

The Flaming Goats of Edom: The Unpalatable Christian Belief In Hell

It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. Heb 10:31, NIV

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By this point, he was more than a little irritated. “How can you believe such a monstrous thing? People burning forever just for their privately held opinions – that’s certainly some loving God you’ve got there.”¹

We had begun civilly enough. He asked me what I did for a living, and I mentioned that I was a minister. The conversation flowed easily and touched on topics as disparate as theology, history, personal experiences, and the latest gadgets we owned.

And then somehow the topic of the afterlife came up. Things were still normal, but then somehow we stumbled into hell – both conversationally and metaphorically.

The very concept of hell offended him. It bothered him on several levels, but I think the thing that bothered him most is that it was pretty clear that I thought he was headed in the general direction of the lava pits.

That’s not an unusual reaction. Very few people enjoy thinking about hell, and those who do are unsettling. And when people find out that I actually believe that hell actually exists, they either get very upset or very curious or both.

And the conversation takes a fairly predictable turn at that point. There are several common objections to the notion of hell and one or more of them is produced along with either a really sad look or an arrogant sneer (it really depends on the person’s personality and on their past interactions with hell-believing Christians).

And here’s how it usually goes. The questions are the section headers and my answers are in the following text.

Why Do Christians Believe In Hell, Anyway?

Jesus taught that there are two ultimate destinations and that everyone will wind up in one or the other. In fact, Jesus talked more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. It was quite central to his message. And since Christ is the foundation of Christianity, we believe as he did.

To pick but one example of many, Jesus said that hypocrites “will go away to **eternal punishment**, but the righteous to **eternal life**.” (Matt 25:46, NIV).

In addition, Christians believe in hell because it makes sense philosophically.

Christianity is often alleged to have a problem: God cannot be all good and all powerful because the world is too evil. If God was all good then he would want to change the world and if he was all powerful he would be able to change the world. Ergo, God is either not good or not powerful or both.

¹ This is a composite conversation based on several encounters that I have had.

Skeptics would be right to see an inconsistency if this world were all that there is, but if Christians are right and there is true justice awaiting us then the problem of evil becomes much less difficult. Justice delayed is not justice denied.

In other words, the skeptic alleges that God ought to change the world and Christians say he is getting ready to do just that.

Why Doesn't God Just Let Everyone Into Heaven?

So why hell? Wouldn't it be nicer of God to just let everyone into heaven?

No, not really.

Heaven is not arbitrary unceasing bliss, as though God were stimulating our pleasure centers directly and we were mere brains in a vat. Heaven is pleasant because that is where God is. Hell is unpleasant because that is where God is not.

In Revelation 21:3, heaven is described thus: "And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now **the dwelling of God is with men**, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and **God himself will be with them** and be their God."

And 2nd Thessalonians 1:7-9 describes hell this way: "This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and **shut out from the presence of the Lord** and from the majesty of his power."

In fact, most of the metaphors for hell in the New Testament focus on exclusion more than suffering. And so, in a very real sense, hell is where people get what they most want. Those who want God, get God. Those who don't want God are removed from his presence forever.

This is merciful, for those in hell would not enjoy heaven. The very thing that will bring the heavenly dwellers bliss – the presence of God – would bring the hell dwellers torment. One way to understand this is by recognizing that our presence in heaven will require radical transformation to which we must willingly consent. In heaven, we will be as different from who we are now as we are now different from the embryos we once were. Those apart from Christ have refused to undergo God's offer of transformation and are thus not made into beings capable of enduring God's overwhelming glory. Having chosen to remain imperfect beings they must dwell in an imperfect place or else be eternally confronted by the one thing they have rejected.

And so hell can be partly understood as self-chosen exile. However, we must also recognize that hell is a deserved punishment. Those apart from Christ die in their guilt and there must be a reckoning.

There are murderers who died undetected, rapists who enjoyed their crime in anonymity, swindlers who bilked the innocent of their savings and died rich, and mean people who never got their comeuppance.

