

Hell, no?

Posted on [August 2, 2009](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Statue of Hades

In this blog series, I will comment on something I've been thinking about – the existence of hell. My intention is to take a look at the absence of any mention of hell in the book of Genesis in particular, but also to note its lack of mention in most of the Old Testament. (It isn't mentioned in a standard RSV which uses the Hebrew [Sheol](#) for the place of the dead, but the NKJV does use "[hell](#)" instead of the Hebrew Sheol. The OSB prefers [Hades](#) following the Septuagint). Hell and Hades both imply more judgment and punishment than does the more passive Hebrew "Sheol" which simply is where the dead both good and wicked reside without being a place of continued punishment.

One of the most interesting aspects of the book of Genesis is the tools of punishment that God has at His disposal to use with His human creatures when they sin.

In [Genesis 2:16-17](#), God warns the first human that should he break God's command and eat of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil that he would die. We do not know if this is the most severe punishment God can conceive, but it is punishment threatened by God. God does not explain death, but the implication certainly is that one will cease to be able to enjoy God's blessings. Is death thus a permanent state? The text offers no further explanation of death, but one might infer from Genesis that passing into death is not a good thing for one then is placed beyond enjoying the rest of God's creation. There is no sense that death places one in a place of permanent torment, a hell, only that one is cut off from one's people and one's God. In fact one might almost conclude that death ends one's existence as there is no indication of life beyond the grave, though the murdered Abel's 'blood' does cry from the ground to God which seems to be a figurative not literal expression, but might keep open the issue of a continued existence beyond death.



Icon of the Expulsion from Paradise

In [Genesis 3:17-24](#), after Adam and Eve have broken God's commandment, God pronounces judgment on Adam sentencing him to toil hard to make crops grow, and sentencing him to death which is now clearly described as the dissolving of the human body back into the dust of the earth. Further God expels the man from the Garden of Delight in which He had placed the man in the beginning, forcing the man out of his caretaker position in God's garden and consigning him to till the earth to produce his own food. The expulsion from Paradise does not say that the man is eternally forbidden from returning to the Garden. Rather the cherubim and the flaming sword prohibit the man from re-entering, which would seem to imply that the situation is temporary for these guardians could be removed allowing re-admittance to the man at some time in the future. Paradise was not annihilated, nor were the humans. Humanity is separated from Paradise but both continue to exist.

As the story progresses it will be Abel, not Adam or Eve who first taste death as returning to the dust of the earth. Again God makes no mention of a hell as a place of unending torture for sinners nor is there any indication that this punishment is connected to future sins of humans. This is a specific sentence against Adam, though it is very possible that the story is a [typology](#) and what has happened to [Adam](#) happens to all of humanity. We share in Adam's sin and the consequence of his sin to the extent that Adam is a type (representative) of all humans (see [Romans 15:14](#), [I Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49](#)).

The next event which God must confront is Cain's murder of his brother Abel in [Genesis 4](#). God exiles the fratricide Cain from the rest of humanity for his crime, but he does not inflict capital punishment on Cain for his crime, nor does God ever threaten Cain with eternal damnation. Cain's punishment is recognition by God of Cain's own action – Cain has cut himself off from civilized human beings. The punishment of Cain is imposed upon him for his sins. Though his descendents will suffer the consequences of what happens to him, they are not declared punishable for his sins nor are they labeled as enemies of God. Perhaps indicative of the early

biblical attitude toward such things it is Cain who builds the first human city – the murderous Cain, expelled from humanity founds the first city – human civilization!



Flood Waters

The Genesis story continues as does human sin. God Himself becomes increasingly troubled by the creatures He has made. He is disillusioned with the humans He made in His own image and experiences grievous anguish in His heart about the humans. In [Genesis 6:6-13](#) God decides to take action against His human creatures because of their wickedness. He decides to bring them to an end by flooding the earth. But again His intention is a temporary punishment – not a continuing state of punishment; for He also decides to save a few humans in order to repopulate the earth. He is not completely exterminating humankind nor the earth He has created, but more is cleansing it of wickedness. The story of [Noah](#) and the flood is God’s fourth major action against human sinfulness. God decides to drown sin and the sinful, but simultaneously tremendous collateral damage is decreed for all of life must suffer because of and with the wicked humans. God is not only punishing the specific evil doers but has decided to wipe out sinful humanity which would include innocent infants and children – with the noted exception of Noah, his wife, their sons and sons’ wives – no children were spared according to the story. The punishment visits death upon humanity, but no mention is made of this being continuous and eternal for the victims of the flood. Their lives are ended, they are not kept alive for further torture.



