

Hell

Why it is everlasting

Introduction

I have expounded this doctrine several times¹ so I do not need to expand on basic issues such as, what Hell is, who is there, why they are there, where it is, why it is different from the grave and so on. Here I want to limit my focus, though I will touch on these issues.

I recently listened to an analytical geo-political podcast by someone I respect who identifies as a Biblical Christian. I was saddened to hear that he derided the idea of Hell as everlasting punishment and strongly affirmed that such a doctrine was utterly unbiblical. He is wrong.

It reminded me that there is a vocal contingent of the Evangelical church that has imbibed unorthodox ideas about Hell as a result of various attacks in the last 70 years or so. Evangelical deniers of a perpetual Hell (usually replacing it with Conditional Immortality)² include: Edward Fudge,³ John Stott,⁴ Michael Horton,⁵ John Wenham,⁶ Philip E. Hughes⁷ and Clark Pinnock.⁸ This is in addition to non-Evangelical Universalists who have always denied Hell. The idea of conditional immortality, advocated by these Evangelicals, historically derives from cults like Adventism building on earlier heresies. It is significant that these men (excepting the heretic Pinnock) are not front-runner systematic theologians but eminent Bible commentators and teachers. Respected historic theologians heartily disagree with them.

A timely reminder of the truth is useful today.

The historic denial

Historically the denial of endless punishment was associated with Universalists, such as in historic Restorationism (not modern Charismatic Restorationism). This taught that all God's rational creatures would be brought into a state of holiness (restored). Some taught that this followed a period of suffering to atone for personal guilt (as if any sinful man could redeem himself!). Others believed that all men at death enter heaven based on erroneous interpretations of passages like: Acts 3:21, Rm 5:18, 1 Cor 15:22, Eph 1:10, Col 1:19, 20.⁹

¹ Such as 'The dreadful doctrine of Hell', 'The pains of Hell', and 'Dead Certainties'.

² Immortality is conditional on being saved by Christ. Unsaved people will be annihilated.

³ Edward Fudge, 'The Fire that Consumes' (1982).

⁴ John Stott, 'Essentials' (1988).

⁵ Michael Horton, 'Hell and Conditional Mortality' (2002).

⁶ John Wenham, 'The Goodness of God' (1974).

⁷ Philip E. Hughes, 'The True Image' (1988).

⁸ Clark Pinnock, 'Defence of conditional immortality' in 'Four Views on Hell', edited by William Crockett (1992). Pinnock can be dismissed as a heretical hyper-Arminian who does not even believe in God's sovereign control of history (see Open Theism).

⁹ Often attributing a wrong meaning to the word 'all'. 'All' does not always mean every single person on Earth or history. It is frequently limited to a small number of people in a given set; e.g. Jn 8:2. 'All' is usually defined by its context, such as regarding the elect only.

Traces of teaching the future restoration of the wicked are found in: Didymus of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus,¹⁰ plus Diodore of Tarsus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia (the leaders of the Antioch school). Origen influenced all of these. However, such views were powerfully refuted by the majority of contemporary fathers, and subsequently by the church under the lead of Epiphanius, Jerome, and Augustine.

The medieval church was almost unanimous in holding the doctrine of endless punishment.

The Reformation churches, both Lutheran and Calvinistic, taught that Hell was everlasting.

After the Reformation, Universalism, Restorationism, and Annihilation, were asserted by some sects but these errors were not adopted by ecclesiastical denominations. None of the Evangelical churches introduced Universalism, in any form, into their standards. Evangelicals strongly affirmed vicarious atonement, which is incompatible with universal salvation. Universalism implies that suffering for sin is simply remedial while Evangelicalism implies that it is punitive and retributive. Thus the doctrine of everlasting punishment for sin was held by the vast majority of Evangelical (Bible-believing) churches.

See 'Immortality of the soul'.

The English word 'Hell'

'Hell' is derived from a Saxon word, *helan*, meaning to cover; hence a covered or invisible place.

The Oxford Dictionary states that 'Hell' is the Old English *hel*, *hell*, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *hel* and German *Hölle*, from an Indo-European root meaning 'to cover or hide'.

