

FIVE VIEWS OF HELL

By Mark Moore

I. Literal

- A. Definition: Hell is a literal place of torment described in terms of flames, sulfur, worms, darkness and gnashing of teeth. All those who do not accept Christ as Lord will be consigned to this place for all eternity.
1. They will be cognizant and perhaps even recipients of a new, eternal body (Jn 5:28-29; Acts 24:15) which could, for example, feel the agony of burning, but not be burned up (cf. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 21).
 2. This view sees hell as punitive not redemptive. In other words, the flames are for punishment, not purification as in Purgatory and Universalism.
- B. Reasons to believe this position:
1. It is the most natural reading of most of the passages on "hell" (Isa 66:24; Mt 25:41, 46; Mk 9:48; 2 Thess 1:8-9; Heb 6:2; Jude 7; Rev 14:11; 20:10). Heaven and hell are both described with the same terms (everlasting [*aiionios*], eternal, forever, unquenchable, etc.). Therefore, it seems inconsistent to believe in an eternal heaven but not an eternal hell.
 2. The soul/spirit¹ of man lives on after death:
 - a. O.T.--2 Sam 12:23; Job 19:25-26; Psa 73:24; Prov 14:32; Eccl 12:7; Isa 14:9-10; Eze 32:18-31.
 - b. N.T.--Mt 22:31-32; Lk 16:19-31; 23:43; Phil 1:23; 1 Cor 15:44; 2 Cor 5:8; 1 Pet 3:19; Rev 6:9-12.
 - c. It is one thing to say that the soul lives on after death; it is quite another to say that it is eternal. The doctrine of the eternal nature of the soul was a Platonic philosophy accepted almost universally during the first century. However, just because it was a Hellenistic belief does not mean that it was not true or Biblically sound.
 3. It has been, far and away, the most dominant and accepted view throughout the history of the church, especially popularized by Augustine, Edwards, and Dante's *Inferno*.
 4. It has generally been the liberal branches of the church that deny the literal and/or eternal nature of hell.
 - a. For example, during the intertestamental period there were extensive debates over the duration of hell. During Jesus' day, the Pharisees taught that hell was eternal while the Sadducees believed that punishment lasted only a year or two.
 - b. However, our fear of liberal theology is not an adequate basis for exegesis.
 5. If Death and Hades are destroyed in the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:10), then there will be no more dying. Therefore, those in hell exist eternally.
 6. It is an effective tool for evangelism. However, not only is this an inadequate basis for exegesis, such cruel pragmatism is antithetical to the character of Christ.
- C. Difficulties with this view:
1. Eternal suffering seems quite severe for sins done during a measurable lifetime which is but an infinitesimal fraction of eternity. Hence, such severity seems out of character for a God of love and mercy. **However:** Three responses may be given to this. First, the sins done in the body are ultimately against an eternal and perfect God. Hence, they deserve eternal, perfect punishment (Anselm). Second, hell is not merely punishment for sins, it

¹Although there is some distinction between the words soul and spirit both in the Hebrew and the Greek, they are often used synonymously since "the soul is the manifestation of life produced by the spirit" (Fields, p. 12), (cf. 1 Ki 17:21-22; Lk 12:20; Acts 2:27, Rev 6:9; 20:4).

is a result of the freewill choice of an individual to reject God. That being the case, where else is one to flee from God's presence in eternity? Third, we are poor judges of divine justice.

2. The term "forever" is not always equivalent to *eternity*. See Walvoord, pp. 23-26 in *Four Views of Hell*. **However:** The duration of the word "forever" (and its synonyms) must be determined by context. Never, in relation to hell, are these words clearly limited or its duration curtailed.
3. Knowing that your loved ones were suffering intolerably in hell would diminish the joy of heaven. **However,** saints may not be cognizant of that fact in heaven, or, understanding the nature and justice of God, that fact may become palatable or, according to Jonathan Edwards, even delightful.

II. Metaphorical

A. Definition: The Biblical descriptions of hell are figures of speech and not intended to be taken literally. They are warnings to the wicked of severe judgment and punishment.

1. John Calvin suggested that perhaps the fire of hell was not literal. He is followed by a host of others who, while perhaps not adopting the Metaphorical position, have wondered if these descriptions are not figurative (e.g. Charles Hodge, J. I. Packer, Kenneth Kantzer, Billy Graham).
2. This is not intended to "soften the blow," but to understand the nature of the Biblical figures.

