

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINES OF HELL

Hell in Mark

The doctrine of hell does not play a prominent role in the Gospel of Mark. It is central in only one passage—Mark 9:42–48. There Mark records Jesus’ teachings about future punishment. First, Jesus stresses that hell is worse than death (it is better to drown in the sea than cause someone to sin and be thrown into hell; 9:42) and earthly suffering (it is better to be on earth maimed than in hell whole; 9:43). Jesus also teaches that hell is a punishment for sin. The overall thrust of the passage communicates, “Stop sinning or else you will suffer the consequences.”

Mark 9 also instructs us that people in hell are excluded from the kingdom of God and are “thrown into hell” by God (9:45, 47). Notice that although persons are responsible for their sin and the resultant destiny of hell, God is the one who casts them into hell. In addition, hell is a place where the fire never goes out (9:43) and where suffering never ends. The agents of suffering (the worm and the fire) are never extinguished (9:48; cf. Isa. 66:24). The implication is strong: The agents of suffering never end because those in hell experience conscious suffering forever.

Hell in Matthew

The doctrine of hell is a prevalent theme in Matthew. John the Baptist warns people about it. Most importantly, Jesus teaches about it throughout his ministry: in the Sermon on the Mount and the narratives that follow, in his commissioning the twelve disciples, in his parables of the kingdom and the narratives that follow, in the denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, and in the Mount of Olives Discourse.

Matthew 3 recounts how John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus. In 3:7–12, he proclaims several truths about final punishment. He warns that hell is a real danger for all who fail to repent—even for Jewish religious elites like the Pharisees and Sadducees (3:7). This future punishment is pictured as the “coming wrath” (3:7) and impending (“the ax is already at the root of the trees” in 3:10). John also cautions that those devoid of good fruit will be “cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10). Finally, John points to a final separation of the wheat from the chaff, when the chaff will be burned “with unquenchable fire” (3:11–12).

Matthew 5–7 records Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount. Known mostly for its emphasis on love and the kingdom of God, the Sermon on the Mount also includes some stern teaching about the reality and nature of hell (5:20–30; 7:13–27). In 5:20–30, Jesus contrasts hell with the kingdom of heaven, which cannot be attained unless one’s righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees (5:20). Hell is a real danger to unrepentant sinners (5:22; cf. 3:7). The “fire of hell” (5:22), the justice of hell (5:20–30; the passage is essentially saying, “Stop sinning or else you will suffer the consequences”), and the extreme suffering in hell (5:29–30) are particularly stressed. As

in Mark 9:42–48, the unrepentant are “thrown into hell” by God (5:29) and warned to use extreme measures to avoid being cast into it (5:30).

In Matthew 7:13–27, Jesus brings the Sermon on the Mount to a climax by stressing the importance of entering the kingdom. In doing so, he contrasts the kingdom of heaven with the horrors of hell. Jesus cautions that hell is a place of destruction, depicted as the end of a broad road (7:13). He also contrasts hell with life, shown as the end of a narrow road (7:14). Jesus points out that those devoid of good fruit (the context implies especially false prophets) will be “cut down and thrown into the fire” (7:19) and warns that hell awaits everyone who does not enter the kingdom of heaven (7:21–23). Because of this, hell is a danger for some who profess to know Christ but who continue in sin (7:21–23). Here Jesus also depicts himself as Judge and King who personally excludes the wicked from his presence and the kingdom of heaven: “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ ” (7:23).

Jesus then concludes the Sermon by painting a graphic scene of future punishment. Those who fail to respond obediently to Jesus’ message are likened to a house that is built on the sand and ultimately comes crashing down (7:24–27).

In the narrative section that follows the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus again speaks of hell. In 8:10–12 (as well as in 22:1–14, which contains essentially the same teaching on the subject), Jesus warns that the people of Israel who are devoid of faith are in danger of hell (“the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside” in 8:12; cf. 22:13). Jesus also portrays hell as “darkness” (8:12; cf. 22:13) and a place of intense suffering, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (8:12; cf. 22:13).

Jesus reasserts the theme of future punishment when he commissions his twelve disciples: “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” (10:28). In Jesus’ parable of the weeds (13:36–43) and the parable of the net (13:47–50), the doctrine of hell again surfaces. Both parables teach the same truths: Hell is exclusion/separation from the kingdom of God (13:40–41, 49–50); it is described as “the fire” (13:40; cf. 3:10–12), “the fiery furnace” (13:42, 50), and a place of suffering, and again depicted as a place “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13:42, 50; cf. 8:12).

