

Purpose of this class:

The doctrine of “hell” has been pretty straightforward in orthodox Christian conversation (a place of eternal fire and punishment for all who have not received Christ in this life). The purpose of this class is to think through the various other opinions, interpretations, and challenges to this orthodox view. We must know these various perspectives to think critically and honestly about this serious topic!

Opening Questions to Consider Regarding Hell:

- Is hell fire punishment or refinement? (corrective/remedial or eternal)
 - Review 2 Peter 3:7 vs Romans 8:18-22 (slash and burn agricultural metaphor)
- Is hell an infinite punishment for a finite number of sin, or an eternal place for the eternally fallen nature/being?
 - How does the seed that comes forth from the slash and burn metaphor give insight? See 1 Peter 1:23
 - See John 12:24 – how does 1 Peter 1:23 change our understanding of this verse?
- Is hell a metaphor for just the absence of life (no life outside of Christ, all else is destroyed).
 - This is known as “annihilationism”.
- Is hell a metaphor for a "refiner's fire" that all endure to come out purified (all receive judgment, all must die to old self, all are reborn ultimately)?
 - This is a form of UNIVERSALISM (some adherents have hell/judgment concept and some would consider this life's struggles to be the refining process)
 - Jesus' warnings are then viewed as a warning to the old self that hasn't been reborn yet
- Is hell fire literal eternal torture or a metaphor for eternal separation from God, where the life outside of God is described as weeping and gnashing of teeth?
 - Remember the etymology of heaven and hell as “close vs. removed from God”
- Is hell a literal place of eternal punishment.
 - Must evil exist infinitely for it to be infinitely punished, otherwise something that is no longer evil (something that has been refined in the flame) will continue to be punished?
 - If the state of evil does exist infinitely, does this create an eternal and infinite (beyond space and time) duality outside of God? Is evil then ever really extinguished?
 - How do we view this in light of 1 Cor 15:22, 28; Lamentations 3:31-33, Col 1:17-20, and 1 Tim 4:10?
- Is death the final point of irrevocability, or can one experience salvation on the other side?

Biblical Hermeneutic:

- Remember the difference between Hades (and Abyss, Sheol) and the final Hell
- Hell language is apocalyptic by nature, and therefore not *necessarily* without metaphor

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- It can be real. Or it can describe a reality using metaphorical language. Is fire literal or metaphorical? How do we decipher?
- Either way the implications are still real, whether literal or metaphorical, and should be regarded as such. The warning is not without merit, otherwise scripture (and Jesus) would be misleading and dishonest.
 - Example = we are all baptized in water (sea=judgment & renewal, Abyss & Red Sea) & fire (refiner's fire and judgement) by Christ through Spirit. While we didn't literally go up in flames or drown in water, there are real implications that signal death to the old and beginning of the new life.

Biblical texts & exegesis:

OT

- Isaiah 66:24 = does this apply to the soul or just the old flesh? Could it apply then to the old "crucified" self of all who've rebelled (all fallen short of glory of God)?
- Daniel 12:2 = Hebrew word originally meant "lifetime, era, or age", and only took on eternal connotations when associated with God (an eternal age/lifetime because eternal being). For those outside of God, could the contempt be eternal but the existence after death be temporal?
- Lamentations 3:31-33 = Children of men implies universality, but does this pertain to this world only or are there afterlife ramifications?

NT

Background on the place of hell

- Luke 16:19-31 = context is the "bosom of Abraham" (place in land of the dead - Hades/Sheol - where righteous and unrighteous existed after death (albeit separated). Chasm was fixed once you died, but remember this is before the cross and does NOT necessarily relate to the relationship between heaven and hell. We also know that Christ crossed chasm. Chasm was impassible until Christ crossed it. Chasm is not mentioned as eternal.
- Matt 25:41 = Hell is the place originally for Satan and fallen angels. While the fire is eternal, is the soul eternally there?
- Rev 20:10 = Devil, beast, false prophet have eternal suffering (fire purifies impurities-but Satan is endlessly impure in being). Is evil ever eradicated then? Or is this apocalyptic metaphor (i.e. – is their day & night the way we think of time, temporal realities?)

Punishment of hell/judgment

- Matt 5:22, 29 = punishment for sin is real.
- Jude 7, 12-13 = "Forever" in Greek = a long period of time without *referring* to a beginning or end; an age.
- See also 1 Timothy 4:10 - what does "especially" mean? Greek means "to an unusual degree, especially, or particularly". Is this because we have tasted the new life of being clothed in Christ already (so it is salvation being experienced particularly to the believer)? Does "all people" imply universalism? (Greek word "pas" does not have to mean each and every, but rather it can sometimes mean as a whole). So this could read that Jesus is the savior of mankind as a whole, and particularly applied to believers.
- Matt 10:28 = eternal damnation or annihilation? Depends on the meaning of "destroy." It has multiple meanings. Destroy = ruin, perish, destruction

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- 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 = annihilationism or eternal life without God?
- Discuss: John 3:36, Luke 13:23-25
 - Can someone meet Jesus on the other side and be saved?
- Is forever forever? Jer 15:14 & 17:27 – what fire was forever in Jerusalem?

Assertions and Questions remaining:

Assertions:

- Hell is at least a very real warning from Christ and the Word of God that should be taken seriously
- The wicked who have rebelled and haven't been "clothed" in Christ will experience this punishment (whatever it may look like)
- God leaves some mystery keeping us mindful of the warning, but careful not to judge

Questions:

- In any view of hell as eternal punishment, how do we reconcile 1) evil existing infinitely (so as to be punished infinitely), 2) the justice of infinite punishment for a finite number of sins & temporary disbelief/rebellion, or 3) the destruction of the soul (see again Matt 10:28)?
- The old creation (old self, wicked, evil, etc.) all experiences the slash and burn fires of judgments, but God brings the seed of Christ into new creation. Is it possible that a new self can rise from the ashes of hell even as the old is said to be eternally punished?

Final statement:

- These are interesting questions above but I wouldn't bank my salvation on them.
- The warnings are real, regardless of whether eternal fire is apocalyptic metaphor or literal. They undoubtedly point to something that is to be taken seriously.
- I hold to the doctrine of hell as a reality because Jesus does.
- We should ensure that we are not on the outside of the door knocking when Jesus says, "I never knew you."

Assignment:

- *Find two references to hell, punishment, Hades, Abyss, or Sheol and explain the passage in light of your views on the afterlife. Be sure to explain your hermeneutic (approach you take to Scripture) and use exegetical principles (what does the word mean, how is it used elsewhere, how would the people of the time heard it, what genre of literature is it?)*