

IS THERE REALLY A HELL?



Introduction

Some religions, such as the Unitarian church (which is not a Christian church), do not believe in the existence of hell. Even many so-called Christians do not believe in hell. These “Christians” who deny the existence of hell are usually those who claim to be Christians but pick and choose parts of the Bible to make up their own religion. It seems that many Christians are afraid to even say the h-word. Hell is a difficult subject to teach or even talk about unless you have the knowledge to discuss it with biblical understanding and factual accuracy. This lesson will give you a lot of information regarding a little-talked-about subject.

Old Testament

The doctrine of hell is taught throughout the Bible. Sometimes, it is talked about without using a name. In the Old Testament, Bible interpreters must deal with the Hebrew words.

1. The Old Testament uses the Hebrew word Sheol (in the NRSV and ASV), sometimes implying a place of punishment reserved only for the wicked. Proverbs 15:24, for example, says: "To the wise the way of life (goeth) upward, That he may depart from Sheol beneath."

2. Of the 65 times the Hebrew word Sheol appears in the Old Testament, the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible translates it

as “hell” 31 times, the “grave” 31 times, and the “pit” 3 times. The New International Version (NIV) of the Bible always uses the word “grave,” but provides footnotes referring to hell.

3. The location of Topheth is also used as a metaphor for hell. Read Isaiah 30:33. Kings Ahaz and Manasseh sacrificed their sons to Molec at Topheth. Because of this, the prophet Josiah reviled the place.

New Testament

The New Testament uses the Greek word Hades.

1. The word Hades is derived from the Greek god of the lower regions. Like the Hebrew word Sheol, it usually referred to the generic resting place of all dead people.

2. In the NIV, the word Hades is used five times.

The New Testament uses the word Gehenna to describe the Old Testament Hebrew area known as Topheth .

1. The word Gehenna is derived from the real place in the valley of Ben Hinnom, which was southwest of Jerusalem and was part of the border between the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It was a garbage dump and the place of perpetual fires where dead bodies were burned.

2. Gehenna is the Greek word that specifically denotes the final resting place of unrepentant sinners.

3. Gehenna is used 12 times and always translated “hell” in both the NIV and the KJV.

4. Gehenna eventually was called the entrance to hell, and finally it was called hell itself.

Hell is described quite often in the New Testament. Pay attention here: Hell is associated with fire at least 25 times. We are reminded in the epistle of Jude that the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is an example of those who “suffer the punishment of eternal fire” because of their “sexual immorality and perversion” (Jude 7).

Perhaps the most vivid description of hell is given in the book of Luke. Read Luke 16:23-28 and discuss the various messages in this passage.

Jesus speaks about hell

Jesus often spoke specifically about hell. In fact, Jesus tells us things about hell that many people today want to ignore. The group should read and discuss the following Scriptures attributed to Jesus:

1. God determines who will go there (Matthew 10:28).
2. Contrary to what many people believe, more than a few people will go to hell (Matthew 7:13-14; 18:34-35).
3. Those who treat others badly will be condemned to hell (Matthew 25:44-46).
4. Hell is a place "where their worm never dies, and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).
5. There will be "darkness" and "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 8:11-12).
6. The wicked will go to "eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life" (Matthew 25:46).
7. On judgment day, "the unbelieving, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death" (Revelation 21:8).
8. Hell is so terrible that Jesus tells us that we are better to cut off a foot or a hand than to continue in sin and consequently go to hell (Mark 9:43-45).
9. Jesus repeatedly confronted sinners with hell. In fact, Jesus used the word hell 12 times in the New Testament.
10. Jesus also talked about hell numerous other times without actually using the word "hell." He frequently described hell as a place of torture where the wicked are punished for eternity.

What relevance does hell have today?

When I try to witness to an atheist or agnostic, the subject of hell always seems to come up. I believe that unbelievers often mention hell because it throws the average Christian back on his heels. A fellow worker (a self-proclaimed agnostic) once asked me a common question: “So are you saying that we should believe in God so we don’t go to hell?” I forget my exact answer. It probably was something like, “No, uhh, but...”

Later, I thought about that conversation. My answer should have been, in fact: “Yes, that is exactly why I wish you would believe in God. I really like you as a friend, and I certainly would not like to think about you going to hell.” Then, I should have explained that one should not believe in God because of hell, but you should believe in hell because you believe in God. That certainly would have caught him off guard but, more important, it would have been the correct answer.

This response is the correct approach for three reasons:

1. Hell is not why we believe in God, but we believe in hell because we already believe in God. In other words, one cannot believe in a place created by God unless one first believes in God who created it. Furthermore, one cannot believe in the wrath of God unless one first believes in God.
2. We need to acknowledge that we care about what happens to others after they die. We need to let doubters know that we do not want to just have a theological debate, but that we actually care about them personally.
3. We also need to show we are not ashamed of an important teaching of Christ.

Another reason we are reluctant to talk about hell is because we are conditioned to do so. Hell seems incompatible with the teachings of Jesus, and at odds with the understanding of the secular world. Pastors often feel uncomfortable or even afraid to

discuss hell. How many times have you gone to church in your lifetime? How many times have you heard a sermon on hell? It is really difficult to talk about a loving God one week and give a sermon on hell the following week.

Can you imagine a pastor approaching a fellow church member and asserting: “Henry, you’re a sinner and a hypocrite, and you’re probably going to hell if you don’t change your ways”? Well, that is the exact doctrine Christ preached on many occasions.

