Robinson, *But That I Can’t Believe* (New York, NY: The New American Library, 1967), p. 69.
  5. Emil Brunner, *Eternal Hope* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 182.
  6. Johanna Michaelsen, *Like Lambs to the Slaughter* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Pub., 1989), p. 298.
  7. One notable exception is Edward William Fudge, who sets forth his annihilationist views in a book of several hundred pages, *The Fire That Consumes* (Houston, TX: Providential Press, 1982). Fudge is an elder in the Bering Road Church of Christ, Houston, TX.
  8. Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 36.
  9. Robert A. Morey, *Death and the Afterlife* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Pub., 1984), p. 90.
  10. Braun, pp. 146, 163.
  11. Michaelsen, p. 299.

[**Note:** I wrote this MS for and presented a digest of it orally at the Eighth Annual Shenandoah Lectures, hosted by the Shenandoah Church of Christ, San Antonio, TX, February 13–16, 1994. It was published in the book of the lectures, *Whatever Happened to Heaven and Hell?* ed. Terry Hightower (San Antonio, TX: Shenandoah Church of Christ, 1994).]

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