So the word is from an ancient Indo-European root word meaning to cover or hide, transmitted into English through a Germanic (Saxon) word developed into the modern 'Hell'. It carries the meaning of a hidden place, which is fitting for buried corpses. From ancient times it also had the meaning of punishment for sins committed when alive.

Since it referred to people buried underground, Hell was also considered to be a place beneath the Earth. The dead go downward. Departed spirits were thought to be in an underworld. The OT also contains this concept (Ps 55:15; Prov 5:5, 10:24).

Everlasting punishment is orthodox

The soundest theologians and church documents for 2,000 years have affirmed that Hell is everlasting.

General

Firstly, even secular dictionaries state that Hell is perpetual:

A place regarded ... as a spiritual realm of evil and suffering, often traditionally depicted as a place of perpetual fire ... where the wicked are punished after death.

The New Oxford Dictionary of English.

The hypothetical abode of evil spirits, and the place in which the wicked are believed to be condemned to eternal punishment after death.

¹⁰ The two Gregories are two thirds of the Cappadocian Fathers, with Basil the Great.

The Oxford World Encyclopaedia.

Secondly, the idea of Hell as eternal punishment is portrayed in most mythological systems as perpetual. This includes Greek, Roman and Norse mythology that undergirds the English language.

Just as natural man knows the difference between good and evil deeds in his conscience, and also knows that it is necessary to worship God, so also man has an inherent knowledge that punishment for sin is everlasting.

Thirdly, even non-Christian religions teach that Hell is everlasting, such as Islam¹¹ or Judaism.

Fourthly, non-Evangelical churches teach that Hell is everlasting, including Roman Catholicism,¹² Eastern Orthodoxy and many others.

Church documents

All the sound, trustworthy church standards teach that Hell is eternal in duration.

The wicked, who know not God and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast aside into everlasting torments, and punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.

Baptist Confession of Faith 1689, 32. The Last Judgment.

The souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.

Savoy Declaration, Chapter 31, Of The State of Man After Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead (Congregational).

The terrible vengeance which God shall execute on the wicked, ... and who shall be convicted by the testimony of their own consciences, and being immortal, shall be tormented in that everlasting fire.

Belgic Confession, Article 37, Of the Last Judgment.

Question 10

Will God suffer such disobedience and rebellion to go unpunished?

Answer:

By no means [1]; but is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins [2]; and will punish them in his just judgment in this life and eternally, as he has declared.

Heidelberg Catechism.

The souls of the wicked are cast into Hell, there to endure endless torments.

The Irish Articles of Religion, Of the state of the souls of men, after they be departed out of this life; together with the general Resurrection, and the last Judgment. 101.

The unbelievers and ungodly will descend with the devils into hell to burn forever and never to be redeemed from torments (Matt. 25:46).

The Second Helvetic Confession, Christ is truly ascended into heaven.

¹¹ Islam also depicts hell (*Jahannam*, a name derived from *Gehenna*) as full of fire and torment. Hell is mentioned 146 times in the Qur'an but only nine refer to moral failings; the rest involve eternal torture for disagreeing with Muhammad. However, punishment is not always taught as eternal; there is confusion on this in interpretations of different schools.

¹² Leaving aside the error of Purgatory.

The souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.

Westminster Confession, 32. Death and the Resurrection from the Dead.

What are the punishments of sin in the world to come? A. The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

Westminster Larger Catechism, 29.

What is the misery of that estate whereinto man fell? A. All mankind by their fall lost communion with God,(1) are under his wrath and curse,(2) and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, 19.

Note that this shows unanimity amongst Continental Reformed, Irish Anglicans, British Presbyterians, British Congregationalists and British Baptists.

Church fathers

The common opinion in the ancient church was that the future punishment of the impenitent wicked is endless.

WGT Shedd, *The doctrine of endless punishment*, p1.

The doctrine of eternal punishment continued, as in the preceding period, to be dominant in the creed of the church.

Johann August Wilhelm Neander [1789-1850], II, 737; German Protestant historian speaking of the period 312-590.

The punishment of the wicked, which most of the fathers regarded as eternal.

Hagenbach, *History of Doctrine*, 78.

And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.

The Athanasian Creed, 43.

The unjust and intemperate shall be punished in eternal fire.

Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, c.1.

He [Christ] may send ... the ungodly and unrighteous, and wicked, and profane among men into everlasting fire.

Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book 1, c.10.

The deviation from the catholic (universal) doctrine was in the Alexandrian school founded by Clement and Origen (notable for many errors). They even taught that the Devil had some sins mitigated.¹³

The consensus among the early church fathers was a belief in everlasting punishment.

Sound theologians

Every sound Reformed, Protestant, Evangelical theologian for 2,000 years has affirmed that Hell is a place of unending torment. While good theologians may have differed on some minor points, there has been virtual unanimity on the doctrine of Hell. This agreement continues from the early church Fathers right up to the turn of the 20th century. This agreement of hundreds of good theologians must not be overturned because of a handful of modern church teachers.

¹³ Gieseler, I, 214.

There is nothing in the Scriptures which even by the most remote implication, suggests that the sufferings of the lost shall ever end.

AA Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 40:9. American theologian.

Unbelievers will receive their sentence of eternal condemnation.

RL Dabney, *Systematic Theology*, Chapter 45, *The General Judgment and Eternal Life*. American Presbyterian theologian.

There can be no reasonable doubt as to the fact that the Bible teaches the continual existence of the wicked.

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p735. American Presbyterian theologian.

The strongest support of the doctrine of Endless Punishment is the teaching of Christ. ... Though the doctrine is plainly taught in the Pauline Epistles, and other parts of Scripture, yet without the explicit and reiterated statements of God incarnate, it is doubtful whether so awful a truth would have had such a conspicuous place as it always has had in the creed of Christendom.

The mere perusal of Christ's words when he was upon earth, without note or comment upon them, will convince the unprejudiced that the Redeemer of sinners knew and believed, that for impenitent men and devils there is an endless punishment.

WGT Shedd, *The doctrine of endless punishment*, p14, 15. American theologian.

Endless punishment is rational, because of the endlessness of sin. ... The endlessness of sin results, first, from the nature and energy of sinful self-determination. ... Another reason for the endlessness of sin is the bondage of the sinful will. ... Still another reason for the endlessness of sin, is the fact that rebellious enmity toward law and its Source is not diminished, but increased, by then righteous punishment experienced by the impenitent transgressor. ... endless punishment is rational, because sin is an infinite evil; infinite not because committed by an infinite being, but against one.

WGT Shedd, *The doctrine of endless punishment*, p89, 90, 91, 92, 93.

The wicked will be cast into Hell where they will suffer everlasting punishment for their sins.

JL Dagg, *Manual of Theology*, p 364. Eminent Baptist theologian.

Q. What is the misery of that state whereinto man fell?

A. All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God (Gen. 3:8, 24), are under his wrath and curse (Eph. 2:3; Gal. 3:10), and so made liable to all the miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell forever (Rom. 6:23; Matt. 25:41).

CH Spurgeon, *A Puritan Catechism*. Victorian preacher and Biblical writer.

Q. 3. Wherein does the curse of God consist?

A. In various things; first, in the guilt of death,¹⁴ temporal and eternal; secondly, the loss of the grace and favour of God; thirdly, guilt and horror of conscience, despair and anguish here; with, fourthly, eternal damnation hereafter.

John Owen, *The Greater Catechism (of Two Short Catechisms)*. Eminent British Puritan.

It was necessary that he should engage, as it were, at close quarters with the powers of hell and the horrors of eternal death.

All the calamities which the wicked suffer in the present life are depicted to us as a kind of anticipation of the punishment of hell. In these they already see, as from a distance, their eternal condemnation.

John Calvin, *Institutes* (Beveridge ed.), p582, 745. French/Swiss Reformer.

¹⁴ All that a natural man hath on this side of hell is free mercy.

They are ignorant of God, and are his enemies, and therefore have justly deserved death, hell, God's judgments, his everlasting wrath and indignation.

Martin Luther, Table Talk, 274. Lutheran Reformer.

Of the end reserved for the city of the devil, namely the eternal punishment of the damned; and of the arguments which unbelief brings against it.

Augustine, City of God, Book 21, title. The greatest church father.

Eternal death is also the consequence of Adam's sin.

