



*Is Hell a real place, or is it the experience of being separated from God after death? Is Satan a "real" figure, or something allegorical from the Bible?*

This question has plagued people of faith for thousands of years. If you ask five different Christian theologians, you will get five different answers. If we look to scripture, we find both a firm "yes" and an intriguing "no". The Bible talks about Hell and Satan as a real place and a corporal being, but the concept of both morphs throughout scripture and there are strong indications that both are used in an attempt to explain the inexplicable.

As far as Hell being a real place, meaning a geographical location on the map we find – an easy "yes". The clearest notion of Hell in the Bible evolved from a valley of ancient burning refuse and ritual burials meant for desecration. Known as the Valley of Gehenna, it lies next to Mt. Zion, outside the walls of Jerusalem to this day.

*Sheol* is another Old Testament word often translated as "Hell" but in its original conception it was simply the place to which dead people went. Not a place of punishment. Even the revered prophet Samuel found himself there. At this time there was no corresponding conception of Heaven as we know it today.

As far as Satan is concerned, the Old Testament perspective not only has nothing to do with a pitchfork and a tail, but also is not connected with a super-being of supreme power and evil.

The word "Satan" is a regular Hebrew word used as an adjective, noun or verb and appears on many pages of scripture. The Angel sent from God that stands against Balaam's disobedience is described as "satan.", since "satan" means to stand against or to accuse. Clearly not the Satan of ultimate evil since this angel was God's messenger. Many scholars have observed it is never used as a name in the Old Testament. You might rightly object by turning to Job 1:6, but that is easily shown to be a mistranslation as one Jewish scholar known as Aaron explained:

In the book of Job, many English translations say that "Satan was in heaven." But that ignores the obvious Hebrew wording for the sake of Christian tradition again, the phrasing is actually "THE Satan." The accuser/adversary. So as far as the book of Job is concerned, there was indeed a designated Angel whose job it was to accuse or oppose. Think of it like "the prosecutor." \*

It is not until the New Testament that "Satan" personifies evil incarnate. But even so I

am not at all convinced we are meant to actually believe in his corporal existence. Satan's longest appearance takes place in the wilderness to tempt Jesus. But he is a one-dimensional character only serving as foil to Jesus' internal struggle to fulfill His calling. In the whole rest of the New Testament, Satan has no lines to deliver or actions that he undertakes. His part is to explain that which makes no sense. Why is there evil in the world? A question for another time.

Hell certainly plays a larger role than Satan in the New Testament for by the time it was written it had become a more concretized notion of ultimate punishing separation from God. This development paralleled the evolving Greek and Roman notions of Hades, Tartarus and the Elysian Fields.

The word *Gehenna*, often translated as "Hell", appears 12 times in the New Testament.

By Jesus' time it seemed to refer both to that valley outside of Jerusalem and a place of everlasting punishment. In our text this morning Jesus seems to be using it both ways. Notice His wording in verse 47, "And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and **to be cast into hell...**". "...cast into Hell", which could easily be translated as "thrown into Gehenna." In the actual Valley of Gehenna, outside of Jerusalem, the dead bodies of people who were regarded as highly immoral were literally thrown onto that burning trash heap. Rather than teaching doctrine, it is easy to argue that Jesus was using powerful metaphor and allusion to make His point in the same way we don't actually

believe that Jesus wants us to pluck out our eyes.

To Jesus' listeners it would have struck a deep and horrific nerve. For the history of this valley was as evil as any concocted notion in the minds of Dante in his *Inferno* or Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Award-winning journalist, Edwin Black, reported in the Washington Post horrific details of this place:

Within this valley at a place called, Tophet, pagan altars were created hundreds of years before Christ. Tophet altars are said to be named for the noisy drum that devotees of the mysterious dark god Molech would beat to drown out the ghastly cries of children immolated in sacrifice in front of their own willing parents. (Washington Post, 1999).

That is Hell. No need for an "after place" to try and find it. But it is a place concocted by human evil, not by the God who created the world and declared it good.

Jesus is conveying the horrors of defying God, of embracing evil, are right down the street and you know the stories of ghastly murder, of a burning trash heap, of defiled bodies, and human excrement. That place, *Gehenna* is Hell.

It is Hell because it encapsulates everything that is the antithesis of God,  
murder not forgiveness,  
evil not love,  
destruction not creation,

defilement not purification

And our brokenness, our evil doesn't simply vanish from this life to the next. Our actions have consequences. And each step away from God makes Hell a little bit larger. We lay the bricks with our actions. We bind them with the mortar of our indifference.

Every time someone on the subway is wantonly killed; another brick is laid.

Every time power-hungry nations invade others; another brick is laid.

Every time a child is abused or neglected; another brick is laid.

Every time we desecrate the treasure of this creation; another brick is laid.

Every time a person is denigrated because of their race, gender or sexuality and we stand by and say nothing; we bind that evil.

Every time someone dies because they cannot afford medical care; we bind that evil.

Every time someone dies alone and forgotten in their apartment; we bind that evil.

Every time someone is sentenced to decades in prison for minor offenses; we bind that evil.

And yet as vast and large as Hell must surely be by now, and even as the Bible makes the consequences clear, so very clear, it cannot conclude that Hell is the absence of God. So, in that sense it is not a place of separation from God. There is no place in which God does not exist and cannot be found. As Paul indicates, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God."

If Jesus tells us Hell is a place of evil and terror, it is also not a place that He sits idly by leaving people to this fate. Jesus goes to Hell. Ephesians 4:9 tells us that Jesus descended into the "lower parts of the earth", a way common in Jesus' time to refer to the location of Hell. Jesus' journey to Hell is bolstered by I Peter 4:6 which tells us that "good tidings were proclaimed to the dead." This aspect of God refers to the Lord's relentless nature to never give up. To go and find that one lost sheep, no matter how far astray it has gone. And according to Jesus' parable the shepherd does not merely find the sheep and invite it to return. No! That would leave something to chance. The shepherd picks up the sheep and carries it home, rejoicing!

In general, Presbyterians are not as focused on Hell as other Christian denominations. At First Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, we had invited a politician, Baptist by faith, to come to the church because we wanted to be able to host refugee families in our town. Somehow, we shifted topics to stewardship, and we commented that Baptists seemed to have an easier time raising money. He said, "You know the difference between Baptists and Presbyterians? Baptists have the threat of Hell they can hang over the heads of their members that you Presbyterians don't!"

And in the end, I think he is right. And it is because of our understanding of the sovereign will of God and the grace of Christ. I Timothy 2:4 tells us God desires everyone to be saved. And we believe God ultimately gets what God wants. And in regard to Jesus. Certainly, He talks a tough game about Hell. He

is deadly serious about following God and loving our neighbor. He knows sadly, Hell can be too easily found when we don't. And *Gehenna* encapsulates all of that.

It is true that you can easily turn to passages in scripture that speak strongly of Hell as a place of eternal punishment and the Devil as an ultimate being of evil. But the Bible gives us a dual witness, as we have seen this morning, and in the end each person must choose. And I choose the side of grace, for that is what our Lord did...in the end. When push came to shove, Jesus left behind the talk of judgement and punishment and He went to the cross and He prayed, "Father forgive them!" Amen.

\*<https://judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/60832/what-is-the-difference-between-hasatan-luficer-and-the-serpent>