At the conclusion of the flood, God has a change of heart about His human creatures. He recognizes that “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth” and apparently decides to live with this sad reality. God also vows never again to destroy all living

creatures just because of the sinfulness of humans ([Genesis 8:21-22](#)). God then establishes a covenant with not only the humans but with all the creatures of the earth never again to destroy the earth by flood ([Genesis 9:8-17](#)). Unless God means His covenant promise to be totally literalistic (He won't flood the world to destroy it, but He might use fire!), God seems to have decided that a permanent state of punishment is not part of His plan for rebellious humanity.

Even the flood doesn't end humanity's rebellion against God. In Genesis 11 God confronts the humans for building the tower to heaven in Babel. The punishment this time is that God both "confuses their tongues" by multiplying languages so that the humans cannot communicate with each other and He scatters them over the face of the earth. Despite the hostilities that will now arise as a result of miscommunications and misunderstandings, God does not devise a hell – a place to keep people alive in order to torture and punish them for their wrongdoings. All of the punishments of God in Genesis are confined to this world – first expelling the humans from His Paradise and forcing them to struggle laboriously with agriculture and child birth, and then using exile, death and catastrophic events to punish (not discipline) the sinners. But as for mention of some form of continued torture beyond life in this world, in hell, no, not in Genesis. Perhaps hell as a method of punishment was not yet part of God's tools of dealing with sin and evil. It certainly would indicate that hell itself is not eternal, but completely temporal.

Hell, yes?

Sometimes it seems to me that believers are eager to inflict hell on non-believers or anybody they don't particularly like. My own personal question is whether the ideas of hell in the Scriptures have in fact been inflated by believers in order to control, beat and threaten others.

Throughout Genesis and the unfolding story of humanity's fall into sin, God does endeavor to discipline or punish the humans for their sinfulness. However, at no time in Genesis does He ever threaten hell or eternal damnation to sinners. God seems to have no interest from the beginning in keeping sinners alive just to torture them.



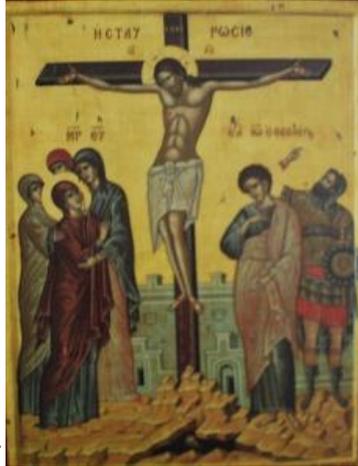
Notions of hell, eternal punishment, torture and damnation do not occur from the beginning of God's creation. This is something to remember, especially when discerning what God intended to do with sinners and unbelievers from the beginning. Adam is cast outside of Paradise, and then later dies, but at no time does God ever threaten him with eternal damnation. This of course raises an interesting question as to whether at some time later in history, long after their deaths, God could posthumously "revive" Adam or Cain and place them in hell to further punish them for their sins? Could or would God retroactively impose on those long dead, eternal punishments for sins, only after the Jewish Exile period when the Jews came to believe such things, since God had not imposed such punishment from the beginning?

For the most part the Hebrew Scriptures envision a place for the dead – [Sheol](#), a shadowy existence of a place where all the dead (righteous and sinners) continue to abide but in which they are not capable of doing anything. Sheol is not a place of torment nor of damnation. Ideas of hell or Hades appear in Jewish thinking in the [post-exilic](#) (6th-3rd Centuries BC) and [intertestamental period](#) (4th- 1st Centuries BC). It is in this time period that Jewish ideas of resurrection and eternal judgment coalesce. Christians inherited this thinking as the basis for their own understanding of what God is doing and how He is working out His plan and will on earth.

It seems that once the idea of eternal judgment came to be accepted by God's people, there was an ever increasing enthusiasm to impose that judgment on non-believers and sinners. God's people also became increasingly desirous of delineating those who were "outside" of God's people (first, the non-Jews, and later the non-Christians) and ever consigning these outsiders to eternal torment.