B. Reasons to believe this position:

1. The Bible often uses figures of speech. Hyperboles like this can be found throughout the Bible. This is especially true when describing future events (e.g. prophecy) or the afterlife which cannot be seen now or even literally depicted since they are outside our range of experience (e.g. heaven: gates of pearls, streets of gold, walls laden with precious stones). Genre, context, and audience must be determining factors.
2. Most people don't take the *worms* literally (Isa 51:8; 66:24; Mk 9:48), it may also seem reasonable not to take the fire literally. Furthermore, both worms and fire picture the valley of Hinnom, and visual comparison of what hell will be like.
3. Fire is a commonly used figure for: Passion (Rev 1:14), Judgment (1 Cor 3:15); Sexual desire (1 Cor 7:9); untamed words (James 3:5-6); and strife (Lk 12:49).
4. Taking the fire literally makes hell much like Hitler's concentration camps, a moral comparison which is unpalatable for most Christians. **However,** even if the descriptions of hell are literal, the difference between God and Hitler is infinite. God will be justified in his judgments against the wicked. Hitler murdered whimsically because of his own arrogance and prejudice.
5. Both the Jews and the Greeks of Jesus' day used similar hyperboles to describe their understanding of hell.
6. Taking the pictures of hell literally creates some apparent contradictions, at least according to the present natural laws: (i) Dark fire, and (ii) burning with fire and eaten by worms and yet no consumption.

C. Difficulties with this position:

1. It may rely too heavily on extra-biblical literature. In other words, it makes Jesus and the Apostles too dependent on prevailing views rather than speaking authoritatively on their own.
2. Although it is appropriate to identify figures of speech in the Bible and interpret them accordingly, one must be cautious not to question the inerrancy and/or inspiration of the text while doing so. Nor should one relegate a Biblical statement to a figure of speech because it is unpalatable or unpopular.
3. Does it really soften the punishment anyway? If not fire, won't hell have something else equally unpleasant?

III. Annihilation

- A. Description: After appropriate punishment in a literal hell, for deeds done in the body, God extinguishes the soul of that person, thus they cease to exist.
1. This view does not insinuate that there is no life after death, even for the wicked. However some liberal theologians believe that death is terminal for all (cf. Act 23:8). This mistaken notion denies the clear teachings of scripture (cf. I.B.2.) and should not be confused with annihilation as taught by conservative, Bible-believing scholars.
 2. This does not necessarily exclude eternal punishment for Satan, the Beast and the false prophet (Rev 20:10).
 3. This view has been espoused by Clark Pinnock, John Stott, Edward Fudge, Michael Green, and Russell Boatman.
- B. Reasons to believe this position:
1. God alone is immortal (1 Tim 6:15-16). Human immortality is found only in connection with His divine Spirit and a resurrected body (1 Cor 15:50-54).²
 - a. Proponents of Annihilationism suggest that all souls, apart from God would therefore cease to exist. This would explain the renewal of the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:2, 14, 19).
 - b. Furthermore, they suggest that the doctrine of the immortality of the soul is based on Platonic thought, passed on to the church through Augustine as Scriptural truth (cf. I.B.2.c.).
 - c. If this is true, then there is another difficulty created by an eternal hell--metaphysical dualism--the coexistence of both heaven and hell. God would have to eternally "abide in" hell in order to sustain the existence of the suffering souls there (1 Cor 15:28).
 2. The Bible teaches that sinners will be destroyed (Psa 37:2, 9-10, 20, 38; Mal 4:1-2; Mt 3:10-12; 10:28; Gal 6:8; 1 Cor 3:17; Rom 1:32; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Pet 2:1, 3, 6; 3:6-7; 3:7), using such words as "death" (Eze 1:20; Rom 6:23; Rev 20:14); "Destruction" [*apoleia*] (Psa 92:7; Mt 7:13; Phil 3:19; 2 Thess 1:9; Heb 10:39); and "Perish" [*apollumi*].
 - a. It is important for us to understand the range of meaning that these terms have. And even more important, we must allow the Bible to define these terms.
 - i. For instance, "death" does not always mean the extinction of life (Gen 2:17; Jn 8:51; Eph 2:1; Col 3:3).
 - ii. The range of meaning for "soul" [Heb. *nephesh*; Gk. *psuche*], is even broader (cf. Fields, pp. 11-13) and must be defined with caution.
 - iii. *Apollumi* can also mean to torment (Mt 8:29; Mk 1:24) or lose (Mt 10:6, 42; 15:24), neither of which would necessitate total annihilation. Likewise, its noun form [*apoleia*], can simply mean "waste" (Mk 14:4; cf. Jn 17:12).
 - b. Although these words do have a broad range of meaning and can mean something other than annihilation, they don't necessarily mean something other than annihilation. As always, these words can only be correctly interpreted in context, allowing for figurative usage where it is appropriate.
 - c. The destruction of the wicked in the O.T. is most often in reference to this present life, not the life to come.
 3. Annihilation could be viewed metaphorically as eternal punishment. Furthermore, for the same reasons that capital punishment was supported in the O.T. as being both appropriate and humane retribution, so too annihilation is appropriate and humane eternal

