

The Pains of Hell

Introduction

Historically, explaining the pains of hell was a critical part of the Gospel message, just as it was with Jesus who spoke more of hell than anyone else in the NT. Evangelists saw it as important to explain the outcome of sin, that evil had to be accounted for and judgment prevail. The wrath of God against sin had to be explained before his mercy expressed in the Gospel could be understood.

Arminians and many others disagreed with this but did not have a significant impact on evangelical Christianity until the late 19th century. This changed with the powerful impact of DL Moody and his evangelistic campaigns in Britain and America. Moody brought a strong Arminian emphasis that downplayed the doctrine of hell as eternal punishment. Instead of being a 'hell-fire preacher' he brought a false message that God loved everybody and Jesus died for everyone. Before long most churches adopted this message as more tolerant and compassionate than the historical version.

Throughout the 20th century this situation worsened as attacks on the veracity of the notion of eternal punishment itself began to appear by rogue theologians. Previously only certain sects refused to believe in hell but by the end of the 20th century, very many people claiming to be evangelical chose to deny the existence of hell as eternal punishment. Some denied hell exists. Some believed in conditional immortality, that is, annihilation for unbelievers after death. Some believed in a form of hell but denied that it involved suffering, merely a lack of fellowship with God or a lack of blessing.

In line with the depreciation of the doctrine of hell there was a parallel decline in the quality of converts. More and more people claimed to be converted who had never had any conviction of sin at all and understood nothing about hell. These professing converts became Trojan horses and cannon fodder for all sorts of heresies that then plagued the churches, as well as draining the resources of leaders through their constant problems because they had no Gospel power in their lives – they had never changed because they never truly repented of sins.

So, it is time to explain the reality of the pains of hell. I am not going to give an apologetic for the existence of hell, having done that elsewhere. Here I simply want to emphasise the awful sufferings of hell that are eternal in duration.

Divine indignation

To those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation.
Rm 2:8

Indignation

qumo,j thumos meaning: passion, angry, heat, anger forthwith boiling up and soon subsiding again.

Divine wrath

To those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath. Rm 2:8

ovrgh, orge meaning: anger, temper, movement or agitation of the soul, any violent emotion, wrath, indignation, anger exhibited in punishment, hence used for punishment itself or punishments inflicted by magistrates.

If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives *his* mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Rev 14:9-11

Here wrath is **qumo,j thumos** meaning: passion, angry, heat, anger forthwith boiling up and soon subsiding again; glow, ardour, the wine of passion.

Tribulation

To those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath, tribulation. Rm 2:8-9

qli/yij thlipsis meaning: a pressing, pressing together, pressure, metaphorically: oppression, affliction, tribulation, distress, straits.

Anguish

To those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness -- indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek. Rm 2:8-9

stenocwri,a stenochoria meaning: a narrow place, metaphorically: dire calamity, extreme affliction.

Everlasting contempt

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame *and* everlasting contempt. Dan 12:2

‘Contempt’ here means ‘abhorrence’, ‘aversion’.

Condemnation

Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth -- those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. Jn 5:28-29

kri,sij *krisis* a separating, sundering; a trial, contest, selection; judgment, opinion or decision given concerning anything especially concerning justice and injustice, right or wrong; sentence of condemnation, damnatory judgment, condemnation and punishment.

Fire

Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Matt 25:41

But the heavens and the earth *which* are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. 2 Pt 3:7

If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives *his* mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Rev 14:9-11

Darkness

These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. 2 Pt 2:17

Destruction

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: whose end *is* destruction, whose god *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame -- who set their mind on earthly things. Phil 3:18-19

‘Destruction’ is *apoleia* meaning: destroying, utter destruction; of vessel; a perishing, ruin, destruction; the destruction which consists of eternal misery in hell.

‘Destroy’ and ‘destruction’ do not always mean annihilation, even in English.¹ They also mean: waste (Matt 26:8), damnation (2 Pt 2:3), perdition (Heb 10:39; Rev 17:11), condemnation (2 Pt 2:1). The context is necessary to determine the meaning.

The destruction here is the description of the end of the enemies of Christ. We know from other texts that this end is everlasting condemnation. Thus ‘destruction’ here is not

¹ When something is said to be destroyed for example, it can often mean useless for its intended purpose but still in existence.

annihilation or vaporisation but a state of destruction, continual destruction, complete ruin, eternal misery. Perhaps 'ruin' would be a better translation here.

