

# Hell: What does the Bible really say about it?

*"Almost nobody in the gospels warns about 'going to hell'. The dire warnings in the four gospels are mostly directed toward an imminent this-worldly disaster, namely, the fall of Jerusalem and other events connected with that. There are occasional sayings that go beyond that... but this dimension seems to be taken for granted rather than made central." – Tom Wright*



Considering how central hell is to many gospel messages, it is surprising how little the Bible actually has to say about it. It is not mentioned at all in the Old Testament (some old versions wrongly translate 'Sheol' as 'hell' – see later) and it only occurs sparingly in the New. The early Christians' preaching in Acts simply does not include warnings of hell (though judgement is sometimes mentioned). The gospel, for them, is much more an announcement of the kingdom of God, the breaking in of new creation as demonstrated in Christ's resurrection and the summons to join in with God's plan to redeem and heal the whole of creation. Threats of hell were never used as persuasion. Nevertheless, hell is a reality witnessed to in the New Testament that we must take seriously, but always guided by Scripture rather than emotion.

## Clearing some rubble

As we saw with eternity, ideas about hell are often shaped by popular culture, lurid preaching and poor Bible knowledge. Let's dispense with some common misconceptions:



### Misconception 1: Hell is Satan's lair

Some assume that hell is the devil's base of operations, from which he sends his forces to attack people (think expressions like 'the hordes of hell' or song lyrics like 'no force of hell can stop his beauty'). In fact, hell is the place Satan really does *not* want to go to, as it spells his final end!

### Misconception 2: People in hell will be tormented by demons

There are films and books that imagine people who are consigned to hell will be tormented by demons, possibly even acting on God's behalf. This is simply not the case, as all evil (including demons) will be condemned in hell. Demons are not the custodians or jailers but the *victims* of hell! (Note: the parable of the unmerciful servant<sup>1</sup> which talks about 'jailers')

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:21-35

has one main point – forgiveness – and is not a reference to hell but the torment and emotional prison people experience in this life when they do not forgive others.)

### Misconception 3: Jesus talked a lot about hell



This is simply not true. As mentioned above, many sayings of Jesus traditionally associated with hell<sup>2</sup> actually refer to the nation of Israel coming under judgment for not believing in God's Messiah – the result being the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in AD70<sup>3</sup>. Jesus actually spoke more about money than about heaven and hell combined! Neither did his followers preach hell-fire and brimstone – they were more excited about the resurrection and the arrival of God's reign in Christ and the outpoured Holy Spirit.

### Misconception 4: Some people are in hell now

An assumption often made is that people who die without accepting Jesus go straight to hell. The Bible, however, presents hell as 'the second death' (Rev 21:8) to which some are consigned *after* the resurrection and final judgement. It is therefore a future event, not a present state. Note that the parable of the rich man and Lazarus<sup>4</sup> does not talk about hell but 'Hades'. Some older Bible versions mistakenly translate Hades as hell – but the two concepts are different as we shall see below.

### Mind your language – some important words



The translators of the King James Bible regularly used the word 'hell' to translate both the Hebrew 'Sheol' in the Old Testament and the Greek 'Hades' in the New. This, together with many artistic works such as Dante's *Inferno* and other Middle Ages thinking, has coloured people's beliefs about hell. Even translations of the so-called Apostles' Creed talk about Christ descending into 'hell', when the original Greek has 'Hades'.

The words Sheol and Hades are roughly equivalent, and mean the abode of the dead, or the grave, or death more generally. The Old Testament has very little on resurrection, and assumes all people reside in Sheol after death, albeit perhaps with some different outcomes in some vague way, depending on their relationship to God. By the time of Jesus, the thinking had developed to where the grave had two compartments, 'Abraham's side' or 'paradise' for the righteous and Hades for the unrighteous. Both were *temporary states* whilst awaiting the end of the age, resurrection and final judgement. Those in paradise enjoyed God's

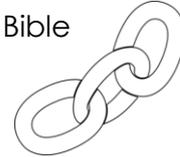
<sup>2</sup> E.g. Luke 13:1-9, where the fig tree represents the nation of Israel.