²This Theological tenet is known as "Conditionalism." It is the idea that the human soul has the capacity for eternal life, but that eternal life is not an inherent and inalienable quality of the human soul.

punishment. **However**, Annihilation is not the most natural understanding of the word punishment (Gk. *kolasis*), which emphasizes the act of punishing not the result of the punishment rendered.

4. Even those texts which seem to teach most clearly the eternal nature of hell may be viewed as hyperboles. For example
 - a. Rev. 14:11 is a direct quote from Isa 34:10 which describes the destruction of Edom. But if one travels to Edom today (s)he will not find it still smoldering. That description is obviously exaggerated.
 - b. Mark 9:48 borrows the imagery of Isa 66:24--"Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched." But again, this is a poetic description of God's earthly enemies that were, in fact, extinguished. It is as if to say, "The worm and the fire don't quit *until the job is finished.*"
 - c. Matthew 25:46 continues to be a difficult passage. But (i) we must remember that it is a parable and not all details are to be pressed. And (ii) annihilation might be figuratively interpreted as "eternal punishment" since its results are everlasting (cf. III.B.3).
5. It frees God from being a vindictive monster who creatively but sadistically tortures the damned in the same way that mischievous boys would treat stray cats. **However**, we must be cautious about imposing human ethical standards on God. His wisdom is beyond us. (However, cf. 2 Sam 24:14).
6. Annihilation is a good apologetic against those who attack the God of Christianity as being a heartless, bloodthirsty monster who created human beings for the purpose of torturing them in an eternal Auschwitz. **However**, our theology must be Bible based, not a knee-jerk reaction to every cultural criticism.

C. Difficulties with this position:

1. It must explain many of the apparent statements about hell being eternal (cf. I.B.1. & III.B.4).
2. The dominant view of Jesus day, both among the populace and the Pharisees, was eternal suffering. Now Scriptures should be interpreted in light of its audience. Therefore, had the writers of the Bible wanted to indicate annihilation to their original audience, they probably would have had to be much more specific than they were. **However**, among the Jewish literature of Jesus' day, there was an unanswered paradox concerning hell. Most texts spoke of eternal punishment (Judith 16:17; 1 Enoch 27:1-3; 53:1-3; 91:9; 2 Enoch 40:12-13; 10:1-6; *Sibylline Oracles* 52:290-310; 2 Baruch 44:12-15; 51-56; *Jubilees* 36:10; 4 Maccabees 9:9; 10:15; 12:12), but some spoke in terms of annihilation (Psalms of Solomon 3:11-12; Wisdom of Solomon 4:18-19; 5:14-15; *Sibylline Oracles* 4:175-85; 4 Ezra 7:61; *Pseudo Philo* 16:3).
3. This view is shared by Herbert W. Armstrong, 7th Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and "Modernists." **However**, because a particular sect or cult shares a doctrine does not make it false. There is some truth in all sects or virtually no one would be swayed by them.
4. Annihilation leaves us with an uncomfortable inequality. All the wicked who died in ages past were consigned to torment in Hades. Some of them have been suffering for thousands of years now before the inception of "The Lake of Fire" (Rev 20:11-14). Is it just "too bad" for them that they were born so early? Or will the wicked of the terminal generation suffer equal time in the Lake of Fire?