In Matthew’s next narrative section, Jesus offers yet another firm warning about hell. In 18:6–9, he reiterates several truths about hell that are parallel to the passage in Mark 9:42–48. The primary difference for us is that he describes hell as a place of “eternal fire” (Matt. 18:8; cf. the similar thought in Mark 9:43, “where the fire never goes out”). In his denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus rhetorically asks them, “How will you escape being condemned to hell?” and shows that hell offers inescapable punishment for the impenitent (Matt. 23:33).

In the Mount of Olives Discourse, Jesus speaks of future punishment in three parables: the parable of the slaves (24:45–51), the parable of the bridesmaids (25:1–13), and the parable of the talents (25:14–30). He then teaches about hell and the final judgment in the

section concerning the separation of the sheep from the goats (25:31–46). Jesus teaches several truths about hell in these passages. First, hell is punishment for disobedience to the master (all three parables). It is also graphically expressed as being “cut into pieces,” a place where people are placed “with the hypocrites” (24:51), and as a place of suffering, again “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (24:51, 25:30; cf. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13). Jesus also likens hell to being outside or a place of exclusion/separation (25:10–12, 30; cf. 8:12), a place “outside ... darkness” (25:30; cf. 8:12), a place of personal banishment from his presence and the kingdom (“depart from me” in 25:41; cf. 7:21–23), and a place of just condemnation/punishment (25:41, 46). Hell is then described as a place of “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41; cf. 18:8 “eternal fire”) and of “eternal punishment” (25:46).

Hell in Luke

Like the Gospel of Mark but unlike the Gospel of Matthew, Luke includes some important material on future punishment but does not employ it as a central theme. Some of Luke’s teaching concerning hell has already been summarized in parallel Gospel accounts. For example, Luke 3:7–12 parallels Matthew 3:7–12, and Luke 12:5 relates the same account of Jesus’ teaching as Matthew 10:28. Luke does not appear to refer frequently to this doctrine in Acts, but he does relate a few fresh insights concerning the future punishment in his Gospel—particularly in Luke 13:1–5 and 16:19–31. In Luke 13:1–5, hell is described as a place for the unrepentant, and those in hell are portrayed as perishing. In Luke 16:19–31, Jesus depicts hell as a place where justice prevails, consisting of suffering, torment, and agony (16:23–25, 27), and as a place of fire (16:24). Jesus graphically illustrates that this future punishment is final and inescapable separation and exclusion from heaven (16:25–26).

Hell in Paul

The word “hell” does not occur in the writings of Paul. But make no mistake, Paul clearly teaches about hell when he addresses the future punishment of unbelievers. Because it would be too cumbersome to highlight all that Paul relates about hell, Romans and 2 Thessalonians will serve as representative—Romans because it illustrates Paul’s diverse handling of future punishment, and 2 Thessalonians because it contains Paul’s most explicit and thorough teaching on hell.

Romans. In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul from the beginning stresses the necessity of proclaiming the gospel because it is God’s appointed means of bringing people to personal faith in Christ. Preaching the gospel is crucial because of the current sinful state of all humanity. Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin, under God’s wrath, and will be judged accordingly. Only those who have faith in Christ will escape God’s just judgment. In this portrayal of the predicament of sinners, Paul relates some important truths about the future punishment of the wicked.

(1) In Paul’s theology, future punishment is connected to God’s wrath. The wicked are presently under his wrath (1:18–32), are objects of his wrath (9:22), continually store up wrath for the day of wrath (2:5–8; 3:5), and can only be saved from this coming wrath by being justified by faith in Christ (5:9–21).

(2) Paul connects future punishment with God's judgment. The wicked are presently and deservedly condemned under the judgment of God, which is impartial, true, righteous, and certain (2:1–12; 3:7–8). This condemnation is the result of sin, is connected to Adam's headship (5:12–21), and is just punishment for sin (6:23).

(3) Paul stresses that future punishment will consist of "trouble and distress." This suffering shows no favoritism between Jews and Gentiles (2:8–11).

(4) Future punishment is often portrayed as "death" and "destruction." Sinners deserve death (1:32), in Adam all die (5:12–21), the wages of sin is death (6:16–23; cf. "perish" in 2:12), as sinners we bear fruit for death (7:5), and those who live according to the flesh should expect death (8:13). Paul also asserts that the reprobate are vessels of wrath "prepared for destruction" (9:22; cf. Phil. 1:28, 3:19; 1 Thess. 5:3; 1 Tim. 6:9).