James P Boyce, chapter 23, The effects of the sin of Adam, 3, 1. Eminent Baptist theologian.

The Bible does teach the unending punishment of the finally impenitent; all Christian churches have so understood it.

Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (abridged edition), p543. American Presbyterian theologian.

Burning in that Gehenna is everlasting, unquenchable fire. ... The wrath of God, in all its terror, is manifested there. ... On this firm Scriptural basis, the Christian church built a doctrine of the eternity of hellish punishment.

Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, p703-4. Dutch Reformed theologian.

Gehenna is eternal hell. Wherever it is used in the NT, it always means the place of eternal damnation.

Walter A Elwell (Ed.), The Concise Evangelical Dictionary of Theology (art. 'Hell').

The Bible describes hell as a place of outer darkness, a lake of fire, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place of eternal separation from the blessings of God. ... The most frightening aspect of hell is its eternity. ... The Bible clearly teaches that the punishment is eternal. ...

Hell, then, is an eternity before the righteous, ever burning wrath of God.

RC Sproul, Essential Truths of the Christian Faith; section 102.

The greatest theologians in church history all agreed that Hell is a place of eternal punishment.

The immortality of the soul

One reason for the necessity of eternal punishment is that the soul is immortal in nature. It is created by God and returns to God when the physical body dies.¹⁵ It is then resurrected for good or evil at the end of time. When a man sins it is the soul that sins¹⁶ and the body carries out the chosen deed. The body is merely the vehicle for sin; the executive action is decided in the soul. Since the soul is immortal, the punishment for sin is everlasting.

Man was created to be the likeness of God. Even though rebellion ruined that image the nature of the human creation is an immortal soul because it was made by God to reflect his divine nature.

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption:(1) but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.

Westminster Confession, 32. Death and the Resurrection from the Dead, 32:1.

¹⁵ Ezek 18:4, 'Behold, all souls are Mine'. In fact, the elect go into the presence of God (after the cross) but the wicked wait in Hades until sentencing by God (see later). Both are under God's jurisdiction.

¹⁶ Ezek 18:4, 'The soul who sins shall die'. Ezek 18:20, 'The soul who sins shall die'.

The bodies of men after death return to dust, and undergo corruption, but their souls, which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God Who gave them.

Baptist Confession of Faith 1689, 31. Man's State After Death and the Resurrection.

The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them.

Savoy Declaration, Chapter 31. Of The State of Man After Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead

The Protestant doctrine on the state of the soul after death includes the continued conscious existence of the soul after the dissolution of the body.

Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology (Abridged edition), p509.

[The Bible] clearly assumes in many passages that man continues his conscious existence after death. In fact, it treats the immortality of man very much as it does that of the existence of God, that is it assumes that this is an undisputed postulate.

Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, p674.

There is no example in the whole of the Bible of its certain use to imply complete cessation of being.

TC Hammond and DF Wright, In Understanding Be Men, p184.

... The wicked by casting them down into Hell, where they must be tormented forever.

Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, p804.

The origin of the denial of the soul's immortality began with the Socinians. Immortality was conditional; it was a gift of God to those who obeyed. The wicked and demons, therefore, would one day cease to exist after the Final Judgment. This was the main historic doctrinal exposition of annihilationism, later adapted by other sects, such as Adventism, Christadelphianism, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, the Emerging Church, key pioneers in Pentecostalism such as Charles Parham and William Branham, the Unification church [Moonies], the Unitarian Church, and Armstrongism.

One of the reasons why conditional immortality and annihilationism were accepted was the confusion caused by the KJV mistranslation of 'Sheol' (the netherworld) by the word 'grave' 31 times. Physical death was seen to be the end in order to avoid the hated concept of eternal punishment.

Throughout history sound theologians have fought ideas such as these, showing that Scripture does not countenance them. Judgment is eternal in scope (Heb 6:2).

The descriptions of Hell

Everlasting fire

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'. Matt 25:41

'Everlasting' is *aionios*, meaning: without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be; without beginning; without end, never to cease, everlasting. 'Everlasting' here cannot be twisted to mean something less than eternal.