Eternal in duration

Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Matt 25:41

And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Matt 25:46

'Everlasting' is **aiwv,nioj** *aionios* meaning: without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be, never to cease, everlasting.

The men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched. They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh. Isa 66:24

to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mk 9:43-44

To be cast into hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched -- where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mk 9:45-46

To be cast into hell fire -- where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched'. Mk 9:47-48

The point here is the everlasting quality of the punishment: the gnawing worm of death never stops and the punishing fire is never quenched. It is a colourful way of saying that divine wrath is everlasting.

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. 2 Thess 1:7-9

What could be clearer? Divine punishment is 'everlasting destruction' as well as separation from the presence of God.

Raging waves of the sea, foaming up their own shame; wandering stars for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. Jude 1:13

If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives *his* mark on his forehead or on his hand, 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. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Rev 14:9-11

Suffering in hell is everlasting in duration. It lasts forever and ever because sin is an affront to an infinitely perfect God. As his Creation we are meant to reflect the character of God. Sinful rebellion to that is not just an assault on God's perfection and holiness, but his infinite attributes as well. This requires an infinite punishment.

Separation from God's glory and all good

When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. 2 Thess 1:7-9

Blessed *are* those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside *are* dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. Rev 22:14-15

Perhaps the greatest suffering of sinners in hell is that, having had their eyes opened up to the truth of history in their resurrection for punishment, they understand the blessings and privileges of the saints. But they are completely excluded from those blessings, yet understand that they could have had them if they believed when they had the chance.

The lake of fire

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. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name. Rev 14:10-11

The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire. Rev 20:13-15

But 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 first death is human death – the end of biological life. But people are not destroyed or annihilated, their souls and spirits are immortal. In the general resurrection at the end when Jesus returns in glory, all people are raised to face judgment. The second death is the judgment of God in condemnation of their sins and the punishment in hell that follows. This death is an eternal death – just as the saint's resurrection is eternal life.

The image of hell

The word 'hell' derives from the Greek word 'Gehenna' (**ge,enna** spelt *geenna*). It is also called the 'Gehenna of fire'.

This was originally the name applied to the Valley of Hinnom, south-west of Jerusalem, where the filth and dead animals of the city were cast out and burned; thus there was continual smoke rising up from the debris - a fitting symbol of the wicked and their future destruction. Worse, in earlier history this was the place where children were burned alive as an offering to Molech. Thus in later times it was considered an impure place and called the 'Valley of Tophet' (spittle). It was an utterly despised place and gradually became an illustration of the fires of hell.

Conclusion

From these texts we can conclude that:

Hell is not a condition but a locality

Many modern people talk about 'being in hell' or affirming that there is hell on Earth right now. This helps bolster the idea that hell is subjective; it is a condition of feeling and not an objective reality; the awful descriptions are just metaphors.

This idea just cannot stand up to scrutiny in the light of NT teaching. Hell is a real place reserved for the unregenerate under the observation of angels. Hell is a prison, a furnace, a lake of fire and an abyss – all terms of locality. Those excluded from heaven are 'outside'; another term of locality.

Hell is

- Exclusion from God's love and favour.
- An endless disturbance of life caused by sin's domination in the soul.
- Pains and sufferings in body and soul.
- Pangs of an awakened conscience.
- Anguish of soul from knowing the truth.
- Despair, weeping, gnashing of teeth.
- There are degrees of punishment for the wicked (Matt 11:22-24; Lk 12:47-48; Rev 14:10).
- Eternal in duration. The same word is used of the bliss of the saints (which is everlasting) and the punishment of the wicked (Matt 25:46; *aionios* without beginning and end, that which always has been and always will be; without beginning; without end, never to cease, everlasting).

It is time to start, once again, speaking the truth about hell and incorporating it into our Gospel proclamation. If people are to be saved, they need to really know what they are being saved from. Without the prospect of hell, there is no urgency in trusting God. Without the spectre of eternal divine punishment, there is no fear of God. Without understanding what condemnation is, there is no searching for redemption. Without realising the pangs of hell, there is no need for a Saviour.

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