(5) Paul seems to suggest that the present state of sin and the corresponding future punishment is separation from Christ ("cursed and cut off from Christ" in 9:3). Here Paul expresses his desire to be separated from God if that would mean the salvation of his kindred people.

2 Thessalonians. It is in 2 Thessalonians that Paul teaches most directly concerning hell. In the midst of encouraging these believers suffering persecution, Paul stresses that God's justice will prevail (1:5–10). In just these few verses, Paul emphasizes several important truths about hell, and in the rest of the letter, he brings in additional pictures of final punishment. (1) He portrays hell as the result of God's retributive justice on sinners ("God is just. He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you," 1:6). (2) He teaches that hell is punishment/condemnation for those who do not know God and for those who do not obey the gospel (1:8; 2:12). (3) Hell is displayed as eternal destruction (1:9; cf. 2:3, 8, 10). (4) Hell is depicted as exclusion/separation from Jesus' presence and majesty ("shut out from" in 1:9).

Hell in Hebrews

The doctrine of future punishment emerges in two passages in Hebrews (6:1–3 and 10:27–30). Hebrews 6:1–3 refers to the future punishment of the wicked as "eternal judgment" (6:2). Interestingly, eternal judgment is considered a foundational "elementary teaching" (6:1–3). Hebrews 10:27–30 depicts this judgment as fearful and dreadful (10:27, 31), and as a "raging fire that will consume the enemies of God" (10:27; cf. 10:31). Hebrews also clearly teaches that hell comes from God as punishment, judgment, and retribution (10:27–30).

Hell in James

The letter of James does not put much stress on the doctrine of hell, though it does offer some general thoughts concerning the future punishment of the wicked. (1) Unbelievers are said to wither away/be destroyed (1:11). (2) James also asserts that sin produces the offspring of death (1:15). (3) He shows that God is the Lawgiver and Judge, who is able to save and destroy sinners (4:12; cf. Matt. 10:28). (4) James warns that the wicked deserve to be punished severely and that this suffering is indeed coming upon the wicked (James 5:1–5). To portray this graphically, James uses the prophetic judgment imagery of

coming “misery,” “eating flesh with fire,” and the day of slaughter. James even concludes his letter by emphasizing that sinners need to be turned from impending “death” (5:20).

Hell in Peter and Jude

There is no clear teaching about hell in 1 Peter. Debates continue to rage over the interpretation of 3:19. But for our purposes, little can be gained, much time could be wasted, and few truths can be gleaned about hell by devoting significant space there.

Peter’s second letter, however, is filled with references to the future punishment of the wicked in hell. Since Jude closely parallels 2 Peter 2, we will also tie in Jude here. Peter and Jude both depict hell as “destruction” (2:1, 3, 12; 3:7, 9; Jude 5, 10, 11). They both liken hell to condemnation hanging over the wicked (2 Peter 2:3; Jude 4; the contextual reference is to false teachers). Hell is a place like a gloomy dungeon where rebellious angels are held for judgment (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6 is similar—God has kept rebellious angels in darkness, bound with everlasting chains for judgment on the great day). Peter illustrates the future punishment by referring to the account of Sodom and Gomorrah burning to ashes (2 Peter 2:6) and warns that God holds the unrighteous for the Day of Judgment while continuing their punishment (2:9). It is also noteworthy that Peter unmistakably instructs us that hell is a place of retribution (“paid back” in 2:13) and “blackest darkness” reserved for the wicked forever (2:17; Jude 13). Jude adds to Peter’s portrait that hell is the punishment of eternal fire (Jude 7, 15, 23).

Hell in John

The doctrine of hell emerges infrequently in John’s Gospel. John’s enigmatic style sometimes leaves the reader wondering the full implications of his message. For example, do the contrasting themes of light versus darkness or life versus death at times imply the continuation of the sinful state after death or do they imply future punishment? In any event, three passages clearly teach about the future punishment of unbelievers: 3:16–36; 5:24–29; and 15:1–8. John describes future punishment as “condemnation” (3:17–21; 5:24, 29) and the continuation/culmination of God’s wrath on those without faith in Christ (3:36). John also pictures hell as destruction and exclusion—unbelievers cannot enter the kingdom of God (3:3–5), will “perish” (3:16; 10:28), and will be “cut off” from Christ (15:1). Hell is also likened to being thrown away into the fire and burned (15:6–7).