The Devil and his demons, being spiritual beings, are immortal; therefore their punishment is also immortal. The 'lake of fire' is a term for Hell and its duration is clearly everlasting. This verse is enough to prove that Hell is a place of eternal punishment. Deniers of this contradict the clear words of the Lord Jesus himself.

Fire and brimstone

He himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation. He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. Rev 14:10

Hell is where the wrath of God is poured out in 'full strength'. When God does something in full strength it clearly refers to an infinite action. Thus his wrath is poured out eternally.

The Lamb (Jesus) and the holy angels are immortal. The torment of the wicked is in their presence. It is an eternal testimony to the justice and holiness of God.

The lake of fire

The cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death. Rev 21:8

The lake of fire is the second death.¹⁷ The first death is the death that follows sin which all people descended from Adam suffer.¹⁸ Men die because they sin. This is physical death.

The second death is the sentence of condemnation of sinners who are raised after death to have a new type of body that can sustain eternity in wrath. This equates to suffering in Hell. The second death is the death experienced perpetually in Hell (separation from God and all goodness and joy plus punishment for sin).

A furnace

The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Matt 13:41-42

The lawless will be cast into a furnace. A furnace is an example of the hottest type of fire used for smelting ore or firing clay.

Outer darkness

The sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matt 8:12

Outer darkness refers to a lack of light; particularly the light of God and is thus a figure of Hell. The repeated article makes it stronger, literally 'the darkness, the outside'.

¹⁷ Lk 12:5, But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!

¹⁸ Rm 5:12, 'Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned'.

Gnashing of teeth refers to pain, depression, anguish, torment.

Blackness

For whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Jude 1:13

Blackness of darkness intensifies the idea of separation from light and God. In the Greek it is a rhyming couplet, *zophos skotos*. 'Blackness' is black darkness (used of Hell), 'darkness' is not just darkness but also darkened eyesight, blindness, ignorance, ungodliness.

No rest

The smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast. Rev 14:11

No rest is an allusion to never-ending punishment and torment.

The illustrations of Hell

The Valley of Hinnom

'Gehenna' is the NT Greek word for Hell and this derives from the Valley Of Hinnom (in the Greek form of *Ge-Hinnom*). This was where children had been burned to Molech in the OT (2 Chron 28:3) that became the city's garbage burning place and dumping ground for unburied dead. When Jesus says, 'the fire of Hell' he is saying 'the Gehenna of fire' (Matt 5:22).

This place was always smouldering with smoke and flames continually rising. As such it was a fitting metaphor for Jesus' teaching that Hell was a place of perpetual burning fire.

Undying worms

In common parlance worms (maggots) are associated with devouring buried corpses. Thus a rotting dead body and worms are a trope of death. Jesus, in discussing condemnation and punishment, takes this to a new level when he states that the worms devouring sinners do not die.

Where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mark 9:44

Where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mark 9:46

Where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mark 9:48

'Worm' is the Greek word *skolex* meaning a worm but specifically that kind which preys upon dead bodies.

'Does not die' is: 'die' - *teleutao* to finish, bring to an end, close; plus 'not' - *ou*, the absolute negative, no, not; in direct questions expecting an affirmative answer.

What this is figuratively indicating is a condemnation which is never ending; the worm does not die feasting on the corpse.

Unquenchable fire

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell [Gehenna], into the fire

that shall never be quenched -- where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.' Mk 9:43-44. Also 45-46, 47-48.

His winnowing fan *is* in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. Matt 3:12

This also clearly symbolises unending flame, never-ending torment.

Summary

The illustrations used to portray Hell as a place of condemnation and torment are such that emphasise an everlasting place of wrath.

Occurrences of the word 'Hell' translating Gehenna

But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Matt 5:22

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Matt 5:29

And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. Matt 5:30

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. Matt 10:28

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. Matt 18:9

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves. Matt 23:15

Serpents, brood of vipers! How can you escape the condemnation of hell? Matt 23:33

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched. Mk 9:43

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame, rather than having two feet, to be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched. Mk 9:45

And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. Mk 9:47

But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! Lk 12:5

And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire by hell. Jm 3:6

Other words used

For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment. 2 Pt 2:4

‘Hell’ here is *tartaroo* from *tartaros* referring to the English Tartarus. In classical Greek mythology this was the deepest abyss of Hades; the name of the subterranean region, doleful and dark, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds.

