

Chapter 10

Popular Misconceptions about Hell

For most of my life I have been perplexed and, frankly, stumped by apparent incongruities in the Bible concerning the nature of God, especially the BIG question that we have all asked ourselves. How can a God of love send the majority of the human race to eternal torment in Hell, most of whom are really pretty decent folks, at least by human standards? Most Christians struggle with this question, and the answers most of us have come up with are not all that satisfying. This is probably the single greatest theological issue confronting most Christians today.

Although most Christians are greatly disturbed by the doctrine of Hell, there is no avoiding the issue, as the concept of Hell is derived from the New Testament, with some of the most disturbing passages coming from the lips of Christ Himself. Hell is pictured by most Christians as a place of everlasting torment, and the imagery most commonly used is that of a fiery judgment, from which there is no escape.

In general, Christians are among the kindest, most forgiving and loving people on the planet, so the doctrine of Hell is not something they are comfortable with. As a result, this doctrine is reluctantly accepted, but almost never mentioned from the pulpits or in the Sunday Schools and Bible studies. In the healthiest and fastest-growing congregations the emphasis is placed on the positive aspects of the Gospel and on issues related to successful Christian living.

In an effort to mitigate the negative aspects of this teaching many Christians tend to rationalize to some extent and interpret the “flames” as symbolic of some sort of mental, rather than physical, torture. It also helps some to know that people who go to Hell will be there as a result of their own choices in life. Although very few people would deliberately choose to go to Hell, they nevertheless choose Hell by default when they decide not to follow Christ. Another mitigating factor would be the fact that there apparently are “degrees” of punishment in Hell, just as there are degrees of reward in Heaven. There are a few passages in the New Testament that seem to support this (See Matt. 11:20-22; 2 Cor. 9:6; 5:9-10). And on the positive side, the gift of God is eternal life. One should be grateful that any are saved at all, since all are sinners and the wages of sin is death,* according to Romans 6:23. (**In many Christian circles the “death” penalty for sin is equated with eternal banishment to Hell.*)

Many Christians, despite the above mitigating facts, are very uncomfortable with the notion of Hell and prefer not to think about it. Although most Christians believe in Hell with their intellects, it appears that they don't really believe in it with their hearts. In other words, they act as though they don't believe in it. Most are only mildly disturbed that many of their friends and

neighbors, not to mention close family members or relatives, might be headed to Hell after they die.

The situation is further exacerbated by the fact that the life-saving Gospel message does not reach everyone and some are predisposed not to believe it because of very strong religious and cultural biases against Christianity. Not all Christians believe this. Some have a more “inclusive” theology and believe that it is possible for non-Christians to become saved without hearing the Gospel message, under certain circumstances, which are not very clearly understood or articulated.

The Bible does teach that by the end of the ages, every knee will bow to Christ and every tongue will confess Him as Lord. At the same time, the Bible also teaches that before that happens many of us will be experiencing “hells” of our own making. There is a huge difference, in my view, however, between the popular view of Hell and what actually happens after death.

The popular view of Hell is based on several misconceptions:

The first misconception about Hell is that punishment in Hell lasts forever. Most people assume that the words “everlasting” and “eternal” are accurate translations of the original Hebrew and Greek words in the Bible. Actually, there is no word in Greek or Hebrew that means everlasting or never ending in the sense that most of us understand it. The words which are translated as “*eternal*,” “*everlasting*,” and “*forever*” are all variants of the Hebrew word “*olam*” and its New Testament Greek counterpart “*aion*.” Sometimes the singular version is used; sometimes the plural, and sometimes the adjective. In each case, the reference is to a period of time with a definite beginning and end, which is the exact opposite of the meaning of “eternal” and “everlasting.” Sometimes phrases like “*into the ages*” or “*the ages of the ages*” are used to denote several distinct epochs or periods of time in succession to one another. It could be argued that the writers of the Bible, although they had no word for “unending,” still intended that meaning. However, the words do not have to be interpreted that way. They can also be interpreted to mean exactly what they meant in the Greek and Hebrew culture, with each age having a beginning and an end. This would be consistent with the New and Old Testament teaching that eventually, after time as we know it comes to an end, and the “ages” come to an end, God will “reconcile” all creation, including all created beings, to Christ. (See 1 Cor. 15:22-28)