No clear references to hell emerge in the three letters of John. Revelation, however, contains some of the most noteworthy passages on hell in all of Scripture. Revelation 14:9–11, 20:10–15; 21:8; and 22:15 disclose some important truths about hell. In 14:9–11, John asserts that hell is a place where God’s fury and wrath are felt at full force (14:10). Hell is also a place of intense suffering—even torment (14:10). John also likens hell to a place with “fire and sulfur” (14:10; cf. a lake of “fire and sulfur” in 20:10, a “lake of fire” in 20:14–15, and a “lake that burns with fire and sulfur” in 21:8) and a place where “the smoke of their torment rises forever and ever” (14:11). This torment is continual: “There will be no rest day or night” (14:11) and “they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10).

In Revelation 20:10–15, John emphasizes that hell is just punishment for the wicked. He also shows that God casts the devil, the beast, and the false prophet into hell. Notice that they are “thrown” there. They do not rule or have any power there (20:10). Hell will contain everyone whose name is not found in the book of life (20:15). John also emphasizes separation as he juxtaposes heaven and hell. This is particularly clear in Revelation 20–22 and especially in 21:6–8. Revelation 21:8 calls hell the “second death.” And in 22:15, hell is likened to being outside/banished from heaven.

Three Predominant Pictures of Hell

This brief overview clearly demonstrates that the future punishment of the wicked in hell is a significant theme in the New Testament. It is woven into the whole fabric of New Testament teaching. In fact, future punishment is addressed in some way by *every* New Testament author. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Paul, James, Peter, Jude, and the unknown author of Hebrews *all* mention it in their writings. That could not be said of many important biblical truths.

Another observation to be drawn from this overview is that the New Testament teaching concerning hell is somewhat diverse. At times, the pictures of hell even seem irreconcilable. How can burning fire coexist with the blackest darkness, for example? How can someone experience intense torment and yet perish? These presentations of hell should not be viewed as contradictory, however. Instead, they are better understood as complementary. Similar to the way in which different artists highlight varied characteristics of their particular subject, different depictions of hell bring out various shades that a monochromatic rendering could not.

Yet it should be noted that these different depictions of hell did not emerge as one might expect. It would seem plausible to expect that Matthew might focus on one aspect of hell, Mark another, Luke another, and even John another. In some ways, this is correct. Paul incorporates wrath into his doctrine of hell more than the others. James and Peter seem to place more stress on the destruction or death of the wicked. And Matthew places hell in contrast with the kingdom.

But an interesting thing to notice is that overall each New Testament writer’s descriptions closely resemble those of the others. In fact, the diverse portraits of hell often come from the *same* biblical writer. Of course, it would be unwise to suppose that we could discover a detailed theology of hell in the brief excerpts on the subject by Mark, Luke, James, Peter, Jude, or the author of Hebrews. That is *not* the point of this paper. But it is fascinating that similar pictures of hell emerge throughout the New Testament.

The following descriptions of hell recur throughout nearly all New Testament writers. Every author pictures hell as just punishment or judgment. Most also depict it in terms of destruction or death. Most also portray it as exclusion, banishment, or separation. Suffering and fire are often included in the pictures of hell as well, but they are often subsumed under a more prominent idea like punishment or destruction. So the three predominant pictures of hell that emerge from this study are hell as punishment,

destruction, and banishment. Each description offers a valuable way of looking at the nature of hell.

Punishment

The chief description of hell in the New Testament is punishment. That hell is punishment is communicated by every New Testament author. For clear examples, see Mark 9:42–48; Matthew 5:20–30; 24–25; Luke 16:19–31; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; Hebrews 10:27–31; James 4:12, 5:1–5; 2 Peter 2:4–17; Jude 13–23; and Revelation 20:10–15.

Three passages are most striking in stressing hell as punishment. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus claims the prerogative as the judge who determines the destinies of the world. He consigns the wicked to “eternal punishment” and grants the righteous “eternal life.”

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, the apostle Paul encourages believers who are suffering at the hands of persecutors. He comforts them by proclaiming: “God’s judgment is right.... God is just: He will pay back trouble for those that trouble you.... He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished.” In this passage Paul pictures God as the just judge. Hell is dispensed as appropriate retributive punishment on unbelievers.

The apostle John also stresses that hell is just punishment in his familiar account of the final judgment in Revelation 20:10–15. In the end, justice prevails. The wicked are cast into hell, and the righteous experience the unhindered and glorious presence of God on the new earth.