Some lexicons say that it answers to the Greek Gehenna but this is wrong. It is the place where fallen angels are reserved for judgment, not punished in judgment. It is the place of bondage before the Final Judgment.

From other clear passages this place is the aerial regions above the Earth (Eph 2:2, 3:10, 6:12) where the Devil and his demons are restricted.

Summary

These are all the places where the word ‘Hell’ appears in the NT in the NKJV.

Apart from the mistranslation in 2 Pt 2:4, ‘Hell’ is always Gehenna, the place of eternal punishment. In other translations, such as the KJV, ‘Hell’ often translated ‘Hades’;¹⁹ but this is a mistranslation. ‘Hades’ should be translated as ‘Hades’ (as in the NKJV), ‘the place of disembodied spirits’ or suchlike (e.g. ‘netherworld’). This is what has caused confusion about the intermediate state²⁰ and the final punishment of sinners.

Summary of Biblical words involved

Sheol

The Hebrew word used in the OT to refer to the place of departed spirits. Although sometimes translated as ‘the grave’ (the KJV translates Sheol as ‘the grave’ 31 times), it is actually the physical body that goes into a grave, buried in the Earth. The soul goes to Sheol. ‘*The body is laid in the grave and the soul departs to sheol.*’²¹ The Hebrew word for ‘grave’ is *kever*. It is not synonymous with Sheol.

There is a lower part and a higher part (Deut 32:22). The righteous are in the higher part, the wicked in the lower part. This is explained in Lk 16. The righteous had the expectation

¹⁹ In these places: Matt 11:23, 16:18; Lk 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 14.

²⁰ The state after physical death but before the Final Judgment.

²¹ BB Warfield, Selected shorter writings, p345.

of rising out of Sheol to glory (Ps 73:23-25); however, this was not as clearly understood as it was after the revelations of Jesus to the apostles.

Translating 'Sheol' as 'Hell' is wrong.

Modern Hebrew and Greek scholars ... unite with near unanimity in maintaining that these words (Sheol and Hades) never on a single occasion in the Bible mean either 'Hell' or the 'grave', but always and only the invisible spirit world.

AA Hodge, *Evangelical Theology*, p372, 373.

Hades

This is the Greek NT equivalent of Sheol. It is the place of departed spirits. It is wrongly translated as 'hell' in several places in the KJV NT. Sometimes it is translated 'the grave' but this is only acceptable if 'grave' is considered as the realm men go to after death, not as a pit buried in the earth where men's souls are unconscious or annihilated. Hades does not imply unconsciousness or annihilation but continued existence in torment awaiting Final Judgment. In Hades people feel and speak (Lk 16:24).

Lk 16:22-23 teaches us that before the cross there was a division in Hades; the wicked were in torment and expectation of wrath to come, but the elect were in a section called 'Abraham's Bosom'. After the cross, at the ascension, Jesus took the elect out of Hades and brought them to heaven to await the restoration of the Earth after judgment (Phil 1:23; 2 Cor 5:6-8). The wicked continue in torment until the Final Judgment (2 Pt 2:9).

Gehenna

The Greek NT word for Hell. This is the place of eternal punishment, the lake of fire, where the impenitent wicked are cast after the Final Judgment, with the Devil and his fallen angels.

The concept of Gehenna is not addressed in the OT.

The necessity of the divine testimony

The entrance of sin into the world required a divine response to the rebellion and corruption of the good that God had created. This act against God necessitated a perfect response. This is hinted at in Gen 3:15: 'And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel'. This points to the cross to redeem men (you shall bruise His heel) and a crushing of Satan in condemnation (Hell: He shall bruise your head).

So, the fact of sin required a twofold response from God.

The first was to enact a plan of salvation whereby the mercy, love and goodness of God could be seen in the universe.

The second was to testify to the justice, wrath, goodness and holiness of God in punishing sin and rebellion.

There had to be both to testify to God's eternal character. The mercy towards the elect was infinite in scope and led to eternal life in fellowship with God. The condemnation of the impenitent wicked must also be infinite in scope and testify to the justice of God.

