

## ***Rethinking Hell***

### **Reorienting Faith Class Session Two**

Ken Wilson, 02/20/22

If your faith is tangled up in knots like these earbuds, an excellent knot to untangle is the doctrine of eternal hell. The traditional hell doctrine, it turns out, is a later development in Christianity, one that is now imbedded in the official teachings of many churches. It's a staple of evangelicalism. How did this happen? Hell, as it is taught today (a realm or a state of never-ending punishment after death) was **not** the consensus view until centuries after the time of Jesus. It is not found in the writings of Paul, the earliest witness we have for the Jesus movement within ancient Judaism. So let's start there.

***The ancient Judaism of Jesus and Paul had [many views of the afterlife](#).***

The language of ancient Judaism regarding afterlife is different than later Christian language which focused on the heaven/hell binary. Ancient Judaism referred to the "age to come," to "the resurrection of the dead," and to a future judgement. Some believed in a resurrection of the dead, others (Sadducees) did not. Those who believed in the ongoing existence of the soul after death (many did not) had various views on what it meant and how this related to future judgement.

*"Sheol, in Hebrew, refers to the bowels of the earth, portrayed as the place of the dead, but in most instances **Sheol** seems to be more a metaphor for oblivion than an actual place where the dead "live" and retain consciousness." (Is there a Jewish Afterlife? in My Jewish Learning)*

The righteous and the wicked alike are depicted in Sheol. Obviously, this is a different understanding than the present day doctrine "hell." A common view in the ancient Judaism of Jesus and Paul period (and in Judaism today) placed time limits on any punishment after death. Another view held that only the righteous would live forever after death, while the wicked would cease to exist (annihilationism.) Some thought after death, souls would undergo a limited-period of purgation, leading to everlasting life with God.

***The Jesus followers believed in a future resurrection of the dead, with some interim period of existence after death, but before the final judgment and general resurrection. But there was a variety of views, speculations, really, about the question of an individual's eternal destiny.***

In the generation after Jesus and the original apostles, sometimes called the age of the church fathers, a key figure, arguably the most prominent of his time, was Origen of Alexandria. Origen, taught universal salvation (eventually all will be saved). This is called "universalism." Other universalists include Clement, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil the Great.

***It wasn't until the fourth century, that the doctrine of hell as never-ending punishment became ascendant.*** The figure who advanced this doctrine, secured it, in a sense is Augustine—a major influence on Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity.

By the 13th Century, hell was fully enshrined in Catholic orthodoxy through the writings of Aquinas: after death some would be saved (after a time of purgation) while others would endure never ending punishment. Dante popularized this view in *The Inferno*, providing vivid imagery of hell as place of everlasting torments.

Within fundamentalism-evangelicalism hell is described as a state of eternal *conscious* torment.

*The hell doctrine can get even more extreme than this.* I became a Jesus follower while remaining agnostic on hell: “doesn't make sense to me, up to God anyway.” First actual church I tried to join was a Christian Reformed Church. Pastor gave me two documents: Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dort which contained the most extreme version of hell: not only as a state of never-ending punishment, but the added twist of “double predestination” (the belief that some are created by God for the purpose of damning them.) I was 19 or so, but I had the presence of mind to return the booklets to the pastor and say, “If this is true, no one should be allowed to teach it.” I declined membership.

While the doctrine of hell as never-ending punishment for temporal sins remains “on the books” in many Christian denominations, in modern times it is often ignored or soft pedaled. A common apologetic: hell is something we can only choose for themselves.

THE CASE FOR RE-THINKING HELL (more to the point: rejecting the traditional doctrine)

Let's start with the softest version of hell: not the one that claims God actively sends people to hell or, worse, that he creates some people for hell, but the view that hell is required by the doctrine of free will. Reasoning goes like this: God is so committed to our free will that he won't override it for those who refuse God's love. Furthermore, if we have a have a soul that lives on forever after death, and we have the capacity to choose separation from God over union with God, then we either become (by our own choice) in the language of C.S. Lewis, “everlasting splendors or everlasting horrors.”

Obvious problem here: we humans are limited/frail creatures. We are not completely autonomous (free) moral agents. What we want, or desire, is subject to many external influences. Our will can be shaped by ignorance and faulty perceptions. Will divine love not save us from the frailty of our will?

***The traditional hell doctrine, including the softer versions, simply fails the justice test.***

How can offenses that are committed in a time-limited lifespan by mere creatures with limited perceptions and knowledge, lead to a divinely imposed (or even allowed) punishment that literally

never ends? If the crime is finite how can the consequences be infinite? This violates basic justice, not just mercy.

Some claim without hell there can be no accountability. But there are other ways to accomplish accountability for our actions without it. Paul seems to have held this view: David Bentley Hart points out that In Paul's writings, the only picture he provides of the final judgement or reckoning, in which he identifies only two classes of the judged: those whose deeds in this life endure and those whose deed are purified by fire, leading to their eventual salvation.

***Proponents of the hell doctrine claim it is required by Scripture, but it is grounded in interpretations that wilt under scrutiny.***

The sayings of Jesus in the gospels are cited as the most compelling evidence for hell. (Remember, Paul doesn't teach anything like the hell doctrine.) These Jesus sayings occur in 3 of the 4 gospels (Mt/Mk/Luke). They are absent from the gospel of John.

The hell sayings in Mt/Mk/Lk take place in five discrete settings (with 3 instances of repetition). They all involve highly figurative language (characteristic of prophetic utterance) given as a warning to those in power abusing their power over others. In all these instances, they are not aimed at common people—but those with some spiritual or religious authority. For those who suffer cruel oppression from the powerful, saying, in effect, the powerful will have hell to pay, is a great consolation.

