

*Psalms 49:13–15 (NRSV)*

- <sup>13</sup> Such is the fate of the foolhardy,  
the end of those who are pleased with their lot.
- <sup>14</sup> Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;  
Death shall be their shepherd;  
straight to the grave they descend,  
and their form shall waste away;  
Sheol shall be their home.
- <sup>15</sup> But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,  
for he will receive me.

*Matthew 8:10–12 (NRSV)*

<sup>10</sup> When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. <sup>11</sup> I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, <sup>12</sup> while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

*1 Peter 3:18–20 (NRSV)*

<sup>18</sup> For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, <sup>19</sup> in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, <sup>20</sup> who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

*Revelation 20:11–15 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup> Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. <sup>12</sup> And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. <sup>13</sup> And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. <sup>14</sup> Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; <sup>15</sup> and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.

*For a topic that gets as much attention in our world as hell, Christians seem to either talk about it too much or not at all. What is the biblical understanding of hell? What are some of our misconceptions? And, most importantly, what if anything does it have to do with the Good News?*

And so we come to the last study in this series, *Confronting the Objections*. Certainly, many non-believers object to the notion of hell. And even among Christians, this topic gets widely varied reactions. Over the last 2,000 years, more than a few Christians almost seemed to revel in their belief that everlasting fires would forever torment those who reject Jesus. Other Christians are simply repelled by the whole notion and can't find much of Jesus in it. So, there are a few things that we need to keep in mind as we come to this difficult and contentious topic.

First, this is an intramural argument, i.e., one amongst believers. On my shelves is a book entitled, *Four Views of Hell: Literal, Metaphorical, Purgatorial, Conditional*, containing four quite different views of hell from four well-respected biblical scholars. They very much disagree with one another, but they would acknowledge that all are Christian and that none

are heretics.<sup>1</sup> Tough topics, like the ones that we've been tackling in this series call for us to pour a lot of grace out upon one another, recognizing that we won't all agree. We'll still be debating this and many topics up 'til the day Jesus returns, when I surely hope to get some definitive answers to my many questions.

Second, there is some important background we need to bring to the topic and even some "unlearning" we need to do.

- Much of what we think we know about hell comes from Dante's *Inferno* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. These are enormously imaginative and powerful works that have laid claim to the cultural psyche. It takes some effort to come to a topic like hell with a blank slate, but if we are going to read Scripture well, we must try.
- In the cosmology of most ancient peoples, the gods are "up there," the living are here on the ground, and the dead are below, under the ground. This was true for the Greeks and the Jews alike. The above passage from Psalm 49 refers to "Sheol." This was the name given by the Jews to the place of the dead – "down there," the underworld some might call it. There was no sense of it being a place of punishment, but just the place where the dead are. The Greek name for this place was "Hades." There are 65 references in the Old Testament to Sheol and 10 references in the NT to Hades. Again, it is crucial to grasp that these were not places of punishment; shadowy and creepy, yes, but not punishment.
- In the above passage from 1 Peter, the "spirits in prison" simply refers to the dead. It is a prison because one can't come back from there, but there is no connotation of burning fires or other forms of punishment. And notice in the passage exactly who it is that Jesus is going to visit – the folks who were so wicked that God wiped out the planet with a flood and started over. These are certainly not the faithful departed, such as Abraham.
- There are 13 references in the NT to "hell," which is different than "Hades." Of these, eleven come from the mouth of Jesus<sup>2</sup>. "Hell" translates the Greek word "Gehanna" and refers to an actual place:
  - "The best known biblical image for hell derives from a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem called *gê ben hinnôm*, "the Valley of Ben Hinnom," in which idolatrous Israelites offered up child sacrifices to the gods Molech and Baal (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31–32; 19:2–6 NIV). Josiah defiled the valley to make it unacceptable as a holy site (2 Kings 23:10), after which it was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. As a result, the Valley of Ben Hinnom became known as the dump heap, the place of destruction by fire in Jewish tradition. The Greek word *gehenna*, 'hell,' commonly used in the NT for the place of final punishment, is derived from the Hebrew name for this valley."<sup>3</sup>
  - Because Jesus is referring to the ever-burning garbage dump of Jerusalem, we have to keep in mind that Jesus' warnings are centered on what will happen to his fellow Jews if they do not abandon the course they are on and embrace Jesus' way and the coming of God's kingdom. As you know, they did not and forty years later the Romans burned Jerusalem, piling countless Jewish bodies into the horrors of Gehanna.