I know what you are probably thinking at this point: God is the only one who really knows who is going to hell. Yes, in fact, the Bible says that we should not say who specifically is going to hell (Romans 10:7). We can, however, recite Scripture and point out that certain actions can endanger one’s soul. What the pastor in our example was actually saying is that Henry is a sinner and a hypocrite; and according to the Bible, sinful people can be condemned to hell! He then should have mentioned that he cared about Henry and asked how he could help him have a better relationship with Christ.

What good does it do to talk about hell?

By now you are probably asking, “What good could such a conversation possibly do?” Well, by confronting this sinner, the pastor would have acknowledged Christ’s teachings on hell and probably gotten a quick and accurate assessment as to where Henry was in his spiritual journey. I am sure many pastors would say: “Yeah, I’d get a response, but that would be the last I’d ever see of Henry.” You know what? Those pastors would probably be right, but it’s time they stop thinking about bringing people to their church, and start thinking about bringing people to Christ. There is no doubt in my mind that if he could be reached at all, Henry would possibly show up in another church. The good news is that Henry would probably ask God for forgiveness and change his sinful ways. Conversely, if the pastor did not confront Henry, he might join

the church and possibly be a bad influence on the rest of the congregation. Furthermore, how many people would have said, "I'd never go to that church, which is full of hypocrites"? Perhaps they also would have said, "Henry goes there so the people in that church must be even worse than me." Jesus explained how evil expands like yeast (Mark 8:15). Paul later picked up on this teaching (1 Corinthians 5:1-8).

What parent never confronts his child with a warning? What parent would not warn his child in order to prevent a terrible punishment? God gave us the Bible as a clear warning that we need to live according to the will of God or suffer consequences both in this life and in the next one. The Bible teaches us that God punishes us because he loves us, and he wants us to change our ways. In a world that doesn't want to be held accountable, we only add to the problem by being ashamed of Christ's teaching about hell.

Another reason to talk about hell is that many people have no idea what they are talking about when it comes to the subject of hell. These people can lead many astray. For example, I recently read a comment on Facebook that hell is not a real place. Instead, it is a pit that man digs for himself by improper behavior. I couldn't even think of a Scripture that can be taken out of context that would leave one with that wild idea. Later, I realized that this idea is taught by Jehovah's Witnesses, so perhaps they taught her this bizarre idea.

Why did God create hell?

Why would God create hell? The purpose of hell was to punish Satan and his angels. Mankind disobeyed God with the original sin of Adam and Eve. It is important to know God protected mankind from hell. All God required is that Adam and Eve love God enough to obey him. However, Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God. They ate of the forbidden tree. Adam and Eve opened a

Pandora's Box of evil that would curse mankind.

Perhaps the best way to understand God's plan is to use the example of a family. Think about it: Would you want to have robot-like children who could never disobey you? Most people would say no because free choice is needed to show true love. Obedience is an act of love. "And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love" (2 John 6). More specific, would you tell your child he could never drive a car in order to make sure he would never drive under the influence of alcohol? You see, free will and trust are needed in a loving relationship.

Will God actually send people to hell?

Some people think God would never really send anyone to hell. These people believe God is making an empty threat. Moreover, these people believe all humans will escape hell except for possibly Hitler (and, of course, all other mass murderers). Many people say that "we are all God's children." To the contrary, we are not all God's children. That statement usually sets people aback, but if they knew their Scriptures, they would not be surprised. As Christ said: "You are of your father, the devil and you want to carry out your father's desire" (John 8:44).

Another false belief is that only those who do not believe in Christ will go to hell. The Bible, on the other hand, seems to teach that unbelievers along with unrepentant sinners will be sent to hell. By "unrepentant sinners" I mean those who live a life of disobedience to God. It is generally accepted that a person who continually sins is not truly repentant. As Jesus once said, we cannot serve two masters.

How can we escape hell?

God had mercy and sent his Son to save mankind from the power

of sin. We need to “trust and obey, for there’s no other way.” (Sound familiar?) God’s mercy is not unlimited. We need to remember John 6:40. “For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” The way to salvation is simple.

Summary

We have learned the different terms for hell. We studied what Jesus said about hell. Scripture tells us that hell is a place of eternal torment for those who reject Christ and decide not to follow him. We studied how Jesus frequently discussed hell as a warning so that people might be saved. We also learned that not just a few but many people will unfortunately go to hell. These are people who ignore God’s warnings. We are conditioned by society to never discuss hell because people do not like to be told that they are living a life of sin. Above all, they do not want to be told they will receive eternal punishment for their sin. Unfortunately, however, the bottom line is that hell is a real place, and God has promised to send unbelievers and unrepentant sinners there.

Review

1. Does anyone in the class not believe in hell? If so, why do they not believe in its existence?
2. Is it possible to believe in the Bible and not believe in hell?
3. Explain the difference between the different Greek and Hebrew words for hell.
4. What is your viewpoint on discussing hell, or hearing a sermon about hell?
5. Are there reasons why Jesus would have discussed hell that don’t apply to us today?
6. Have you ever wanted to warn someone about hell but were afraid to do so?
7. Do you fully understand why God created hell and why evil

people must go there?

8. Read the second chapter of 2 Peter and answer the following questions:

a. Name the four examples of evil that were punished by God.

b. Were the angels sent to hell because of unbelief or because of disobedience?

c. Unbelief is only one sin that is mentioned. What are the other sins?

9. Have someone close by reading John 6:40.