

Hell – An Orthodox Perspective

When people ask the question, “*What do the Orthodox think about hell?*” this is a difficult question since the concept of Hell is different from person to person and is further complicated by the fact that Hell, as an idea or concept, has evolved significantly since the inception of the early Church.

A good start is a quote from the noted Christian writer C.S. Lewis. In his article *The Problem of Pain* he states;

“There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of Our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom...”

In this study we will examine the different terms used for “Hell”, the evolution of Hell, and the most common views on Hell as expressed by the Church Fathers, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant.

Defining the Biblical Terms for Hell

COMPARISON OF HEBREW AND CHRISTIAN PERCEPTION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH					
OLD TESTAMENT	Scriptural References	NEW TESTAMENT		Scriptural References	ETERNITY
Sheol	Job 17:16, Genesis 37:35, Psalms 16:10 and 31:17	Hades			Lake of Fire
			Ἅδης	Matt. 16:18, Luke 16:23, Acts 2:31	
			κόλασις	Matt. 25:46, 1 John 4:18	Annihilation
Grave	Genesis 42:38	Grave			
Pit	Isaiah 14:15, Isaiah 38:18	Gehenna		Mark 9:43, Matt 10:28	Redemption
Abyss	Genesis 1:2	Abyss		Luke 8:31, Rev 11:7, Romans 10:7	
		Tartarus		2 Peter 2:4	Separation

Traditional Descriptions of Hell

1. A place of eternal judgment and torment in anguish and pain for all eternity for those who have rejected God and denied Jesus as their Savior (Lake of Fire)
2. A temporary place of torment in anguish and pain and then final annihilation
3. Universality of the Redemption and the Final Restoration of All after purification and before admittance into the Kingdom of Heaven
4. A place of separation from God

Historical Teachings on Hell

In the first five centuries of the Early Church there were six known theological schools.

- Four (Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea and Edessa) taught all men would eventually be restored from Hell.
- One, Ephesus, taught Annihilationism (that sinners are totally returned to nothingness in Hell).
- One, Rome/Carthage taught eternal everlasting punishment.

Interestingly St. Paul never used the word Hell in any of his writings, although he spoke of man’s work being revealed or tested by fire (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). In addressing the Thessalonians he did speak of eternal destruction when he said; *“⁸He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹They will be punished with everlasting destruction (ὄλεθρόν αἰώνιον) and shut out from the presence of the Lord.”*

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The Gospels, except for John, used several of words indicated in the table above for Hell in their Gospels. The Book of Acts mentions the word Hell twice (once as Sheol and once as ἄδη) and both times when speaking about Jesus' resurrection and being our rescue from hell. The first quote echoed David from the Book of Psalms (Psalm 16:10) and the second spoke of the inability of Hell to hold Jesus (Acts 2:31).

Examining the Four Different Views on the After Life

1) A place of torment where those who have rejected God are in anguish and pain eternally. (*Lake of Fire*)

This position is the predominate thought in modern day Protestantism, especially among fundamental Evangelicals.

BIBLICAL

Matthew 25:31-46 The Sheep and the Goats

³¹ "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. ³² All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats... ³⁴ "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world...' ⁴¹ "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me...' ⁴⁶ "Then they will go away to eternal punishment (κόλασιν αἰώνιον), but the righteous to eternal life."

JUSTIN MARTYR, a 2nd Century Father of the Church, seems to indicate a belief in eternal torment as evidenced by the following passage from his First Apology.

"Everyone is stepping forward into everlasting misery or happiness, according to his works." "Moreover, we say that the souls of the wicked, being reunited to the same bodies, shall be consigned over to eternal torments, and not, as Plato will have it, to the period of a thousand years only." "Satan, with all his hosts of angels and men like himself, shall be thrust into fire, there to be tormented world without end, as our Christ hath foretold."

ST. AUGUSTINE of Hippo, a doctor of the Church in the 4th and 5th century, and Neoplatonic philosopher whose writings influenced the development of the Western Church and Western philosophy stated in his City of God, that for those who reject God's saving Grace.

"God will miraculously preserve them alive so that they can suffer endlessly in the flames of hell. He argues that the physical flames of hell will torment immaterial evil spirits...punishment will not be temporary because the Scripture calls the punishment "eternal."

St Augustine was the first to argue that αἰώνος strictly meant endless or eternal, however he was later to retreat from that and admit that this word did not necessarily always imply "endless" but could mean with an end as believed by Justin Martyr and Irenaeus.

Article 1035 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church states;

The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, "eternal fire."

Reformation (Protestant) support of this view is seen in Chapters 32 and 33 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647).

The bodies of men, after death, return to dust and see corruption:(a) but their souls (which neither die nor sleep) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them... (c) And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day.

For then shall the righteous go into everlasting life, and receive that fulness of joy and refreshing, which shall come from the presence of the Lord: but the wicked who know not God, and obey not the Gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.

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2. Annihilation Theology

In this theology the word for “eternal” or everlasting (αἰώνος) but it could also refer to the finality or completeness of the destruction or elimination of the soul—it’s a “destruction of the ages.

ST. IRENAEUS, in *Against Heresies*, argued directly from the fact that immortality is conditional on the grace of God to the conclusion that those who reject God will cease to exist.

“And therefore, he who shall preserve the life bestowed upon him, and give thanks to Him who imparted it, shall receive also length of days for ever and ever. But he who shall reject it, and prove himself ungrateful to his Maker, inasmuch as he has been created, and has not recognized Him who bestowed [the gift upon him], deprives himself of [the privilege of] continuance for ever and ever.”