God, as the judge of all the earth, has a self-imposed obligation to see to it that justice is done.

This is morally right of God: he has compassionately offered them forgiveness which they have rejected, and now he must regretfully follow through with the punishment that they deserve.

Despite what some caricatures of Christianity pretend, God does not delight in damning the wicked. Describing God's judgment, Isaiah 28:21 says that God will "do his work, his strange work, and perform his task, his alien task." The point is made even more explicit in 2nd Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise [to destroy the world and bring final judgment], as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Is Hell Torture?

Most people can accept the notion that hell is, in some sense, a self-chosen exile from God. And most can handle the notion of some punishment in the afterlife for wickedness done on earth.

But hell seems over the top. A burning lake of sulfur? Worms that gnaw on your flesh forever? How can this be a just response to mortal deeds, no matter how heinous?

Fortunately, our view of hell as a torture pit owes more to Dante than to the Bible.

The first point to be made is that hell is not the same for everyone.

For example, in Matthew 11:20-24 (NIV):

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be **more bearable** for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be **more bearable** for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

Even more striking is Luke 12:47-48 (NIV):

That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be **beaten with many blows**. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be **beaten with few blows**. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the

one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

The implications are pretty striking: it's hard to have different degrees of punishment when everyone is on fire forever. The suffering-o-meter would be maxed out for everyone. And so a differentiation in punishment suggests that the images of hell we find most disturbing aren't accurate.²

So what is the torment of the damned if not unimaginably painful fire?

Interestingly, many descriptions of hell in the Bible speak of psychological and not physical pain.

- “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to **shame and everlasting contempt.**” (Daniel 12:2, NIV)
- And throw that worthless servant **outside**, into the **darkness**, where there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** (Matt 25:30, NIV)
- These men are springs without water and mists driven by a storm. **Blackest darkness** is reserved for them. (2 Peter 2:17, NIV)
- They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their **shame**; wandering stars, for whom **blackest darkness** has been reserved forever. (Jude 13, NIV)
- Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. **Outside** are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Rev 22:14-16, NIV)

In these passages, the suffering of hell seems more the pain of being excluded from something good rather than the horror of physical torture.

Ecclesiastes teaches us in several places that the ability to experience pleasure is a gift from God. For example, in Ecclesiastes 5:19 we read that “when God gives any man wealth and possessions, **and enables him to enjoy them**, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God.” Ecclesiastes 2:25 states it even more succinctly: “for **without him, who can eat or find enjoyment?**” If hell is the place where God and His gifts aren't, then the ability to enjoy life will also be absent from hell.

Perhaps (and this is speculation), hell is for most people a bit like an endless adolescent sulk. You are miserable sitting in your room alone, listening to depressing music, musing about how the world hates you. And you are taking a perverse satisfaction (that cannot

² It is extremely interesting that in the parable of Lazarus, Jesus describes the rich man as able to carry on a conversation. That hardly seems possible for someone being burned alive. There are other interesting details in the story. First, the rich man asked to have his suffering alleviated in hell – not to be admitted into heaven. He didn't want to be where God was. Second, the rich man wasn't being burned in the fire (note the lack of shrieking in the story). He was just really, really thirsty. By no means is it a pleasant image, but it hardly accords with the nightmarish torture scenes some Christians have projected onto hell. Most theologians reject taking the Lazarus parable as a depiction of heaven or hell (some would say it refers to the intermediate state and others would say the details are mere backdrop to the story), but I find it interesting that the details Jesus offers undermine our concept of hell so radically.

truly be called pleasure) in your sulking. And the one thing guaranteed to drive you into an even deeper funk is spying that one perky person who is always nice and kind to you no matter what kind of sulk you throw. At this point, my mind is drawn to Romans 12:20, Paul says that we should not reward evil with evil. "On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will **heap burning coals on his head.**" (NIV) The Romans passage isn't about hell, but the concept of burning coals pouring over my head sounds very much like the sort of language that is elsewhere used about hell. It just makes me wonder: perhaps hell can be understood as an adolescent funk exacerbated by God's unrelenting love. It's an oddly compelling concept in which the flames of hell are fueled by the love of God.