The attributes of God

Punishment for sin has to take into account the greatness and glory of God, particularly his holiness and justice. Sin is an affront to the justice of God and is rebellion by a created being against the infinite majesty of the Creator. The lawlessness has an impact upon the infinite goodness of God; it has infinite consequences.

Since sin is an affront to a holy, infinite God, the punishment for sin is not determined by the nature of the sinner but by the nature of the offended party. Killing a donkey is a sin but killing a human being is a much greater sin because of the intrinsic value of the person killed. Killing a man is a sin that can result in life imprisonment; but killing a king is treason that will result in execution. The king is of more value than an ordinary citizen.

Therefore, sins against an infinite God will require an infinite punishment. This punishment is punitive retribution; it is not remedial, rehabilitation or mere chastisement (discipline).²² It is lethal in force. A holy, infinite God requires eternal punishment for sins against his law.

The atonement for men's sin required the sacrifice of an infinite Saviour to redeem sins. While this was partly to cover the sins of millions of people, it was also to satisfy God's law for the infinite value of sins committed. Thus the Saviour was God/man. Man to suffer and obey under the law without sin; God so that the divine Person had an infinite value.

Objections

Everlasting does not always mean forever; it sometimes just means an age.

This is true; but it does not change the fact that it mostly means eternal. The literal usage of the words used²³ mean everlasting. When sometimes used for a long period this is a figurative use of the words.

In Matt 25:46 the same Greek word used describes the blessings of heaven for the redeemed and the penalty of the wicked (though two words are used in the English translation). 'And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life' (NKJV). 'Eternal' is *aionios* and so is 'everlasting'. The literal meaning of *aionios* is 'never to cease', 'everlasting'. If hell is a restricted period then so is the bliss of the redeemed.

The terms used for everlasting punishment cannot be diminished as referring to a shortened period, such as 'unquenchable fire', (Mk 9:43), or 'their worm does not die' (Mk 9: 48).

God is love and eternal punishment does not comply with a God of love.

Saying that God is love is simplistic and narrow; more thorough is that God is holy love. God is all his attributes and these must not be limited by human emotions or understanding.

²² Thus purgatory and the temporary atoning suffering of some Universalists are errors.

²³ Hebrew *olam* (everlasting, perpetual). Greek *aionios*.

God's love is demonstrated in his mercy to the elect. God chose a portion of the human race to be saved when he did not need to do this. This is love.

But God's other attributes, offended by sin, must also be accommodated. These include: justice, righteousness, goodness, wrath against sin and holiness. These demand that sin must be punished in the right measure of the offence against God's infinite holiness.

Sinners are said to be destroyed

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Gehenna]. Matt 10:28

The Bible teaches that the soul is immortal and therefore is never annihilated (see relevant section). This passage cannot be forced to contradict clear texts elsewhere and the general Biblical doctrine. [After death the soul of the wicked is in torment in Hades (Lk 16:23, the place of departed spirits = OT *sheol*). After the final judgment it is in Hell, the lake of fire.]

'Destroy' is frequently used in the Bible, not to mean utter destruction or annihilation but a severance or change in nature. It does not necessitate annihilation but a continued existence denoted by the language qualifying that existence.

The word here is *apollumi* meaning: to destroy, to put out of the way entirely, abolish, put an end to, ruin, render useless, to kill, to perish, to be lost, ruined. This word, therefore, can range from meaning destroy to abolish; from to kill to render useless. In Rm 14:15 the brother destroyed is not vaporised but grieved.

The destruction in hell is a severance from all things good and from God. It is a continual punitive destruction.

In the OT *Sheol* is the grave (sometimes translated as 'Hell'). There is no mention of eternal punishment, just the grave.

The wicked shall be turned into hell, [*Sheol*] and all the nations that forget God. Psalm 9:17

The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave [*Sheol*] and brings up. 1 Samuel 2:6

This subject requires a proper analysis.

Progressive revelation

The doctrine of progressive revelation through the Bible, full explanation given by Jesus and the apostles continuing his teaching, means that the OT is not the full exposition of teaching. [*The OT is the NT concealed. The NT is the OT revealed; sic Augustine.*] Neither does Hebrew have the philosophical nuance that Greek does. This means that fuller explanation is given in the NT.