But there's a more basic problem, one of translation: using the English word "hell" to translate the Greek words used in these gospel sayings, is extremely misleading. The Greek words are *Hades* and *Gehenna*, and they did not mean what the English word "hell" came to mean many centuries later. Here's why:

Gk. *Hades*, is similar in meaning to Heb, *Sheol* (language of OT) = "realm of dead." Both Hades and Sheol were understood as a realm where all the dead (righteous and unrighteous) resided. Not a place of torment.

The Greek, *Gehenna* referred to an actual location in Palestine, outside the city of Jerusalem. Some earlier legends regard Gehenna as a place of child sacrifice. Others view it as a trash heap. The latter could make sense of Gehenna described as a place with fires that don't go out ... as is common in landfills. In a landfill, fires are purifying—things that are burned are "burned up," they don't exist eternally. Obviously to use the term "Gehenna" (an actual location) in this context is metaphorical--figurative, not literal.

Nevertheless, major translations use the English word "hell" to translate Hades, and Gehenna: KJV, RSV, NIV, NASB. These are the translations of committees with ties to church institutions. Often, the

translations are designed for use in churches that teach hell as infinite punishment for finite sins. [At least now many modern translations include footnotes to indicate the Greek word, Hades, or Gehenna when “hell” is used as an English translation.]

[Note: one instance of Greek word other than Hades or Gehenna that is sometimes translated into English by the word “hell” occurs in 2 Peter 2:4: “For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into Tartarus and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment”

Tartarus is from ancient Greek mythology—“Tartarus was known to first-century Romans as the prison of the Titans and the deepest recesses of Hades, nothing more.” That doesn’t describe the eternal hell of the hell doctrine. The text itself says certain angels are there “until the judgment” so it’s explicitly an interim, not an eternal state. Same translation problem as Hades and Gehenna—“hell” doesn’t accurately translate any of the three Greek words used in the NT

*But there is an equally problematic second translation problem—the English word “eternal” (meaning time that goes on forever) is a misleading translation of the original Greek word **aeon** and its cognate, **aiionios**.*

Here’s an example of its occurrence in the final parable of Jesus in Matthews gospel, the parable of the sheep and the goats—the social justice parable about the necessity of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoners. Whatever you do to these least of these you did to me. In many English translations, it concludes like this: “*Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison and did not help you?*” He will reply, *‘I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ Then they will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life.*” Sounds like Jesus is describing hell as never-ending punishment, what evangelicalism calls “eternal conscious torment” doesn’t it?

Except that the original Greek word rendered “eternal” (*aiionios*) means more accurately, “age to come” [the age after this one.] The root word *aeon*, is like our English eon, meaning an age of limited duration. We use it to refer to geological ages, “bronze age,” Paleolithic age, but also of shorter duration, information age or the age of the gas powered engine. Long or short, eon in English (derived from Gk. Aeon) is a period of limited duration.

So David Bentley Hart writes, “Basil the Great reported that the great majority of Eastern Christians [who spoke Greek as their native tongue] assumed that the *aiionios kolasis*, the ‘chastening of the Age’ mentioned in Mt. 25:46, would consist in only a temporary probation of the soul”

**To summarize the problems caused by misleading translations of key Greek words:**

There is a compelling case that “hell” is a mistranslation of Hades and Gehenna, and that “eternal” as in “time without end” is a mistranslation of *ainios*, not to mention that “chastening” [a discipline that rehabilitates] is a better translation of the Gk. *Kolasis*, than “punishment” which in English implies vengeance. I find this alone a convincing case that Jesus did not teach the doctrine of hell as we understand it today.

I don’t mean to pile on (kidding/not kidding) but here’s for me a clincher on the question of whether or not Jesus taught hell as a place of never-ending, infinite punishment:

***There are more statements in Scripture that speak of eventual universal salvation than there are statements mistranslated with the English word “hell”***

In his excellent book, *That All Shall be Saved: Heaven, Hell, and Universal Salvation*, David Bentley Hart, lists 23 portions of Scripture that seem to describe universal salvation:

I’ll pick a handful from DBH, p. 95–102

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## CONCLUSION

It’s possible to believe in the doctrine of hell if you want to. But I don’t think it’s a belief that is grounded in the teaching of Jesus in the gospels. It’s not a belief grounded in the teaching of Paul’s letters, which is silent on hell. It is only be grounded in a literal interpretation of mistranslated texts that are obviously figurative, not literal, addressed to oppressors not the oppressed, as a prophetic warning, using the age-old means of prophetic hyperbole.

This leaves many alternatives open:

**Agnosticism** regarding the question of future destinies: “I don’t know. I assume Love wins, but how that works out is beyond me and I don’t feel a need to have a best guess.”

**Annihilationism**: those who refuse divine love—assuming divine love is incapable of pursuing them and saving them, like a parent might snatch a child away who is determined put their hand in an electric socket, an impingement on their “free will”—simple cease to exist. Downside: it doesn’t account for the many statements that “all shall be saved.”

**Universalism**: eventually all will be united with divine love [This includes the idea of an experience/period of purification as accountability for our actions in this life.]

***The advantages of rejecting the “never-ending punishment” hell doctrine are many.***

It doesn't ask us to redefine divine love as simply an aspect of God's being, rather than the irreducible fullness of God's being.

It removes a major obstacle in experiencing the writings of Scripture as a means of divine inspiration and help.

It removes a doctrine that is used to justify harmful teachings on the grounds that harm in this life is trumped by a never-ending, infinite punishment in the next.

It's part of a process of healing our existential anxiety—our fear that a future in God's hands is not ultimately beautiful, glorious, and good.

#### RESOURCES

*The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart

*That All Shall Be Saved* by David Bentley Hart

*Inventing Hell* by Jon Sweeney

*Love Wins* by Rob Bell