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<sup>1</sup>Heresy refers to destructive and destabilizing distortions of the faith. Disputes about the nature of hell haven't typically labeled as heresies in the Christian community. In fact, the heresies that gave rise to the writing of the great Christian creeds revolved around the nature and person of Jesus. In my 11:00 Sunday class we are going to take a look at some of the most important heresies that have arisen in the Christian church. It is a series to accompany the 9:30 sermon series: *I Believe: Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed* that begins on Feb 21.

<sup>2</sup>The count is only seven if we eliminate duplicates from parallels in the synoptic gospels.

<sup>3</sup>Ryken, L., Wilhoit, J., Longman, T., Duriez, C., Penney, D., & Reid, D. G. (2000). *Dictionary of biblical imagery* (electronic ed.) (376). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

*So, is there a hell?*

Because the word “hell” is so pre-loaded with emotion and misconceptions, let’s begin with this question: *Will there be those who do not enjoy eternal life with Christ?*

The vast majority of Christians over the last two thousand years would answer “yes.” There are some “universalists” who believe that all those who have ever lived will in the end be saved and reconciled with God. And this group has probably been growing in recent decades. But, historically, this is a belief that has often been seen as outright heresy. Two early church fathers, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, apparently affirmed this belief. But it was condemned as heresy by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553AD. The great theologian, Karl Barth, seemed to embrace this belief, at least at times. And the influential theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, certainly does.<sup>4</sup> I even have on my shelves a book titled, *The Evangelical Universalist*, which seems like an oxymoron and explains why it was published anonymously, even though written by an obviously knowledgeable NT scholar.

In my view, the belief that all will be saved, regardless of their free desires, is heretical, in that it significantly distorts the gospel by eliminating the need for our love of God, our faith and trust in God, to be freely given. And, as you know if you are a regular reader of these studies, love isn’t really love if it is not freely given. At the great judgment depicted in Revelation 20, there are those whose names are found the book of life and those whose names are not. Those whose names are not found in the book of life are “thrown into the lake of fire.” The question of “hell” revolves around what happens to them, to those not in the book of life.

*Ok, what happens to those who will not enjoy eternal life with Christ?*

One answer might be that they are tossed into that lake of fire in Rev. 20:15, where I presume they would be burned up, annihilated, for that is what fire does. Or perhaps they head for the “outer darkness” of Matthew 8:12. For me, that evokes the chaos and desolation of an existence without God, which I hesitate to even call “life.” Something like the eternal grayness imagined by C.S. Lewis.

Or perhaps, it is a place where those who deny God spend eternity suffering in a fire that burns but doesn’t consume so that “the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever” and their torment is “in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb [Jesus] (see Rev. 14:9-11).<sup>5</sup> In the fourth century, Augustine went so far as to say that God uses his creative power to ensure that there is always fresh flesh for burning. As you might guess, I find it hard to picture Jesus condoning such torment even of the very worst among those who deny him.

You can see the problem. It really isn’t surprising that there is a book outlining four quite different views of hell by knowledgeable and well-meaning Christians. I’m guessing there are quite a few such books. The Bible just doesn’t give us all the answers we seek.

Over the years, there have been two thoughts around this topic that have really stayed with me. The first is from Clark Pinnock, an evangelical biblical scholar who has gotten into some hot water with his more conservative colleagues on this topic. Pinnock simply pointed out that (1) the phrase in Scripture is “eternal punishment,” not “eternal punishing,” and (2) fire would consume and destroy even resurrected bodies, which are still flesh and bone. Pinnock found himself led by Scripture to the belief that those who, in the end, choose against God will simply cease to exist, i.e., they will annihilated. But, you might say, aren’t our souls immortal? Though this tends to be how Christians understand

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<sup>4</sup>From Roger Olson’s, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*, IVP, 2004.