The God who never mentioned eternal damnation for Adam or Cain or the Babel residents or the pre-flood sinners, and who regrets destroying creation in the flood, and who sends His Son into the world to save the world, and who does not wish the death of the sinner, is He as eager to damn sinners and unbelievers to Hell as are His people?

The Prophet Jonah knew God would save the Ninevites which is why he didn't want to warn them about God's intentions ([Jonah 4:2](#)) and tried to flee from God. Jonah preferred to see the



Ninevites toasted. God proved Himself every bit as gracious, merciful and abounding in steadfast love as Jonah lamented. Jesus who died on the cross in order to save sinners, who commanded us to pray for our enemies (which presumably includes sinners and non-believers), who forgave those who crucified Him, did he want us to wish for damnation for those outside the Church?

Isn't a main part of the Gospel story that what the Jews got wrong was their exclusivist and elitist ideas of election? They were to be light to the nations, not those intentionally trying to ensure that darkness doomed the Gentiles to an eternity of Hell. Christians are supposed to go forth into the world with the Gospel – the Good News of salvation. Christians too are told by Christ to be a light to the world. The glad tidings are not that sinners are to be eternally tortured, but that all sinners are loved by God and can be forgiven of their sins. The Gospel was not meant to be a club with which to beat, threaten, intimidate, terrify or horrify sinners. It is to be the wonderful sound of glad tidings, a message of God's love and forgiveness and an invitation for us to serve and love one another by sharing the blessings God has bestowed upon us. Jesus on the cross did not threaten his tormentors with eternal damnation but asked God to forgive them for their ignorance. In Christ's parable of the Last Judgment ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)) it is not sinners who are consigned to damnation but rather those who failed to love and serve Christ in the least of His brothers and sisters. In the parable of [Lazarus and the rich man](#), it is again not an issue of sin which separates the two in Judgment, but failure of the rich man to provide for the beggar Lazarus – neither one is praised for their virtues but described only in terms of their need and their wealth.

For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (*John 3:17, RSV*)

Go to Hell?



Part of St. Paul's own amazement about the reaction of his fellow Jews to the Gospel of salvation was that a message that God universally forgives sinners, was not welcomed by God's People. Whereas for St. Paul the Jews were to be light to the nations, meaning they would guide and inspire all people to God's kingdom, the common notion among the Jews was that being a light meant they alone would be saved of all the people on earth and the rest of humanity would see Israel's glory and weep and gnash their teeth. The thought that God might extend His love to all the nations of the world is not welcomed by those who believe their righteousness not only distinguishes them from the rest of humanity but also is the very thing that condemns the rest of the world. This surely is the message Luke has Jesus offering in the parable of the Publican and Pharisee ([Luke 18:9-14](#); *"He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:"*), of the Last Judgment ([Matthew 25:31-46](#)), of a Kingdom where the first are last and the last first ([Matthew 20:14-16](#)) and in which foreigners not the sons of the kingdom enter into the joy of their master ([Matthew 8:12](#)). Though hell for sinners was not even mentioned at the beginning of creation as part of God's plan or will, some of God's people came to see heaven as their right and hell as the just reward for all the Gentiles. The New Testament changes the dividing line from between Jews and non-Jews to distinguishing between those who believe in God's salvation and those who don't. There is one God for all the world. He is not just the God of the Jews. It is God's good pleasure to populate the earth and heaven, not hell.

If we look at the New Testament, we can see there is clear indication that we are to fear God, that there will be a Judgment Day, a winnowing process in which the unbelievers and sinners are separated from the righteous and are condemned. But condemned to what? Hell? Or exclusion from God's presence, kingdom, heaven?



In the RSV of the Bible, the word “hell” occurs only 13 times all in the New Testament. Matthew makes the most references to hell – 7 times with 3 occurring in one short passage. Luke uses the word hell only once. The Evangelists John and Mark and St. Paul the Apostle do not use the word at all! James makes one reference to hell and Peter twice refers to hell. The word “Hades” occurs only 9 times in the RSV New Testament and not at all in the Old. Luke refers to “Hades” four times – twice in his Gospel and twice in Acts. Matthew only makes one reference to Hades, while it is referred to 4 times in Revelation. Again St. John, St. Mark and St. Paul make no reference to Hades. One can find more numerous mention of “fire” (unquenchable, eternal, testing) in the New Testament with Matthew and Revelations by far making the most references to these judging fires with several of the New Testament books including at least one reference to a judgment by fire. However, only some references in the New Testament seem to refer fire to a hell, others see fire raining down on earth or envision some other form of judgment which destroys the wicked rather than keeping them in perpetual torment. Matthew in his gospel refers to the gnashing of teeth which will occur in the end six times while Luke makes one reference to teeth gnashing. Again neither Mark or John mention such things in their gospels. Mark and John also do not mention “eternal punishment” or “destruction” while you can find a few such references in Matthew (2), Luke (1), and also in Paul, Hebrews, Peter and Jude.