To be clear: I am not asserting that hell is merely psychological. Jesus gets at the physicality of hell quite explicitly: "If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell." Mat 5:29-30, NIV

There will clearly be a degree of physical unpleasantness in hell, and for some it will be overwhelmingly intense. The case of Judas comes to mind: "But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." (Matthew 26:24, NIV).

However, the mere fact that Jesus singles Judas out for this mention indicates that such extreme suffering is abnormal. In other words, if it's actually better for everyone in hell to have never been born then his statement about Judas would mean, "Judas will be treated exactly the same as every other sinner." And that is clearly the opposite of Jesus' point – Judas will suffer more than most. Perhaps more than any. And his suffering will be so intense that it will actually be better for him if he had never existed at all. So why doesn't God simply destroy Judas (and Satan) rather than punish them? I think the answer can be found in their particular sins – if anyone can be demonstrated to have committed an infinite crime, certainly Satan and Judas fit the bill.

In other words, for most people an eternity in hell will not be worse than having never been born. Even in hell most people are better off existing than not existing.

And so the most Biblical picture of hell is not one of sadistic torture at all.

In chapter 8 of *The Problem of Pain*, C. S. Lewis gets at the same idea through some very poetic imagery: "Now it is quite certain that all these expressions [fire, darkness, and chains] are intended to suggest something unspeakably horrible, and any interpretation which does not face that fact is, I am afraid, out of court from the beginning. But it is not necessary to concentrate on the images of torture to the exclusion of those suggesting destruction and privation. What can that be whereof all three images are equally proper symbols? Destruction, we should naturally assume, means the unmaking, or cessation, of the destroyed. And people often talk as if the "annihilation" of a soul were intrinsically

possible. In all our experience, however, the destruction of one thing means the emergence of something else. Burn a log, and you have gases, heat and ash. To have been a log means now being those three things. If soul can be destroyed, must there not be a state of having been a human soul? And is not that, perhaps, the state which is equally well described as torment, destruction, and privation? You will remember that in the parable, the saved go to a place prepared for them, while the damned go to a place never made for men at all. (Matt. 25:34, 41) To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being in earth; to enter hell, is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) into hell is not a man: it is 'remains.'" While Lewis goes a bit further than the Biblical text allows, this has been a very helpful passage for me.

What About The Lake of Burning Sulfur?³

The idea of hell as primarily depressing sounds reasonable to many people, but we must face up to the fact that Bible paints some pretty painful pictures of hell. What are we to do with those?

Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the **eternal fire** prepared for the devil and his angels. Matthew 25:41, NIV

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 than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where 'their worm does not die, and **the fire is not quenched.**' Mark 9:47-48, NIV

I am in agony in this **fire**. Luke 16:24, NIV

A third angel followed them and said in a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives his mark on the forehead or on the hand, he, too, will drink of the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. **He will be tormented with burning sulfur** in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. **And the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever.** There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or for anyone who receives the mark of his name." Rev 14:9-11, NIV

And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the **lake of burning sulfur**, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever. Rev 20:10, NIV

If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the **lake of fire**. Rev 20:15, NIV

But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, 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. Rev 21:8, NIV

³ I am indebted to Glenn Miller of <http://christian-thinktank.com/> for most of the insights in this section.

These seem pretty clear and convincing. At least, they seem convincing until we look at the Old Testament background for this imagery.

Consider Isaiah 34:8-15

For the LORD has a day of vengeance,
a year of retribution, to uphold Zion's cause.

**Edom's streams will be turned into pitch,
her dust into burning sulfur;
her land will become blazing pitch!**

**It will not be quenched night and day;
its smoke will rise forever.**
From generation to generation it will lie desolate;
no one will ever pass through it again.

The desert owl and screech owl will possess it;
the great owl and the raven will nest there.
God will stretch out over Edom
the measuring line of chaos
and the plumb line of desolation.