<sup>3</sup> This in itself was more a natural and political consequence of their actions, as opposed to a sovereign choice of God – as with the Babylonian exile.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 16:19-31

presence, whilst those in Hades were in torment. But Hades was not 'hell'. The word for the final place of punishment, to follow the final judgement, was 'Gehenna', named after a valley near Jerusalem where terrible things had happened in the past and which God had condemned<sup>5</sup>. Many Bible passages can be re-examined with this distinction in mind and it certainly reduces the apparent Biblical emphasis on hell.

In fact, Gehenna itself is only mentioned 12 times in the whole Bible – although references to the 'lake of fire' and 'second death' in Revelation can be taken to refer to the same thing. There is one reference<sup>6</sup> to 'Tartarus', sometimes translated as 'hell' but in context this is a temporary holding place for rebellious angelic beings awaiting judgement – perhaps their version of Hades.



### The three main views



Neglecting the idea of 'purgatory' (a supposed cleansing place for Christians before entering 'heaven'), there are three basic ideas about the eternal fate of those who do not believe in Christ.

#### The 'traditional' view – Eternal Conscious Torment (ECT)

In this view, those who have finally rejected Christ are consigned to suffer in a consciously aware state for ever and ever. Hence they are punished infinitely, with no possibility of an end to their torment. This belief rests heavily on the assumption that the human soul is immortal (though even traditionalists agree this is nowhere stated explicitly in the Bible).

#### The 'conditional' view – Conditional Immortality (CI)

Unlike the traditional view, CI states that immortality belongs to God alone, but that he confers immortality on those who turn to Christ<sup>7</sup>. All people, whether believers or not, are resurrected at the end of the age to undergo final judgment. Those who are not 'in Christ' are consigned to the 'second death' and undergo a period of suffering (the severity of which could vary depending on their deeds) which eventually results in them being consumed and ceasing to exist (annihilation).

#### The 'universal' view – Universalism

In this view, whilst those who have rejected Christ in their lifetime may undergo suffering, this acts in a purging way – not to pay for sin, but to discipline them into rethinking their life with the aim of eventual restoration to God. Evangelicals who hold this view (who are relatively

<sup>5</sup> See Isaiah 30:33, where Topheth is in the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna), noting the reference to burning sulphur, which is also a description of the 'second death' in Revelation.