The most common argument against this line of reasoning is that if the Greek words which are mistranslated as “eternal” don’t really mean “unending” with respect to Hell, wouldn’t that mean that they also don’t mean “eternal” when used to describe eternal life in Christ? My answer to that question is, yes, you would be exactly right about that. “*Aionian*” life, often mistranslated “*eternal*” life, does not refer to the “duration,” but instead to the quality of our life in Christ. The Greek term “*Aionian*” literally means belonging to or pertaining to an age or ages. It means exactly the opposite of eternal and everlasting. Nowhere in the Bible does it refer to an infinite, unending period of time. When Jesus gives us *aionian* life, the life He gives us is Himself. He is the “*way, the truth, and the life*.” Everyone will live eternally, both Christians and non-Christians alike. All people continue to live after death in the sense that their conscious existence

will never come to an end. *Aionian* life does not refer to never ending conscious existence. Even those who believe in everlasting punishments of the wicked in Hell will acknowledge that the wicked possess everlasting conscious existence. Instead, *aionian* life refers to our quality of existence IN CHRIST (See Rom: 3:24; 6:3-4; 8:1-2, 1-11; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17; 15:22; Eph. 1:1-9; Col. 3:4; 2 Tim. 1:1; 2:19).

If *aionian* life referred to the length of our life the meaning of the phrase would be completely lost. The emphasis should not be placed on the word *aionian*, but instead on the word “life.” What distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian is not the length of his life, but the nature of it. Bible passages which refer to *aionian* life are referring to spiritual life vs. spiritual death, not physical life and death. As Christians, we experience spiritual life in our present walk in this world and during the eons, or ages, to come. To have *aionian* life is to be alive spiritually in Christ. Those who do not have *aionian* life are dead spiritually and separated from Christ in this life, a condition which sometimes, but not always, continues after death. Technically Christ still resides within all of us, but not all are consciously aware of this and as a result are not able to experience “*aionian*” life.

A second misconception about Hell is that the purpose of God’s judgments (ie. the “hells” of our own making) on the unsaved are retribution for the sins they have committed. The purpose of God’s chastisement is not retribution, but correction. Although we are all in the process of being saved, we still remain subject to the temporal consequences of our sinful behavior in this world and sometimes the next. Because He loves us, we often find ourselves on the receiving end of God’s “tough love.” To a great extent God has created a self-adjusting universe. The judgments of our Lord do not usually come directly from His hand. They mostly result from the natural laws which He has set in motion, by which *we “reap what we sow.”* (See Galatians 6:7) This has the purpose of teaching us valuable life lessons, bringing us to repentance, and restoring us to a loving relationship with Himself through Christ.

A third misconception about Hell is that it is a place of physical torture and torment for everyone there. Although many New Testament passages teach that there will be suffering in Hell, not all will suffer in the same degree. It is conceivable that for some the punishments (ie. God’s corrective actions) will be relatively mild when compared to the fate of others. The Hebrew justice system was based on fairness, and the punishments fit the crimes exactly, as specified in Leviticus 24:19-21: *“Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.”*

In Matthew 5:38-48, Jesus took this law of reciprocity to a whole new level by asking us to return good for evil. *“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love*

those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. ”

Not only is God’s justice fair and equitable, with punishments fitting the crimes, but it also includes mercy and forgiveness. Jesus asks us to forgive our enemies so that we might become perfect as God is perfect. In other words, it is the character of God to be loving and forgiving. God’s punishments are not disproportionate to the crimes. He doesn’t punish temporal sins with infinite punishment in a place called Hell. He doesn’t ask us to forgive our enemies, while at the same time refusing to do the same Himself. That would make God the biggest hypocrite of all time.

A fourth misconception about Hell is that the imagery of fire is symbolic of torture and excruciating pain. While most Christians believe that the fires of Hell are not literal, they still believe they symbolize extreme suffering, torment and regret. In my view this is only partially true. While a certain amount of pain and regret would be involved in most disciplinary actions, the result is a good one. According to Hebrews 12:11, *“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”*

Throughout the Bible the imagery of fire is symbolic of cleansing and purification, not torture. The fires of God’s judgment will not be pleasant to endure. Nevertheless, the result will be repentance and purification. According to the prophet Zephaniah, after God’s fiery judgment ALL will *“call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.”*

Zephaniah 3:8-9: *“Therefore wait for me,’ declares the LORD, ‘for the day I will stand up to testify. I have decided to assemble the nations, to gather the kingdoms and to pour out my wrath on them—all my fierce anger. The whole world will be consumed by the fire of my jealous anger. Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder.”*

The prophet Malachi uses the imagery of a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap to describe the day in which the Messiah will bring judgment on Israel.

