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A Biblical Worldview Perspective on Hell

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I was talking with a guy one time about faith matters, and just right out of the blue he brought up the idea of hell. In fact, he made what, to me, seemed like a really outrageous statement. He said he actually wanted to go to hell because he was sure that is where all his friends would be. He went on to say that they would all just hang out and drink beer together for eternity.

Now this guy is the only one who ever said anything like that to me, but I have actually heard of other people expressing the same thought. It makes me wonder where these people get the idea that their vision of hell is even remotely accurate. Nowhere in the Bible is hell described that way. It seems to come straight out of their imagination. I guess they figure that since it will only be sinners going to hell, that it will be full of bad people, like them and their buddies, just going around doing the kinds of bad things they did on earth and enjoying one another's company.

Well, it's not going to be like that. One of the big problems people run into when dealing with the topic of hell is that they imagine it in terms of the physical environment that they know. (In many ways, it is actually the same problem a lot of people have when they think about heaven.)

The truth is, though, eternity, where heaven and hell exist, transcends the physical universe. The reality of our existence in eternity is going to be quite different from our earthly one.

The problem we run into when trying to describe a transcendent existence is that we don't have

any actual experience in that realm. The only experience we have of living is in the natural world where we currently dwell. Thus, when we try to talk about transcendent reality, we have to do it using metaphors and images that are tied to this world – the one place where we do have experience.

In the Bible, God has revealed to mankind things about Himself and the eternal realm so that we can have some sense of who He is and His ways. But the problem of not having any personal experience of eternity still exists. Even in God's revelation in Scripture, He has to use images and metaphors to describe it. This does not make it any less real, it only means that the reality is much beyond what we are capable of comprehending based on our earthly existence. The best we can do is get a general sense of the reality.

As we examine Scripture, we actually come across a number of different images to describe hell, and what is described is truly horrible. But there is something else we need to recognize, as well – the descriptions are not literal. Be careful, though. That does not mean hell is not real and doesn't exist. What it means is that we are just limited in our ability to describe it. And as horrible as the descriptions are, the reality is so much worse. Hell is not a place bad people are going to go and enjoy hanging out with their friends. It is a place of isolation, agony, and separation from God – for eternity.

As we look at the metaphors and other descriptions for hell used in the Bible, we will also share Bible verses and passages where these images are discussed. Understand, though, that what is shared here is not intended to be an exhaustive study. There are other

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verses, as well, that reinforce what is being shared here. These are given to help believers have a broader grasp of what the Bible teaches about hell.

1. Unending Death/Second Death

Matthew 10:28; Acts 2:27; Romans 6:23; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 2:10-11; Revelation 20:6, 14; 21:8

In biblical theology, the first death is a reference to physical death, and the second is associated with spiritual death. The second death is the state of being separated from God for eternity. Those who know a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ will not experience the second death, but will go on to eternal life in the presence of God.

As we think about the second death, we should note that it is associated with the judgment to which non-believers will be subject. It is reserved exclusively for non-believers and will result in them going to hell.

2. Punishment

Matthew 25:46; John 3:36; John 5:29; Romans 2:5-8; Hebrews 10:28-31

A second image we find in Scripture is that hell is a place of punishment. It is not a place where people are sent to get reformed so they can move on to something better. They end up there because they did something deserving of judgment.

God is completely just. He would never send people to hell who are not deserving. At the same time, He is completely righteous and demands that humanity be righteous, as well. Unfortunately, no human can live up to that standard. But this is where another of His characteristics shines forth – He is also merciful. And in His mercy, He has provided a way for us to have our

unrighteousness mitigated – and He provided the means for that mitigation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who reject His remedy, though, will be judged – and they will deserve the punishment they receive. It will be something that they, themselves, have personally chosen.

3. Outer Darkness

Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; 2 Peter 2:4, 17; Jude 13

The term "outer darkness" is used in several places in Scripture to describe the nature of separation from God. It generally describes a condition of great sorrow, loss, and woe.

God is often described as light, and the idea of darkness represents the opposite. As with the other descriptions of hell, the term itself is symbolic. At the same time, it represents an actual reality. God's judgment is pictured as "dark" because of the absence of light – that is, the absence of God's presence.

Hell exists outside of the natural universe in an eternal realm that those who live in physical reality do not have access to. In using this imagery, God has revealed the nature of hell in another way that helps us to grasp a sense of it. This outer darkness represents a place of judgment, moral depravity, trouble and affliction, death and nothingness, and a place of anguish, heartache, grief, and unspeakable suffering.

