

Heaven and Hell Bible Study
Christ the King Lutheran Church
Commerce, GA

Session 4: What is Hell Like?

In preparation for this session, read pages 11-17 in *A Simple Explanation of Heaven and Hell*

At this point we have learned that death is the consequence of sin. Death comes physically to all on earth, but for those that have not trusted in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins death is eternal. We have also looked at some of the apologetics (defenses) related to the doctrine in that it is necessary for the nature and character of God to be good, just, and consistent. Now we turn our attention to the question, "What is hell like?" As always, we look to God's Holy Word for the answers.

Noting a Few Important Things as We Begin

-As we learned before, a belief in hell is less popular than a belief in heaven. Numbers vary, but between 50-60% of Americans believe in hell. However, when it is narrowed down to describe the specific Biblical definition of hell, only 30-40% agree.

-Secondly, when we look at what the Bible tells us about hell we also must understand that there is a hell now and a hell to come (the lake of fire described in Revelation). A review of the chart will be helpful here. When a person dies in sin now their soul is in hell. On the Last Day, when the body is resurrected the eternal hell of the lake of fire is for both body and soul.

1. The Bible gives more specific detail about hell _____ and not as much as the hell of the _____. We will learn this is the opposite of heaven in that we are told less specifically about heaven _____ and _____ about the new heavens and earth after the Final Judgment.

-Finally, there are many misconceptions and false beliefs about what hell is like in our popular culture. Let's examine a few of those. You may wish to discuss these further or have some other examples.

2. Many people _____ that it exists

People actually _____ of hell often (how?, see below).

It is used as a _____ word and in sayings.

People often tell _____ about it.

It is portrayed in a _____ way.

Hell is only for _____ people.

Most people don't want to go to hell (nor think they deserve to go there). However, there are some that will tell you that they are not really concerned about it. Why? (give example) They view it as a big _____.

Note: All of the above can be used by people as a "defense mechanism" to avoid deeply pondering the implications of the existence of hell and what that means.

Hell in the Bible

There are three words that are translated as “hell” in our English Bibles.

1. *Sheol* (Hebrew)

We find this word in the Old Testament. It is a little difficult to translate exactly to an English equivalent. It most literally means “pit” or “grave”. Sometimes it is used as a general term meaning what happens after someone physically dies and sometimes it is used to describe an unpleasant place of punishment after death. We can tell which it is referring to by the context of the passage. Traditionally, *sheol* is translated as hell into English. Some modern translations use the words “pit”, “grave”, “realm of the dead”, or simply put “*sheol*”.

2. *Hades* (Greek)

This is the first of two Greek words translated as hell in the New Testament. It literally means “out of sight”, the place of the dead. Greeks readily related to this term as from their mythology this was an unpleasant place ruled over by Poseidon (Neptune).

3. *Gehenna* (Greek, derived from the Hebrew *ge hinnom*-Valley of Hinnom)

This word is used to describe hell in the New Testament as well, particularly by Jesus. The valley is located south of Jerusalem and had a dark past and unpleasant present (at the time of Christ). In the Old Testament this was a place that was associated with wickedness as children were sacrificed to the pagan god Molech here (2 Kings 23:10, 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6).

It had become the garbage dump of Jerusalem. Everything unclean ended up there. Fires constantly burned, giving off a stench. Bodies of animals and even criminals were dumped there. Maggots and worms had ample food supply. So when Jesus spoke of the wicked ending up in *gehenna*, this was describing the worst possible place one could imagine.

A Sampling of Bible Verses Describing Hell

The Bible provides us with many verses describing the reality and nature of hell.

3. Many people are surprised that one of the primary sources of teaching about hell is from Jesus Himself. Jesus spoke about hell more than _____ in the Scripture, more often than He spoke about _____, and about _____ of His around 40 parables relate to themes of judgment and hell.

We will read through all of the following passages. Then we will record some common themes that we can clearly learn about hell from the Bible.

Deuteronomy 32:22

Psalm 9:17

Isaiah 5:14

St. Matthew 8:12

St. Matthew 13:47-50
 St. Matthew 10:28
 St. Matthew 25:41, 46
 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9
 Revelation 14:10-11
 Revelation 20:10
 Revelation 21:8

4. Fill in the following questions and blanks based on what we have read here and have previously learned.

Hell is _____.

Hell was prepared for the devil and his angels, but all of the _____ will also end up there.

How long does hell last?

A common feature of the torments of hell is _____ and brimstone (sulfur). We also see what descriptions of it appear?

We want to look at two longer passages where Jesus is teaching about hell. The first is St. Mark 9:42-48.

5. Jesus begins here with a warning. What is it and why would it relate to the Greek word *gehenna*?

6. Jesus references Isaiah 66:24 three times in the passage. How does this reinforce what truths we learned above?

7. Jesus is obviously not advocating a literal removal of body parts, so what is the point here?

Now read St. Luke 16:19-31. This includes a very vivid look into hell.

Note: This is sometimes called the "Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus". However it does not fit the ways that parables are usually defined. It is best understood that Jesus here is describing something that actually happened, or at least something that could happen.

8. Once again, what that we have learned about hell is reinforced here?

9. What is particularly terrible about the rich man's torment in hell? (at least 2 things can be noted here)

Ultimately, hell is a separation from God and thus anything that is good.

Literal or Figurative?

Some people, including some theologians, especially in more modern times have argued that the Bible's descriptions of hell that we learned above are figurative. They would say that there is not necessarily real fire, gnashing of teeth, etc. These are only metaphors that God used to tell us that hell is a bad place. It is important to remember that the understanding of the church traditionally has been to take these descriptions in a more literal manner.

We must also note that if saying these descriptions are not literal is meant to "soften" hell in any way that is a dangerous road to go down. Furthermore, if these descriptions are figurative they would do nothing to make hell less severe. If God is just giving us the closest thing that our human minds could maybe understand, then the use of a literary device would mean that hell is even *worse* than these descriptions.

Degrees of Punishment in Hell

One of the objections to hell is "how is it fair that a nice old Jewish lady or kind old man who just isn't religious end up in the same place as Hitler and unrepentant serial killers?" First of all we must understand that a statement like this is misguided on several levels including a gross misunderstanding of the universal and damnable nature of sin as well as it is essentially stating that one knows better and more about justice than God. But could it be that while hell is certainly horrible for all that end up there, that the level of torment and punishment varies from individual to individual?

Read the following passages: St. Matthew 11:20-24, 23:15, St. Mark 6:10-11, and St. Luke 12:47-48.

10. Would these passages suggest that there are indeed degrees of punishment in hell?
11. What is a common theme that we see (not only here) but throughout the Scripture in terms of God meeting out harsher punishment on some compared to others?
12. Even if some were to receive less torment than others in hell, does that change anything about our desire to reach them with the Gospel?

Closing Words of Comfort

From the booklet (pages 16-17): "Christ suffered your hell for you on the cross. Jesus bore God's wrath for you. He bore hellish punishment for you. He died for you. Rejoice! Take comfort! Hell is real, and nothing can change that. But Christ has saved us from hell, and nothing can change that, either."

Closing Prayer