Malachi 3:1-4: *“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.”*

In the above passage fire is used as an instrument of cleansing and purification, and the Levites are refined like gold and silver. In other words, they are purged of their sins and made righteous. This interpretation is in accordance with the New Testament teaching that none of us are righteous and all are in need of cleansing and forgiveness.

In Matthew 3:10-12, John the Baptist, the “*Messenger*” mentioned in the above quote from Malachi, uses the same imagery. “*The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*”

The above passage can be interpreted two ways. The first interpretation is that Jesus will baptize Christians with both the Holy Spirit and with fire. The second interpretation is that Jesus will baptize the Christians with the Holy Spirit and non-Christians with fire. The latter view better fits the context in which John likens this process as one of separating the wheat from the chaff and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire. It doesn’t matter which position you take on this, however, the imagery is still consistent with Malachi’s depiction of the fires of God’s judgment as a refining process.

According to the Apostle Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11-15, even Christians will experience the refining fires of God’s judgment, though perhaps to a lesser degree. “*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.*”

A fifth misconception about Hell is that only God’s elect or chosen ones may avoid it. Many students of the Bible believe that the purpose of our election is that God has chosen or elected or chose us for salvation, and everyone else was chosen for eternal damnation. This is the same mistake that the Hebrew nation made in Old Testament times. They assumed that they were a nation chosen by God for special favor and privilege, when in reality they were chosen for service and were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles and were to become the vehicle through whom God would bless all nations. We Christians are a royal priesthood chosen by God to be a light to the unsaved and reach them for Christ. If God truly is sovereign over His creation and desires that all men be saved, then He is perfectly capable of achieving that end. We Christians must regard ourselves as among the first fruits of God’s plan of redemption. We are not privileged, to the exclusion of all others. Instead, we are privileged to be used by God to spread the Gospel to all nations.

The passage of Scripture most often used by Hyper-Calvinists to support their doctrine of double predestination is Romans, Chapters 9-11. Double predestination is the teaching that God predestines only a chosen few, the elect, for salvation, and by default He predestines everyone else to spend eternity in Hell. In this Scripture passage the Apostle Paul teaches exactly the opposite. Here is the sequence of events as Paul describes them in Romans 9-11:

In Romans 9, Paul explains that our salvation is based on God's mercy and not on man's desire or effort. It's completely up to God who gets saved and who remains unsaved (ie. whose hearts are hardened). God hardened Pharaoh's heart for the benefit of releasing the Hebrew nation, His chosen people, from slavery and displaying His power in the process.

Romans 9:16-18, *"It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden."*

Later in the same chapter Paul explains that it was God's plan to eventually save both Jews and Gentiles. The Gentiles, who were not originally God's chosen people, would one day also be called God's people.

Romans 9:23-24, *"He did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea: 'I will call them my people who are not my people; and I will call her my loved one who is not my loved one.'"*

In Romans 11, Paul explains that only a remnant of the nation of Israel were elected to receive Christ, and the others were hardened.

Romans 11:7-8, *"What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day.'"*

Paul then explains that the nation of Israel did not fall beyond recovery. The transgression of the nation of Israel was the occasion of the Gospel being spread to the Gentiles. He then explains that if the Israel's loss resulted in "riches for the Gentiles" how much greater will be the riches of the nation of Israel when they themselves are restored to "fullness."

Romans 11:11-12, *"Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!"*

Then Paul tells us that Israel has experienced a hardening only until a full number of the Gentiles have come in. After that, all Israel will be saved.

Romans 11:25-26, *"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'"*

Finally, at the end of Romans 11, Paul sums up the whole matter and drives the message home. He points out that just as we have received mercy as a result of the disobedience of Israel, they will receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to us. God has *"bound all men over to disobedience in order that He may have mercy on all."*

Romans 11:31-32, *"so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound ALL men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them ALL."* (The caps are mine) There is no question in my mind that the Apostle Paul was a universalist.