OT Data

- Sheol occurs in the OT 65 times.
- About half the time it is translated 'grave' and half as Hell in the KJV. It is sometimes translated as 'pit' as equivalent to 'grave'.
- It is the congregation of the dead (Prov 21:16).
- It is the abode of the wicked (Job 24:19) and the good – but the good are not left there (Ps 16:10).
- The dead go down to it (Num 16:30).
- It is dark (Job 10:21-22).
- It is deep (Job 11:8).
- It has bars; i.e. no escape for the wicked (Job 17:16). ['Gates' in the NKJV is a mistranslation.]

What does the NT teach about Sheol?

The Greek equivalent to Sheol is Hades – the place of departed spirits; the home of the disembodied. This is not Hell, which is the place of eternal punishment after condemnation by God.

Before the cross, Hades contained both the wicked and the righteous; however the righteous elect were in a special separated compartment of Hades called Abraham's Bosom – a place of bliss but not heaven (Lk 16:22).²⁴ After the cross, Jesus took captivity captive (Eph 4:8); he took the elect out of Abraham's Bosom in Hades and carried them with him to heaven where they sit with God (Jn 14:3, 28, 17:22; Matt 25:33-34; Phil 1:23).

The state of the blessed dead is sometimes called 'paradise'. This word is based upon a Persian word (*pardes*) for a royal garden or pleasure ground and refers to the bliss of dead saints in happiness (Lk 23:43; 2 Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7).

The wicked in Hades are in torment (Lk 16:23). This is not the pains of Hell because they have not yet been judged at the Final Judgment. The torment is the expectation of the pains of Hell now that their eyes have been opened to the truth.

Hell is the Greek word Gehenna and refers to the place where the wicked are eternally punished for sin after being condemned in the final judgment, the lake of fire.

This is not explained in the OT. Sheol is just the place men go after death. It therefore contains the concepts of both Hades and Hell but does not define them.

So, yes Sheol is the netherworld but Sheol is not the lake of fire; it is not Hell (even though it is sometimes badly translated as such). Sheol contains the concept of Hell to come but is not Hell. Therefore there is no case for deniers of everlasting punishment by referring to Sheol for support.

There has to be the possibility of repentance after death

This includes the Roman idea of a purgatory whereby, by various means, a person's sin is gradually mitigated and heaven can be entered.

²⁴ Jesus does not state that this is a parable. When speaking in parables the text usually says so (Matt 13:33; Lk 5:36, 8:4, 15:3). Instead he merely says, 'There was a certain rich man' (Lk 16:19).

This universalist theory implies an ongoing probation and purgation and the migration of the soul. It has been combated by sound theologians for millennia. It is simply denied by a single verse of Scripture, 'it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment' (Heb 9:27).

After death there is only the prospect of judgment; there is no further probationary period. Probation only exists in this life. If men refuse to repent in this life, there is no further hope.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that the testimony of church history is that the Christian church has always and consistently taught that the punishment in Hell is everlasting, eternal, and never-ending.

This is necessitated by the nature of sin, the immortality of the soul that sins and the offence against an infinite, holy God.

The denial of this has only been by heretics and fringe cults for hundreds of years. It is only in the last several decades that former Evangelicals have denied this doctrine and gained a following. This is during the period when the church has downgraded and denied many doctrines.

Resources

- John Blanchard, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*
- JI Packer, *The Problem of Eternal Punishment*.
- Robert A Morey, *Death and the Afterlife*.
- WGT Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment*.
- William Hendriksen, *The Bible and the Life Hereafter*.
- Loraine Boettner, *Immortality*.
- Note the relevant content in church standards.
- Note the discussions in good dogmatic works, notably: Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*), AA Hodge (*Outlines of Theology*), RL Dabney (*Lectures in Systematic Theology*), Herman Hoeksema (*Reformed Dogmatics*), RL Reymond (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*), Hammond and Wright (*In Understanding Be Men*), James P Boyce, (*An Abstract of Systematic Theology*), WGT Shedd (*Dogmatic Theology*), JL Dagg (*Manual of Theology*), John Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*), Francis Turretin (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*), RC Sproul (*Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*).

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