The punishment of hell is depicted as just, consists of suffering (often connected with fire), is conscious, and is eternal.

(1) The punishment is deserved and therefore *just*. The justice of the future punishment of the wicked is axiomatic. Yet for clarity and emphasis, the biblical writers stress the justice of the retributive punishment (i.e., “pay back” in 2 Thess. 1:6; 2 Peter 2:17, etc.) in many passages (see Matt. 5:20–30; 23:33; 24:45–25:46; Mark 9:42–48; Luke 16:19–31; Rom. 1:18–3:20; 2 Thess. 1:5–10; Heb. 10:27–31; James 4:12, 5:1–5; 2 Peter 2:4–17; Jude 6–23; Rev. 20:10–15).

(2) The punishment also consists of *suffering*. Those in hell suffer intense and excruciating pain. This pain is likely both emotional/spiritual and physical (John 5:28–29). Hell is a fate worse than being drowned in the sea (Mark 9:42). It is worse than any earthly suffering—even being maimed (Matt. 5:29–30; Mark 9:43). The suffering never ends (Matt. 25:41; Mark 9:48). The wicked will be “burned with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12). Those in hell will be thrown into the fiery furnace and will experience unimaginable sorrow, regret, remorse, and pain. The fire produces the pain described as “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30). The intensity of the suffering seems to be according to the wickedness of the person’s behavior (Rom. 2:5–8). Hell is utterly fearful and dreadful (Heb. 10:27–31). This punishment is depicted as “coming misery,” “eating flesh with fire,” and “the day of slaughter” (James 5:1–5). Those in hell will feel the full force of God’s fury and wrath

(Rev. 14:10). They will be “tormented” with fire (14:10–11). This suffering is best understood as endless since the “smoke of their torment rises forever and ever” (14:11). This suffering is constant because it is said that those in hell “will have no rest day or night” (14:11) and “will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (20:10).

(3) All these depictions make it best to conclude that the punishment is *conscious*. If hell did not consist of conscious suffering, it is hard to see how it could in any meaningful sense be worse than death, be worse than earthly suffering, be filled with weeping and gnashing of teeth, or be a place of misery. These images demonstrate that people in hell will be perfectly aware of their suffering and just punishment.

(4) This punishment is *eternal*. The fire is eternal, the smoke of the torment rises forever and ever, and the instruments of suffering are eternal. More than that, hell is called “eternal punishment” (Matt. 25:46). This eternal punishment is placed alongside “eternal life” in the passage in such a way that the natural interpretation should keep them parallel. The continual nature of the punishment is shown in Revelation 14:11, where it is said that the wicked “will have no rest day or night.” Jude 7 speaks of the “punishment of eternal fire.” The endlessness of this punishment is also confirmed by the forceful pronouncement in Revelation 20:10, “They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.” It is hard to imagine a stronger affirmation of endless punishment than that.

Destruction

Punishment is not the only picture of hell, however. Hell as destruction or death also plays a central role in Scripture. The theme of destruction occurs in the writings of most New Testament authors. The only exception seems to be Mark. Mark addresses hell in just one passage, however, so it is not at all surprising that he does not allude to hell as destruction (and if Mark 1:24, which speaks of Jesus’ destruction of the demons, refers to hell—which is possible but uncertain—then even Mark portrays hell as destruction). Destruction is clearly used as a depiction of hell in Matthew 7:13–14, 24–27; 24:51; Luke 13:3–5; John 3:16; Romans 9:22; Galatians 6:8; Philippians 1:28; 3:19; 1 Thessalonians 5:13; 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10; 1 Timothy 6:9; Hebrews 10:27; James 1:11, 15; 4:12; 5:3–5, 20; 2 Peter 2:6; and Revelation 21:8.

Conditionalists have been quick to point out that the historic view of hell lays most of its stress on hell as punishment and not as destruction. This charge is not without merit. This imbalance may result from the marked emphasis on sin as guilt, salvation as justification, and God as Judge in Protestant theology. With those themes as primary, it seems natural to stress hell as punishment. This imbalance may also have arisen because the more familiar extended passages on hell emphasize punishment more than destruction (i.e., Matt. 25:31–46; Rev. 20:10–15). Hell as punishment is clearly a predominant theme in the New Testament teaching concerning hell and is likely even the major picture of hell (cf. the previous section). But it should not lead us to ignore the other pictures of hell—destruction and banishment.