4. Unquenchable Fire

Matthew 18:8-9; Mark 9:46-48; Luke 16:19-31; Hebrews 10:27; Jude 7, 23; Revelation 20:14-15, 21:8-9

The image of fire is probably the most well known and talked about metaphor for hell. It is an image that represents severe pain and suffering.

It is difficult to imagine the actual reality this represents. Hell exists in transcen-

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dent reality, which no living human has ever experienced. It is certainly possible that God has created physical fire in the transcendent realm, but it is, perhaps just as likely that fire is another metaphor meant to represent an element of spiritual reality that human beings, in our current state, have no way of fully grasping. Regardless of the ultimate truth, one thing we can be sure of is that the reality will be way worse than the image.

5. The Worm Does Not Die

Mark 9:46-48

This imagery is taken from Isaiah 66:24, and carries a similar meaning to the unending death and the punishment in the images above. The passage in Isaiah describes a period of great prosperity in the coming kingdom of the Messiah. This image describes the heaps of dead bodies killed in battle where the people of God have triumphed, and go out to observe the carcasses of those who died standing against God. The thought is that there were so many carcasses that the worms would never run out of food, and would be around until those bodies were completely consumed – essentially an eternity. So what we have here is an image that denotes great misery and complete destruction.

So the passage in Mark borrows the Isaiah imagery and applies it to the state beyond the grave. It describes the destruction and suffering of the wicked as something that will be disgusting, frightening, and eternal.

6. Everlasting Destruction Outside of God's Presence

2 Thessalonians 1:9

In this verse, it is said of those who do not know God that they will be "punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord." In this case hell is not described using a material image,

but as an eternal existence totally and completely outside of the presence of God. Additionally, it is described as a place of everlasting punishment and destruction. Here, it is left to the imaginations of those reading the words to envision what that may be like. Whatever it is though, it is certainly more horrible than anything our limited imaginations can conjure up.

7. Destruction

Matthew 7:13-14

This image of hell, as one of destruction, is found in Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus' focus is not so much on giving a detailed description of hell, as it is to admonish people not to live a life that would lead there. The more vivid images are left to other passages of Scripture.

According to Christ's teaching, the road to hell is the default for most of humanity. It is described as broad with a wide gate that is easily accessible to humanity. At the same time, it is a road that leads to destruction. In other words, it appears that much more of humanity will opt for the road to hell than for the road to life that is narrow and has a small gate.

8. Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth

Matthew 24:51

This image is taken from one of Jesus' parables. Here, Jesus described a master who was going on a long trip and put one of his servants in charge of the household while he was away. The parable describes the servant as wicked, and who abused his authority while the master was gone. However, at a time when the servant was not expecting, the master returned and punished him for his wrongdoing. It is said that the master will "cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The "weeping" describes deep regret of the heart, mind, and soul, along with wailing and beating of the breast as an expression of intense sorrow. The "gnashing of teeth" describes a person's reaction to intense bodily pain. When put together, this description of hell is seen as a place of indescribable spiritual agony and unending physical pain.

So What Is Hell Like?

By compiling all of the metaphors together, what does the Bible indicate hell is like? It is a place of:

- total separation from God - (Eternal death, Outside of God's presence),
- punishment for a life a sin (Punishment, Everlasting destruction),
- great sorrow, loss, and woe (Outer darkness),
- pain and suffering (Unquenchable fire, Where the worm does not die, Destruction), and
- deep regret (Weeping and gnashing of teeth).

While we may not be able to fully comprehend the horrors of hell as we live this side of eternity, we do know that it is a place where those who refuse Christ will be sent to be eternally separated from God – and we know that it will be a horrific place. And as can be discerned from the images above, it doesn't even have to be a physical location as we envision it from the biblical images for there to be eternal agony.

If you were to take a survey and ask people if they think they will go to heaven, almost all will say yes. You will get responses that indicate they don't think they are really that bad, or that the acts they have done in their lives don't rise to the level of deserving to go to hell.

Sadly, that does not represent reality. When people make those kinds of judgments, they are doing so based on their own personal set of moral values. In truth, though, the ultimate evaluation will be made by God based on His standard – and His standard is total moral perfection.

Of course, no one can, or has ever, lived a life of moral perfection (except Christ Himself). And outside of living a life of moral perfection, there is only one other way to achieve heaven – to have one's moral imperfections (sins) pardoned by God Himself.

And God actually provided a way for human beings to receive that pardon. When Jesus Christ died on the cross, He took upon Himself the sins of the world. Those who acknowledge that fact and give their lives to Him will receive that pardon – and along with it eternal life in heaven. Those who don't, no matter who they are, have made their decision to walk down the broad road with the wide gate to eternity in hell.

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