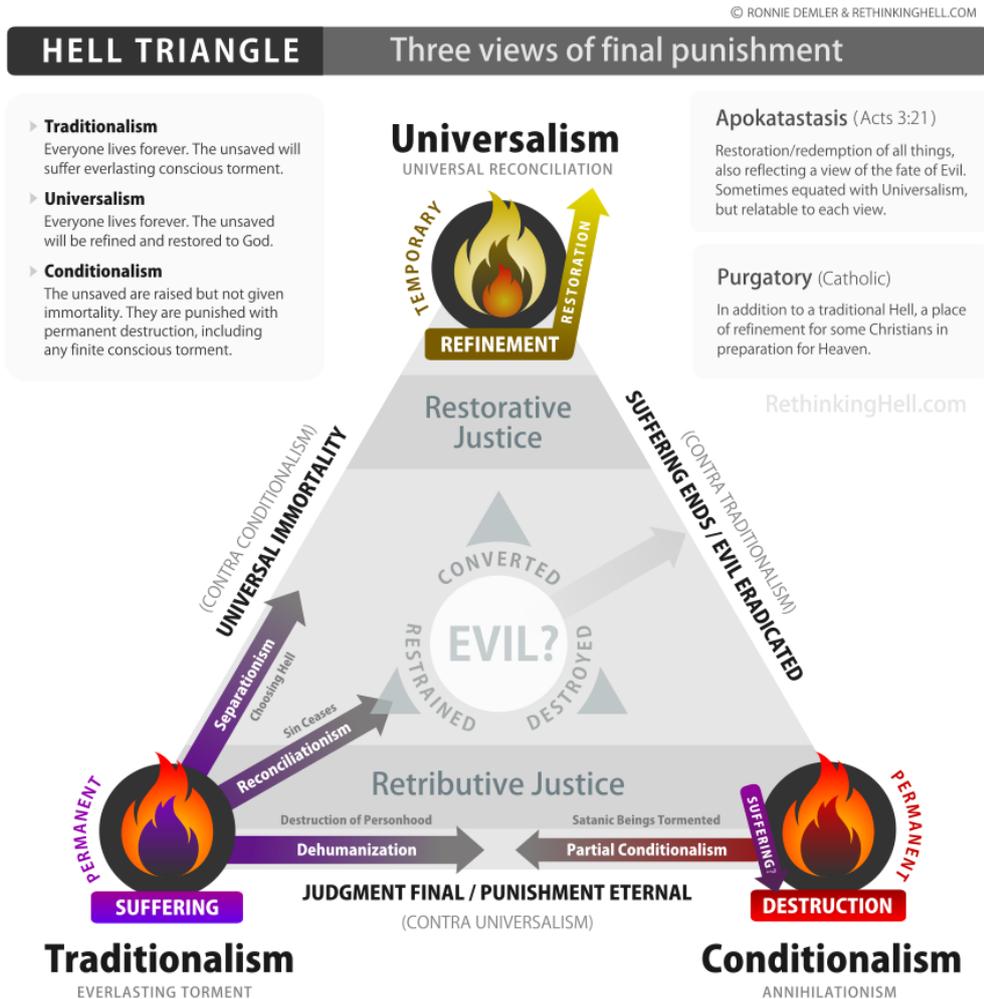
<sup>6</sup> 2 Peter 2:4

<sup>7</sup> See 1 Tim 6:15-16 and 1 Tim 1:16; also Rom 2:7

few in number) would still affirm that only true repentance and faith in Christ would allow a person to escape the suffering. 'Hell' would either remain empty (except perhaps for the devil and his demons), or it would be emptied over time as people were saved.

### The hell triangle

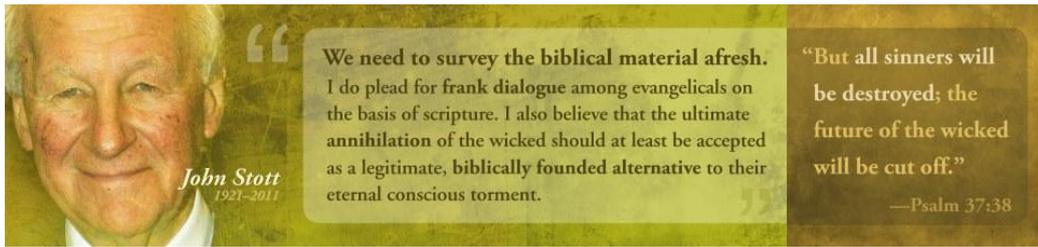
The diagram below shows the relationship between the three views and their differences. Credit: [www.rethinkinghell.com](http://www.rethinkinghell.com)



### Discussion time...

Consider the three views of hell. Which do you feel has the most and the least biblical support, and why?

## Part 2: Time to rethink?



John Stott famously caused a stir when he admitted his view had shifted towards conditional immortality. But a rising number of evangelicals, including scholars, are joining him in rethinking their position.