The more familiar passages portraying hell as destruction are generally smaller in scope and do not develop their teachings. A notable exception is 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, where Paul stresses hell as punishment but also brings in the picture of destruction, even calling it “eternal destruction” (1:9). It is indeed interesting that the theme of destruction has

been downplayed in church history because it is found in many well-known verses. The most-quoted passage in the world says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not *perish* but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Romans 6:23 asserts, “For the wages of sin is *death*, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus declared in Matthew 7:13–14, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to *destruction*, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Revelation 20:14 and 21:8 speak of the “*second death*.”

The growing emphasis on the theme of destruction has been a factor in the rising popularity of conditionalism. In his case for conditionalism, John Stott highlights Scripture’s “vocabulary of destruction” and suggests: “It would seem strange, therefore, if people who are said to suffer destruction are in fact not destroyed; and as you put it, it is difficult to imagine a perpetually inconclusive process of perishing.” Conditionalist John Wenham argues that when the Bible speaks of the unrighteous’ perishing, destruction, and death, it indicates total extinction, utter loss, or complete ruin.¹³ Conditionalist David Powys even claims, “Destruction is the most common way of depicting the fate of the unrighteous within the Synoptic Gospels.”

These conditionalists correctly remind us that destruction is a central motif in depicting hell in the New Testament. But in their interpretation of the destruction passages, they tend to assume a connotation of extinction or annihilation rather than the more probable sense of loss, ruin, or corruption. D. A. Carson shows this in his critique of Stott’s previously-quoted objection: “Stott’s conclusion ... is memorable, but useless as an argument, because it is merely tautologous: *of course* those who suffer *destruction* are *destroyed*. But it does not follow that those who suffer destruction cease to exist. Stott has assumed his definition of ‘destruction’ in his epigraph” (emphasis his).

So then what does hell as destruction signify? Douglas Moo addresses the meaning of destruction in his chapter of this book. He asserts that definitive conclusions are “not easy to attain,” but they do not necessarily connote “extinction.” Laying aside the judgment texts, Moo points out that none of the key terms usually has this meaning in the LXX or New Testament. Instead, the words usually “refer to the situation of a person or object that has lost the essence of its nature or function.” Moo notes that “destroy” and “destruction” can refer to barren land (*olethros* in Ezek. 6:14; 14:16), to ointment that is poured out wastefully (*apōleia* in Mark 14:4; Matt. 26:8), to wineskins with holes that no longer function (*apollymi* in Mark 2:22; Matt. 9:17; Luke 5:37), to a lost coin (*apollymi* in Luke 15:9), or even to the entire world that “perishes,” as the inhabited world in the Flood (2 Peter 3:6). Moo concludes, “In none of these cases do the objects cease to exist; they cease to be useful or to exist in their original, intended state.”

So hell as destruction is best understood to show that hell is final and utter loss, ruin, or waste. Destruction is a graphic picture that those in hell have failed to embrace the meaning of life and have wasted it. Trying to find life in themselves and sin, they have forfeited true life. Only ruin and garbage remains.

Banishment

The third central picture of hell in the New Testament is banishment. The idea of hell as banishment, separation, exclusion, or being left outside is found in the writings of most New Testament authors, with the exception of James or Hebrews. Hell as banishment is especially prominent in the teachings of Jesus, particularly in Matthew. This is to be expected because of the kingdom themes developed in Jesus' teaching in this Gospel. The contrast is vivid: Believers are welcomed into the kingdom while the wicked are banished outside of it.

Mark 9:42–48 reveals that those who do not enter the kingdom of God will be thrown into hell by God. John the Baptist stresses the final separation of the righteous from the wicked, noting that the wicked will be thrown into hell and “burned with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:1–12). In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims that he will judge the world and declare to unbelievers, “Away from me!” (7:21–23). In doing so, he personally banishes them from his kingdom. Jesus regularly portrays hell as being outside the kingdom (and in outer darkness) and the wicked as excluded from God's kingdom (8:12; 13:42, 50; 25:10–12, 30). In the Olivet Discourse, Jesus again shows that he will personally banish the wicked from the kingdom: “Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). Luke recounts Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, in which Jesus depicts the rich man in Hades as separated by a great chasm from Lazarus in heaven (Luke 16:19–31). John's Gospel also incorporates Jesus' warning about being “cut off” from him (John 15:1–7).

In 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10, the apostle Paul asserts that those in hell will be “shut out from” Jesus' presence and majesty. This is a strong picture of banishment.