However, Justin along with Irenaeus, did not believe in endless torments, but in the final annihilation of the wicked, as the following from his *Dialogue with Trypho* indicates:

“Souls are not immortal...I do not say that all souls will die. Those of the pious will remain (after death) in a certain better place, and those of the unholy and wicked in a worse, all expecting the time of judgment. In this manner, those which are worthy to appear before God never die; but the others are tormented so long as God wills that they should exist and be tormented. Whatever does or ever will exist in dependence on the will of God, is of a perishable nature, and can be annihilated so as to exist no longer.”

3) Universality of the Redemption and the Final Restoration of All

This theology is today the basis of the Universalist-Unitarian Church.

ORIGEN (2nd & 3rd century) was the first systematic theologian and philosopher of the Christian Church whose writings were heavily influenced by Hellenic philosophy. A fundamental element of his theology was the doctrine of αποκατάστασις (*apokatastasis*) which is the universal restoration of all fallen beings to their original holiness and union with God. Using a passage from the Book of Acts (3:21) as his basis he saw Hell as corrective and purgative, not punitive and eternal.

21 ον δει ουρανών μεν δεξασθαι ἄχρι χρονῶν αποκαταστάσεως πάντων ων ἐλάλησεν ο θεός δια στόματος πάντων αγίων αυτού προφητῶν ἀπ’ αἰώνος.

²¹ Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.

This theology of final redemption of all was also developed from St. Paul’s statement of being “saved from the flames” in his first letter to the Corinthians (3:12-14)

¹² *If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved as through the flames. (σωθησεται ουτως δε ως δια πυρος)*

The Church Fathers Clement and Origen referred to this as God’s “WISE FIRE” as a “saving fire” which burns away that which has become deformed through the misuse our free will while under Satan’s temptations, that which God created in His image in the Proto-Creation, Adam and Eve.

GREGORY OF NYSSA (4th century Church father) seems to agree when he wrote; “*What therefore is the scope of St. Paul’s argument in this place [1 Cor. 15:28] That the nature of evil, at length, be wholly exterminated, and divine, immortal goodness embrace within itself every rational creature; so that of all who were made by God, not one shall be excluded from his Kingdom. All the viciousness, that like a corrupt matter is mingled in things, shall be dissolved and consumed in the furnace of purgatorial fire; and everything that had its origin from God, shall be restored to its pristine state of purity.*”

The Fifth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (553), condemned this theology of *apokatastasis* clearly when it stated:

“If anyone says or thinks that the punishment of demons and of impious men is only temporary, and will one day have an end, and that a restoration (ἀποκατάστασις) will take place of demons and of impious men, let him be anathema.”

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4) Separation from God

In this case the idea of “hell” is seen as a metaphor such that the pain and suffering and physical environment described in the Bible are not to be interpreted literally. The biblical descriptions of heat, bondage, darkness, thirst, worms, pain, flogging, fire, etc., symbolize the emotional pain of being separated from God.

Along this line, some Orthodox Christians believe that Heaven and Hell are relations to or experiences of God's just and loving presence and not a created place of divine absence. One expression of the Orthodox teaching is that hell and heaven are dimensions of God's intensifying presence, as this presence is experienced either as torment or as paradise depending on the spiritual state of a person dwelling with God.

St. Isaac of Syria, in his Mystic Treatises states:

For those who love the Lord, his Presence will be infinite joy, paradise and eternal life. For those who hate the Lord, the same Presence will be infinite torture, hell and eternal death. The reality for both the saved and the damned will be exactly the same when Christ "comes in glory, and all angels with Him, " so that "God may be all in all."

Fr. John S. Romanides, in his Empirical Theology versus Speculative Theology, Orthodox theologian, agrees saying:

God himself is both heaven and hell, reward and punishment. All men have been created to see God unceasingly in his uncreated glory. Whether God will be for each man heaven or hell, reward or punishment, depends on man's response to God's love and on man's transformation from the state of selfish and self-centered love, to Godlike love which does not seek its own ends.

Articles 1033 and 1057 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church does also speak of *separation from God*.

“To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from Him forever by our own free choice. Hell's principal punishment consists of eternal separation from God in whom alone man can have the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.”

A good place to end the discussion of Hell might be with the words of one of the most famous Protestant theologians, Karl Barth. In *Barth in Conversation* he reminds us of what is truly important.

*Jesus Christ ... has Himself alone tasted to the depths all that rejection means and necessarily involves. We certainly cannot deny its [hell] reality. But we can ascribe to it only a reality which is limited by the status and fate of Jesus Christ in His humiliation, His descent into hell, on the basis of the handing-over which fell on Him. We can thus ascribe to it only a reality which is necessarily limited by faith in Jesus Christ. **In faith in Jesus Christ we cannot consider any of those who are handed over by God as lost. We know of none whom God has wholly and exclusively abandoned to himself. We know only of One who was abandoned in this way, only of One who was lost. This One is Jesus Christ. And He was lost (and found again) in order that none should be lost apart from Him.***

He goes on, however, to deny the theology of Universalism.

*Neither can we say, according to the apokatastasis theory, that all will be saved. **We shouldn't try to solve this problem of the future automatically**, but can only say: there is full salvation for all men in Christ; we are invited to believe in him, we want to do the best we can, and it shall be revealed to us before his judgement throne what we have done in our mortal life, good or bad. (2 Cor. 5:10)*