### Problems with the traditional (ECT) view

Many people find the concept of ECT horrific, but emotion should not determine our beliefs. Rather we must look at Scripture, especially what is revealed about God through Christ. What kind of God is he? Is God likely to punish people without end, keeping them alive so they can suffer? Does an infinite punishment fit the crime, when the crime was committed by a finite human being over a finite time? Using medieval reasoning (it is worse to kill the squire than a peasant, and worse still to kill the king), Anselm of Canterbury argued that to offend an infinite God demands an infinite punishment. But we no longer think about the seriousness of crime and the required severity of punishment as depending on the importance of the victim but rather solely on the action itself.

Similarly, ECT suggests a one-size-fits-all punishment, whereas the Bible talks in many places about judgement according to deeds, and Jesus hinted there could be different grades of punishment (Luke 12:46-48).

If we have a view of the future that involves the 'restoration of all things' (Acts 3:21) then it makes little sense that there should be a corner of the universe where evil and rebellion against God continues to exist forever. Surely in the 'new heaven and new earth' evil must be fully eradicated?

If it were not for two highly symbolic Scriptures in Revelation<sup>8</sup> it is likely that ECT as a concept would never have arisen, as the huge weight of Bible passages speak of evil being *totally destroyed* (e.g. Psalm 37). The website [www.rethinkinghell.com](http://www.rethinkinghell.com) covers all of the relevant Scriptures, showing how they more naturally fit with CI rather than ECT.

### A personal view

I believe that when the Bible speaks of 'eternal punishment' or 'eternal fire'<sup>9</sup> it is referring to a punishment or a fire with eternal effects not eternal duration. In passage after passage (even John 3:16),



<sup>8</sup> Rev 14:9-11 and Rev 20:10-15

<sup>9</sup> See Mat 25:46 and Jude 7

the effect is to consume or destroy or kill, in order to get rid of evil altogether, not to maintain it. Immortality of the soul, on which ECT depends, is more dependent on Greek philosophy than on Scripture.

The language of Rev 14 (smoke rising forever) draws from Isaiah 34:8-10 which describes smoke rising from destroyed rebellious cities. There was no life remaining, just a memorial of God's judgement on evil. Similarly, Jesus words about the worm not dying (Mk 9:48) refers to Isaiah 66:24. The reference is to dead bodies, fully consumed by fire and worms which will not stop until the corpses are devoured. Again, there is no life. Evil has been destroyed.

*"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." – Jesus (Mat 10:28)*

The strongest passage as far as ECT is concerned (Rev 20:10-15) is in a highly symbolic part of the Bible (multi-headed beasts ridden by gaudy tattooed prostitutes!) and so cannot necessarily be taken literally. Aside from the devil (here representing all demonic evil and deception), the main entities thrown into the lake of fire are the beast (representing evil political power), the false prophet (representing false religion), death itself and the grave (Hades). These are all abstractions – representative concepts, not individual persons, and hence cannot literally be tormented. The lake of fire is the 'second death', meaning an end of life. In my view, the overwhelming weight of Scripture points to destruction of evil as its purpose, not ongoing punishment.

### Final thoughts: Room for hope?



Aside from the nature of Gehenna, the next question is: how many actual people will end up there? Traditionally, only a minority of people escape the torment of hell. But doesn't God want everyone to be saved<sup>10</sup>? Many people who have never heard the gospel receive visions of Jesus. Who knows how many people reach out to God, despite their lack of knowledge of the gospel, perhaps very late in life? Indeed, the Bible never says there is no chance for repentance *after* death. My suspicion is that God manages to save a very large number of people. Could that be everyone, eventually? Perhaps. There are many scriptures that seem to support the idea<sup>11</sup>. We shall probably never know in this age. But we do know that God will finally rid creation of all evil and populate it with a vast multitude of people united to God and each other in glory!

<sup>10</sup> 1 Timothy 2:4

<sup>11</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22, John 12:32, 2 Corinthians 5:14, 18-19, Colossians 1:19-20, 1 Timothy 2:3-6, 4:9-10, Hebrews 2:9, 1 John 2:2, 4:14, John 1:29, 3:17, Romans 8:32, Titus 2:11.