Her nobles will have nothing there to be called a kingdom,
all her princes will vanish away.

Thorns will overrun her citadels,
nettles and brambles her strongholds.
She will become a haunt for jackals,
a home for owls.

Desert creatures will meet with hyenas,
and wild goats will bleat to each other;
there the night creatures will also repose
and find for themselves places of rest.

The owl will nest there and lay eggs,
she will hatch them, and care for her young under the shadow of her wings;
there also the falcons will gather,
each with its mate.

This is an announcement of God's judgment against the nation of Edom – notice how similar the language of eternal fire is to its New Testament counterparts. Also notice how the rest of the imagery is incompatible with a nation actually being consumed by unending flame.

Owls will build nests there and raise families? According to the last stanza they will. Nests and owls are pretty flammable – if the water and the dust are literally consumed with fire then surely twigs and feathers will combust as well.

Nocturnal creatures will find rest there? According to the second-to-last stanza these night-dwellers will repose while the goats carry on a conversation. I've never seen flaming goats before, but I don't imagine that they calmly bleat back and forth.

This oracle is an announcement of historical doom against Edom – it does not describe judgment in the afterlife. It is a poetic way of saying that Edom is about to be so thoroughly destroyed that it is as if they were going to be set on fire forever. That is the Old Testament background of apocalyptic imagery. Such language is deliberately exaggerated and the New Testament audience knew that.

And so that should be our assumption in the book of Revelation and in the teachings of Jesus as well – the descriptions of fire are symbolic and meant to communicate absolute desolation.

I am not alone in thinking such thoughts. In Cornelius Plantinga's *Not The Way It's Supposed To Be: A Breviary Of Sin*, he quotes Henry Stob's fanciful insight:

“Hell in the Bible... is either very hot or very cold, depending on whether the sinner is perceived as a rebel or an alien. In either case hell is not a divine creation. Hell is made by those who climb the holy mountain and try to unseat the Holy One who, ablaze with glory, dwells in the light unapproachable. Those who mount an attack on God and cross the barrier of his exclusive divinity die like moths in the flame of him who will not and cannot be displaced. And hell is made by those who, turning their backs on God, flee the light and move toward the eternal blackness that marks God's absence. Hell, then, is unarrested sin's natural and programmatic end. Sin is either rebellion or flight, and, when persisted in, leads either to the fiery furnace or to the cold and desolate night.” (p 154-155).

Is Hell Eternal?

Yes – hell is eternal. There is no doubt of this. In the passages already mentioned we see talk of everlasting destruction (2 Thess 1:9), everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2) and of blackest darkness that extends forever (Jude 13).

Most persuasive is Matthew 25:46 (NIV): “Then they will go away to **eternal punishment**, but the righteous to **eternal life**.” Heaven and hell are described in exactly the same language: one lasts as long as the other. As Moses Stuart explains in his 1830 book *Exegetical Essays on Several Words Relating to Future Punishment*, “We must either admit the endless misery of hell, or give up the endless happiness of heaven.” (page 62).

An eternal hell strikes many people as absurdly immoral. How can any finite set of sins ever merit eternal punishment?

Let's assume that Hitler is hellbound and that God decides he's responsible for the deaths of 50,000,000 people. This is a solid estimate of how many people died as a result of World War II. Perhaps Hitler isn't really culpable for all of those deaths, but this is a worst-case scenario.

That's a lot of sin. But does it merit infinite punishment? Let's say that for each death he ought to be tormented for 1,000 years. Even with such a steep penalty, Hitler has still fulfilled his sentence after fifty billion years. And after a trillion years his ongoing punishment would be absurdly disproportionate.

So why infinite punishment for Hitler, let alone for some random guy who mostly told some lies, got some speeding tickets, looked at some porn, and was pretty darn selfish from time to time? How does that guy merit infinite retribution?

There are two questions we can ask ourselves which help us begin to understand.

First, which is worse: to kick a flower or to kick a puppy?