The literary context in Revelation 20–22 makes it clear that hell should be understood in part through its contrast with heaven. In heaven, believers experience the glorious presence of God. The wicked, by contrast, are left outside, unable to enter the heavenly city and forever excluded from wondrous fellowship with God (22:14–15).

Whereas punishment stresses the active side of hell, banishment shows the horror of hell by highlighting what a person misses. When average evangelical church members are asked what hell is like, their likely response will be that hell is “separation from God.” While the idea of separation is certainly correct and included in this New Testament concept of banishment, separation alone does not do justice to the force of this picture of hell. Banishment is much stronger than separation. It suggests God's active judgment while separation could simply imply divine passivity. Banishment also stresses the dreadfulness and finality of the predicament. The Scriptures demonstrate that Christ eternally excludes the unrighteous from the kingdom. The wicked never experience unhindered fellowship with God. They are forever banished from his majestic presence and completely miss out on the reason for their existence—to glorify and know their Creator.

Kendall Harmon suggests three aspects of hell associated with banishment. (1) Hell is being cut off from Christ and the kingdom of God. This is what scholastic theologians

called the *poena damni*, the spiritual agony of exclusion from God's presence. (2) Hell is God's judgment in completely giving over the sinner to himself (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). (3) Hell is not being known by God (Luke 13:22–30). Addressing the banishment of the wicked from God and the glory of heaven, Augustine observed:

To be lost out of the kingdom of God, to be an exile from the city of God, to be alienated from the life of God, to have no share in that great goodness which God has laid up for them that fear him, has wrought out for them that trust in him would be a punishment so great that, supposing it to be eternal, no torments that we know of, continued through as many ages as man's imagination can conceive, could be compared with it.

Interpreting the Three Pictures of Hell

Important Considerations

It is important to note that the three pictures of hell are each characterized as *eternal*. Matthew 25:46 speaks of hell as “eternal punishment”; 2 Thessalonians 1:9 teaches that hell is “eternal destruction” and suggests eternal separation.

The three pictures of hell should also be viewed independently before synthetically. Harmon astutely observes that Edward Fudge mistakenly supposes that God's final sentence begins with banishment, continues with a period of punishment, and ends with destruction. The Scripture offers no such order. Just as each Gospel account deserves to be read and interpreted as a whole before being harmonized or systematized, each portrait of hell should be allowed to stand on its own. Much can be learned about hell by considering it as punishment. Other insights can be gleaned by viewing it as destruction. Even further light can be shed on hell by seeing it as banishment. Three pictures are more helpful and produce more clarity and understanding than only one. Harmon suggests:

The crucial point is that the different images each refer to a single reality and that combining different images is not like putting together the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, but rather like letting the sunlight reflect through a diamond and seeing each ray's colors as pointing towards a single eschatological truth.

Next, the three pictures of hell should be held in balance. Those of us holding the historic view of hell should be careful not to allow the motif of punishment to dominate our thoughts about hell. Conditionalists should make sure they are not stretching the destruction theme beyond what Scripture actually teaches. And most evangelicals need to guard against the tendency to view hell only in passive terms, like separation.

Finally, one must not assume that these three pictures of hell cannot stand together. Indeed, they can and do converge in the same passages. The three pictures of hell are sometimes used by the same author in the same passage. Thus, Jesus uses all of them in Matthew 24:45–25:46. The wicked servant is “cut into pieces”—destruction (24:51). He is assigned to a place with the hypocrites—banishment (24:51). And he suffers extreme pain in the punishment. In the next parable, the bridesmaids are shut outside—banishment (25:10–12). Jesus then moves to a different parable in which the worthless servant is thrown outside into the darkness—banishment (25:30). The servant also suffers intensely—punishment (25:30). In his next analogy, Jesus proclaims to the wicked,

“Depart from me,” and banishes them to hell as a place of “eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). Yet he concludes the section by declaring that the wicked will “go away to eternal punishment” (25:46). This passage is not unique in interweaving these pictures of hell. The apostle Paul also uses the portraits of punishment, destruction, and banishment in 2 Thessalonians 1:5–10—and even in one verse (1:9)! Paul declares that God will punish unbelievers (1:6, 8, 9). But he also stresses that they will receive “eternal destruction” and will be “shut out” from Christ’s presence. Revelation 20:10–22:15 likewise brings these three pictures together when John depicts punishment (20:10–15), destruction in the sense of “second death” (20:14; 21:8), and banishment by declaring that those in hell will remain outside heaven and will never enter it. So punishment, destruction, and banishment can stand together—they do so in three of the central passages on hell.