IV. Purgatory

- A. Definition: Purgatory is a place "between" heaven and hell in which an individual is purified through suffering if they are not yet good enough to enter into God's presence. Once their sins are adequately "expiated" they can leave purgatory and enter God's presence. This place is extant only until the final judgment of God.

1. When a people die, their fate is sealed. They will either go to heaven or hell. But those not "bad enough" for hell and yet not "good enough" for heaven must be purged of their sin.
 2. This "expiation" is accomplished by their own suffering and can be "augmented" by the living who pray for them and perform meritorious acts of benevolence on their behalf. This is based on the belief that Christians are all part of one body and this solidarity transcends death.
 3. This position is unique to the Roman Catholic faith.
 4. The first clear reference to purgatory was late in the 12th century (Jacque Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1984).
- B. Reasons to Believe this position:
1. "Purgatorial" ideas are found in other religions (e.g. reincarnation of the Hindus), indicating that humanity senses a need for purification after death. **However**, the natural theology of pagan religions is hardly an adequate base for adding to Christian revelation.
 2. It is supported by a strong Catholic tradition. For instance, by the third or fourth century there is evidence that the Eucharist was celebrated for the benefit of the dead.
 3. It might make sense that between our death and our entrance into heaven there would be a necessary "cleansing transformation" which would make us fit to enter into God's presence, since our death alone (shedding the mortal body), would certainly not purify our minds and spirits. Furthermore, it would make sense that this cleansing would be an act of human will rather than a sovereign, immediate act of predestined transformation.
 4. It is claimed by Catholics that there is no clear scripture that contradicts the idea of Purgatory, although Heb. 9:27-28 & Rom 8:1, 34 might be cited.
- C. Difficulties with this position:
1. This position is clearly based on tradition in addition to Scripture,³ although 2 Maccabees 12:41-46 is looked to for support.⁴
 - a. Hayes, in *Four Views of Hell*, defends the uses of tradition as part of theology and exegesis because (i) historically the church has adopted a variety of hermeneutical strategies (e.g. allegory), (ii) textual criticism has shown that determining the original text itself is complex and sometimes uncertain, and (iii) exegesis is always guided by the tradition of the expositor.
 - b. Although Hayes has identified three very real and important issues, he has blown them out of proportion in order to justify the inappropriate use of tradition over and against the Scriptures.
 2. The theology of Purgatory is a late development with obvious connection to Ecclesiastical position more than to Scripture.
 3. The idea of Purgatory demonstrates an egregious misunderstanding of Jesus' substitutionary atonement (Rom 3:28; Gal 2:21; Eph 2:8-10).
 4. The nature of the doctrine of Purgatory has changed throughout church history. This "metamorphosis" seems to betray the instability and unbiblical nature of the doctrine itself.

³The only Scripture which could be pressed into service here is Mt 12:31-32 which says that the blasphemy of the H.S. could not be forgiven in this age or in the age to come. Protestants have understood this as a hyperbole. But Augustine (*City of God*, 21.24) and Gregory the Great (*Dialogues*, 4.39), took this to mean that there were some sins that could be forgiven even after a person had died. 1 Cor 3:11-15 is also sometimes used to defend purgatory but it is obviously mishandled for this purpose. One might also look to 1 Cor 15:29--baptism for the dead.

⁴The Catholics accept this book as canonical.

V. Universalism

- A. Definition: The wicked will be purified through the flames of hell. The more you've sinned the longer you will stay in hell but eventually everyone will be saved.
 - 1. Advocated by Origen.
 - 2. This position can be synthesized with the Metaphorical view.
 - 3. Whereas Annihilationism says, "The more you sin, the longer you suffer, but eventually (mercifully) you will be snuffed," Universalism says, "The more you sin, the longer you suffer, but eventually (mercifully) you will be saved."
- B. Reasons to Believe this position:
 - 1. It advocates the ultimate omnipotence of God in his desire to love and redeem all of creation unto himself.
 - 2. It promotes the kind of love and mercy found in John 3:16, 1 Timothy 2:4, and 2 Peter 3:9
- C. Difficulties with the position:
 - 1. It has no Scriptural support (except perhaps Col. 1:20).
 - 2. It does not adequately consider the freewill of both men and of fallen angels.

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