And is it worse to kick a puppy or to kick a child?

Clearly, the same action has different degrees of moral blame depending on who the action is performed against. The greater the victim, the worse the crime. Even our own laws recognize that some crimes are worse depending on the target. The penalty for punching the president is worse than the penalty for punching me.

So here's the question: is it worse to hurt a human or to hurt God?

Since God is infinitely greater than any human (or even than all humans put together), sins against God are infinitely worse than they appear to us from our mortal perspective. Our sins are thus infinite in magnitude, and therefore merit a punishment that is infinite in duration.

In fact, if you'd like to be uber-nerdy about this (and who doesn't?) God's majesty is akin to an uncountable infinity. An eternal hell is akin to a countable infinity. As every student of math knows, an uncountable infinity is infinitely greater than a countable infinity. And so our sin is uncountably infinitely bad and our punishment is mercifully only countably infinite in duration.

Second, will you stop doing good deeds in heaven?

No, you won't. Heaven is not a disembodied afterlife, involving harps and clouds. In heaven, we will be able to do at least nine things: understand God, love God, understand others, love others, understand ourselves, love ourselves, understand creation, love

creation, and rule creation. So things like science, art, recreation and worship will be ongoing for eternity.

So if people won't stop doing good deeds in heaven, what makes you think people will stop sinning in hell?

And if people commit an infinite number of sins in hell, then an infinite sequence of finite punishments is warranted.

Sometimes I wonder if everyone in hell is just five minutes from release... forever.

In this vein, I often think of Rev 16:8-11 (NIV)

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was given power to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but **they refused to repent** and glorify him.

The fifth angel poured out his bowl on the throne of the beast, and his kingdom was plunged into darkness. Men gnawed their tongues in agony and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, but **they refused to repent** of what they had done.”

This passage is not about hell, but it is about how committed sinners respond to God's judgment. In the same manner, people in hell will refuse to repent even if granted the opportunity.

Even more tellingly, Revelation talks of Christ reigning on earth for 1,000 years after which Satan is given one more chance. He mounts an assault on God and multitudes flock to Satan to embrace his rule over that of King Jesus (Rev 20:1-10). The implications are amazing to me – people who experience God's love against their will still loathe Him and desire anything rather than Him: they choose Satan over Jesus!

In other words, whether people are offered the carrot of Christ's love or the stick of God's wrath many will choose to reject him, leaving eternal isolation as the only remaining option.

No one has summed this up better than C. S. Lewis:

In the long run, the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is... a question: "What are you asking God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that that is what He does.
C. S. Lewis, The Problem of Pain (chapter 8)

So What?

So what's the takeaway from all of this?

First, the concept of hell is thoroughly Biblical and philosophically acceptable.

Second, most Christians have a vision of hell that owes more to popular culture than to the Bible. Hell is not a place where the worst horror movies of all time come to life – hell is a place of darkness, desolation, and despair.

Third, God doesn't want to send anyone to hell. He has done everything possible to reduce the population of hell to a minimum – in the person of Jesus he has died on our behalf, suffered as only God can, and offers us a lifeline. If we choose to reject it, the fault is no one's but our own.

“The only answer to all such cavils [universalism, annihilationism] is the cross of Christ. Behind that cross there is no concealed reserve of mercy or love.... Strange it is that they who are most emphatic in asserting that God must give salvation to all men in the next world, are precisely those who dismiss as fanaticism the truth that He gives salvation here and now to those who seek Him.” Robert Anderson, *Human Destiny: After Death, What?*

Indeed.

Hell is not something I particularly enjoy talking about, and it's probably something you don't particularly enjoy thinking about. But I hope you found these thoughts helpful.

And if you someday have a conversation with a rather irritated atheist and you begin to ask him if he's ever looked at the Old Testament comments about Edom and its eternal desolation and he cuts you off saying, “I've heard all that before.” then you might want to ask him if he knows me.

If he does, ask him how he's doing and tell him I hope I see him on the other side someday.