The picture of a judgment by God of the people of earth is certainly portrayed in the New Testament and found on the lips of Jesus Himself. Though the hell fires are spectacular and damning when portrayed, they may loom larger in the minds and pronouncements of some than they do in the New Testament. The fires of hell are not the main proclamation of the Christian Scriptures – the kingdom of God is. For example on the Orthodox Pre-Lenten Sunday of the Last Judgment, the hymns mention the rivers of fire consuming sinners in a terrifying picture which combines images from the book of Revelation to form its cataclysmic destruction. However, the Gospel reading is from Matthew 25:31-46, which does not mention sinners or unbelievers nor violators of God’s commandments. Those doomed to judgment are those who do not serve the least of Christ’s brothers and sisters. And Christ says the hell fires were prepared for the devil and his angels, not for humans! This is in the Gospel which mentions hell more than any other book in the New Testament – 7 times while the entire rest of the New Testament mentions it only 6! That St. Mark and St. John both give to us tradition in which they never record or remember Jesus making any reference to hell or Hades or punishment is

significant. They envision the Gospel message of Jesus not including those terms; a



tradition in which hell is not essential to the teachings of Jesus and in which they never put such terms in Jesus' mouth

Obviously Christian tradition did include those writers who use the terms hell, Hades, punishment in the official Scriptures of the Church. So the fact that some New Testament authors never mention those terms cannot be used as the basis for rejecting those words or the ideas behind them. Those terms are part of the New Testament and St. Matthew at least believed Jesus used those terms even if sparingly (hell, Hades, punishment occur only 10 times in Matthew, 4 times in Luke's Gospel but never in John or Mark's Gospels). Hell does not appear to have been a major part of Jesus' message or concern; whereas Jesus is concerned about judgment, a theme that comes up in various ways throughout the Gospels especially in Jesus' parables but also in his teachings about forgiveness and mercy or end times. Christians need to keep these facts in perspective as they talk with others about what faith in God means. As one bit of wisdom from tradition said, "The person who obeys God for the reward of heaven is nothing but a mercenary. The person who obeys God out of the fear of hell is nothing but a slave. But the person who obeys God out of love for the Creator is a true child of God and it is children, not slaves or mercenaries that God seeks."

Patristic Images of Hell

Below are a few select comments from Patristic writers regarding their own thoughts on hell.

"For estrangement and turning away from God are more unbearable than the punishments expected in hell, and more oppressive to the one suffering than the deprivation of light is to the eye, even if no pain is added to it, or than the deprivation of life is to a living creature." ([*St. Basil the Great, d. 379AD*](#))

“We surely ought not to think that what is referred to as ‘hell’ is a place, but a state of life, invisible and incorporeal, to which Scripture teaches us that souls lead.” ([St. Gregory of Nyssa](#), d.384AD)

“You see, true kingship is this, being in a position to win the Lord’s benevolence and clemency through the excellence of one’s lifestyle. After all, the reason we ought to be in fear and dread of hell is not the undying fire, the terrible punishments, the unremitting retribution, but rather offending such a good Lord and finding ourselves outside his benevolence.” ([St. John Chrysostom](#), d. 407AD)

“Now, if in the case of friends and children we think distressing them is far worse than being punished, much more should this be our attitude in the case of God, and we should think that doing anything not pleasing to him is worse than any hell.” ([St. John Chrysostom](#))

“Let no one fear death, for the Death of our Savior has set us free. He has destroyed it by enduring it. He destroyed Hades when He descended into it. He put it into an uproar even as it tasted of His flesh. Isaiah foretold this when he said, ‘You, O Hell, have been troubled by encountering Him below.’ Hell was in an uproar because it was done away with. It was in an uproar because it is mocked. It was in an uproar, for it is destroyed. It is in an uproar, for it is annihilated. It is in an uproar, for it is now made captive. Hell took a body, and discovered God. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see. O death, where is thy sting? O Hades, where is thy victory? Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated! Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down! Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice! Christ is Risen, and life is liberated! Christ is Risen, and not a single corpse remains in the grave!” ([St. John Chrysostom](#), Paschal Sermon)

Chrysostom says in his “Address on Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up their Children” that the age at which to teach a child about hell is “when he has grown older, tell him also more fearful tales; for you should not impose so great a burden on his understanding while he is still tender, lest you dismay him. But when he is fifteen years old or more, let him hear of hell.”