<sup>5</sup>I’ll simply note here that you don’t have to spend much time in Revelation to realize it would be absurd to hold that all the images in this apocalyptic writing are “photographic” depictions of actual events in the past, present, or future. Will we one day live in a city made of pure gold? And, if so, how could it be clear as glass? (Rev. 21:18). To treat the glories of Revelation in that way is to abuse this God-breathed writing and to miss the point entirely!

things, it really isn't a biblical concept. At least, I've never been able to find it in Scripture.<sup>6</sup> We are not promised eternal life outside our life with God.

N. T. Wright asks us to consider this. We are made in the image of God. Sadly, too many peoples' lives are devoted to pursuits and purposes that chip away at it, much like a statue that is allowed to accumulate rust and slowly decay. Until we are reconciled to God, this image of God continues to deteriorate. Indeed some people, commit such horrors that we wonder if there is anything of God left in them. What happens if a person never comes to faith in Christ in this life, or possibly even, the next? Would not the image of God in them finally be extinguished. And, if so, what remains of their humanity. Of all God's creatures, only we humans are made in his image. What if that image is gone? Could we even be considered human? Would we not be just another beast? Immortal perhaps, but no longer "Scott," no longer a person, no longer human.

In the end, we affirm that we have been created to live in loving fellowship with God and one another. The life for which we have been made is a life with God. And it is in God alone that we find true life. As in almost all topics around the "Last Things" we have many more questions than we do answers. Perhaps it is this way so that we will focus on our relationship with God and hear well his charge to proclaim, by word and deed, God's Good News to all who will listen. All the rest of it . . . well, we get to leave that in God's hands, for which we should be eternally thankful!

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. You might begin by talking about your own understanding of hell. Did you find something close to anywhere in this study? What in the study surprised you? Has the study spurred you to reconsider some of your thoughts about the Christian view of hell? If so, how?
2. Rev. Edlen Cowley has written some discussion questions for St. Andrew's Fellowship Groups. They are helpful in considering personal questions that arise around this topic.
  - Read John 14:1-7. Hell has been described and talked about in different ways throughout history. Regardless of its description, we are told in scripture that "the" way to avoid hell is by having a personal relationship with Christ. How and why is your personal relationship with Christ important to you?
  - The relationship we have with Christ is not established singularly on the basis of "hell-prevention". God seeks to know us and journey with us through our life in Christ. What is the basis of your relationship with Christ? How did your relationship with Christ begin? If you have yet to accept Christ, how would you imagine a new life with Him would be?
  - Hell in theory is not only an afterlife experience. Many people experience hell in their lives every day. How can or how does Christ help you through the "hell" experiences you have in life?
  - Matthew 16:14 reads, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." How does Hell seek to prevail against the church? How can we help the church withstand attack?
  - As a group, discuss the top three ways you can enhance and develop your personal relationship with Christ. Commit to doing these three things this week.

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<sup>6</sup>It is fascinating how many such beliefs there. We assume that they are in the Bible, but have actually come from elsewhere and we've then simply strived to make them fit. Frankly, many such imported ideas come from Plato.

## *Daily Bible Readings*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Jeremiah 7:30-34</b> The “valley of the son of Hinnom” would come to be called <i>gehanna</i>, the garbage dump of Jerusalem.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Psalm 16</b> The psalmist contrasts the temple, the path of light, with Sheol, the abode of the dead.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Acts 2:22-28</b> In Peter’s sermon, he quotes from Psalm 16 in verses 25-28. Notice that Sheol (a Hebrew name) is changed to Hades (the Greek name for the abode of the dead). Same place; different name.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Philippians 2:5-11</b> In v. 10, “in heaven, on earth, and under the earth” describes the entirety of all that God made. There seems to be no one, anywhere, who does not acknowledge and embrace that Jesus is Lord.</p>
<p><b>Friday, John 14:1-7</b> Jesus goes to prepare a place for his disciples.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