A sixth misconception about Hell is that it is a physical place or locality. In the Old Testament the word that used to be translated "Hell" is *"Sheol,"* the place of the dead. Most modern translations do not use the word "Hell." The literal meaning is simply "unseen." It was not described as a place of suffering and torment. It was a place where everyone went after death and nothing went on there at all. It was just another word for the "grave." If anything did go on there, there was no way of knowing what it was, hence the name "unseen." The ancient Israelites did not believe in life after death. Their views are summarized in Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, *"For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten, their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished; never again will they have a part in anything that happens under the sun."*

During the Babylonian Captivity the Jews were introduced to the concept of a dualistic conflict between God and Satan, and the additional concepts of rewards and punishments after death in Heaven or Hell. These were taken from the religions of the Babylonians (Mesopotamian myths) and the Persians (Zoroastrianism) during the Captivity. During that period the concept of Satan found its way into the Old Testament, much of which was written during the Babylonian Captivity and thereafter, including the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. During the 400-year period between the captivity and the time of Christ, after returning to Palestine, Jewish theology was also influenced by the Greeks, who were in turn had been influenced by the Egyptians, and the doctrine of Hell developed into what is now pictured in some of the apocalyptic and apocryphal literature of the intertestamental period, and eventually found its way into the New Testament as well, particularly in the Book of Revelation. In the New Testament the *"Sheol"* of the Old Testament was transliterated into the Greek word *"Hades,"* which was the "underworld" of Greek mythology.

If you want to believe in this version of Hell you must also believe that it is either an unseen place where nothing at all happens, or a fiery place somewhere under or near the center of the Earth where people are tortured in literal flames. Take your pick.

The other word for Hell in the New Testament is *"Gehenna,"* the garbage dump outside Jerusalem in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, where in ages past babies were sacrificed to the Canaanite God Molek. In Jesus' day this place was used to burn the garbage from the city and was continually ablaze, and it was full of disgusting worms. Today the garbage dump is gone and I understand that it is quite nice there now, especially in the Spring. In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) Gehenna was the word used most often by Jesus, actually eleven

times, to describe the fate of those who were not ready for the Kingdom. In the parable of the rich man and poor man, Jesus used the word “*hades*.”

Not many evangelicals believe that Hell it is a place of literal fire and torment. Most of them believe that the flames are a metaphor for suffering. I quite agree with this interpretation. I would expand the meaning to include purification as well, as in the case of a crucible or furnace in which gold ore is refined into pure gold. Jesus made frequent use of parables and metaphors to illustrate underlying truths. He used the terms “*Gehenna*” and “*Hades*” because they were well-known and commonly used in the popular culture. I seriously doubt that “*Gehenna*” and “*Hades*” refer to a literal places where people go after they die. Even if this were true there is no reason to assume that the flames are literal or that people will be trapped there for all eternity, without any chance of escape. There is absolutely no Scriptural support for that.

If “*Sheol*” or Hell is a literal fiery place, then the event described in Revelation 20:13-15 makes no sense at all. “*And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*” What would be the point of throwing Hell into Hell? If the Lake of Fire is the second death why throw death into it? Two negatives make a positive. If death and Hell were destroyed, wouldn’t the result be the elimination of both? If we rightly assume that death and the fires of Hades are metaphors for God’s corrective judgments on sinners, and spiritual separation from God, then destroying them in the Lake of Fire would be a good thing, not a bad thing. Destroying death would make everyone alive. The second death is just the opposite of physical or spiritual death. It actually refers to the elimination of both. It is the “death of death,” so to speak. Even Satan was thrown into the Lake of Fire (Rev.20:10), symbolizing the fact that even he will be cleansed and purified in the fires of God’s righteous judgments. According to 1 Corinthians 15:26, “*The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*” Just a few verses earlier (v. 22), the Apostle Paul pointed that “*as in Adam ALL die, so in Christ ALL will be made alive.*” (the caps are mine)

Finally if all sinners at the end of the ages are literally thrown into a Lake of Fire “*for ever and ever,*” prior to the creation of the New Heavens and New Earth, why are all those sinners still hanging around outside the gates of the New Jerusalem? See Rev. 22:14, “*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.*”

The chronology and imagery of the Book Revelation were never meant to be taken literally. The whole thing was a dream or vision, after all. If you try to make literal sense out of it, all you end up with are absurdities.