Systematic Implications

The three pictures of hell are not easily integrated into a simplified whole, however. Jesus says in Matthew 25:41 and 46, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire....’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.” From this passage, someone might propose that the banishment leads to punishment. But that is reading too much into Jesus’ intentions because Paul asserts in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, “They will be punished with eternal destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.” Here someone could conclude the opposite—the punishment is the destruction and exclusion. And in Revelation 20:10–22:15, the ideas of punishment, death, and exclusion are never integrated. So great caution should be taken when trying to systematize these three pictures of hell.

But this does not mean that these three pictures do not have important systematic implications. Quite the contrary, understanding them will further biblical and systematic theology. These pictures of hell correspond to the biblical teaching concerning God, sin, the atonement, salvation, and heaven.

The three pictures of hell interweave with biblical portraits of God. Hell as punishment vividly depicts God as Judge, who justly sentences the wicked (cf. Rev. 20:10–15). Hell as destruction seems to portray God as Warrior or Victor who defeats his enemies (cf. 2 Thess. 1:6–9). Hell as banishment views God as King who allows only his citizens into his kingdom (cf. Matt. 7:21–23).

The three pictures of hell flow naturally from biblical portraits of sin. Each picture of hell seems to be the logical result of the particular portrait of sin. Hell as punishment recognizes sin as guilt, crime, trespass, or transgression. Hell as destruction/death sees sin as opposition or spiritual death (e.g., Rom. 5:12–21; Eph. 2). Hell as banishment/separation views sin as alienation from God.

Various pictures of hell even seem to show an “inaugurated eschatology” of sin/death. God’s wrath is on sinners, and hell is the culmination and release of that wrath (Rom. 1:8–2:8; 5:6–11). Sinners are condemned already, but they await the ultimate

condemnation in hell (John 3:16–36; 5:24–28). Sinners are now dead spiritually but await the second death. Unbelievers are alienated from God now but will be finally excluded from his presence. Sinners’ hearts are dark now but will eternally be in the “outer darkness” and “blackest darkness” of hell. The evidence is compelling: In some sense the descriptions of hell can be viewed as culminations, extensions, intensifications, and/or logical continuations of the unbeliever’s current state of sin.

It is also important to note how the pictures of punishment, destruction/death, and banishment have Old Testament roots. These three pictures can be found as early as the Fall recorded in Genesis 3. The curses of the Fall are depicted as punishment for Adam’s sin (cf. Rom. 5:12–21). God also warned Adam of sin’s consequence of death, and he banished Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden (cf. Cain’s banishment in Gen. 4:16).

The three pictures of hell also appear to illustrate the biblical doctrine of the atonement. On the cross, Jesus died as a substitute for our sins and drank the cup of wrath—punishment (Matt. 26:42; Rom. 3:21–31; 1 Peter 3:18). On the cross, Jesus offers himself as a sacrifice for our sins—death (cf. Heb. 9–10). On the cross, Jesus experiences separation from the Father’s fellowship as he cries, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46).

The three pictures of hell stand in contrast with biblical portraits of salvation. Hell as punishment remains for those who were not justified by faith. Hell as destruction awaits those who never received the new birth/new life in Christ. Hell as banishment/separation is in store for all who have never been reconciled to God in Christ.

Finally, the three pictures of hell stand in contrast with biblical portraits of the kingdom of heaven. Hell as punishment stands opposite of heaven as inheritance/reward (Matt. 25:31–46). Hell as destruction or death is the other extreme to heaven as eternal life. Hell as banishment stands in contrast with heaven as entrance into the kingdom and marvelous presence of God. Instead of inheriting the kingdom in Christ, unbelievers are punished eternally. Though God extends the invitation for new life in Christ, non-Christians opt for eternal destruction. Rather than experiencing unhindered fellowship with God through the calling of Christ (“come” in Matt. 25:34), the wicked are banished forever from God’s glorious presence. Christ graciously offers heaven, but sadly many people still refuse him and are cast into hell—the dreadful place of punishment, destruction, and banishment.

CONCLUSION

Having said all the above I don’t think we can definitively say what hell is except that (i) it will involve separation from God, (ii) it will be unpleasant, a place of eternal punishment and (iii) it seems in some way to involve destruction (although quite how that reconciles with eternal punishment is not clear. I don’t believe the Bible taught precisely what Hell will be – but we now for sure it won’t be nice. All in all a fate best avoided.