“...He (God) threatened us with hell, not to inflict it on us but so as not to inflict it, while he prepared it for the devil - ‘go into the fire prepared for the devil’ (Matt 25:41), he says, remember – he prepared the kingdom for human beings, showing that he did not wish to cast a human being into hell.” (St. John Chrysostom)

“Sin, Gehenna, and death do not exist at all with God, for they are effects, not substances. Sin is the fruit of free will. There was a time when sin did not exist, and there will be a time when

it will not exist. I also maintain that those who are punished in Gehenna are scourged by the scourge of love. ... For the sorrow caused in the heart by sin against love is more poignant than any torment. It would be improper for a man to think that sinners in Gehenna are deprived of the love of God. ... Thus I say that this is the torment of Gehenna: bitter regret.”
([St. Isaac the Syrian](#), 7th Century)



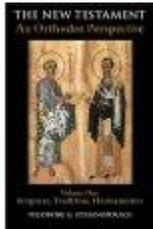
In the writings attributed to ([Pseudo-\)Dionysius the Aeropagite \(5th Century AD?\)](#), there is found the story of the holy Carpus who takes offense at the behavior of a couple of Christians. Carpus prays to God asking for the instant destruction of these two men and at that moment his house is split open and he sees a vision. *“A vivid flame appeared which came down on him; the sky was rent; Jesus revealed himself in the midst of a multitude of angels... Carpus lifted his eyes and stood astonished at what he saw. Looking down, he told me, he watched the ground itself opening to make a black yawning abyss, and in front of him on the edge of the abyss the two men he had cursed, trembling and gradually losing their foothold. From the bottom of the abyss he saw snakes crawling up and wrapping themselves round the men’s feet trying their utmost to drag them down. The men seemed to be on the point of succumbing, partly despite themselves, partly quite willingly, since there were being assaulted and at the same time seduced by the Evil One. Carpus was overjoyed, he told me, as he contemplated the spectacle beneath him. Forgetting the vision above (Jesus), he was growing impatient and indignant that the unbelievers had not yet succumbed. Several times he joined his efforts to those of the snakes... In the end he lifted his eyes and saw again in the sky the same vision as shortly before. But this time Jesus, moving with compassion, came down to the unbelievers and stretched out a hand to help them... then he said to Carpus, ‘Your hand is already raised. It is I whom you should strike, for here I am to suffer again for the salvation of humanity...moreover you should consider whether you yourself should not stay in the abyss with the snakes, rather than live with God...”* *“Carpus’s vision convinces him that to wish to damn anyone is to attack Christ himself, to annul his Passion and so to compel him to undergo it again; similarly it is to throw oneself, by one’s own actions, in the abyss.”* ([Olivier Clement](#), d. 2009)

Contemporary Orthodox Theologians on Hell

What follows are various quotes from Orthodox theologians of the 20th and 21st Centuries.

“... of hell itself. This idea, designed to terrorize souls, does not attain its goal, because it is abstract and therefore powerless. But, at the same time, striking sensitive hearts with horror, paralyzing filial love and the childlike trust in the Heavenly Father, this idea makes Christianity resemble Islam, replacing love with fear.” ([Fr. Sergius Bulgakov](#))

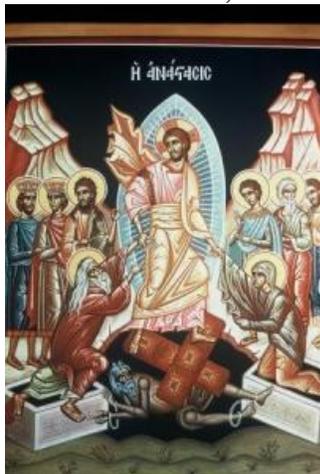
“For [St. Isaac](#), hell did not exist prior to sin and its ultimate end is unknown. Hell is not a place



of punishment created by God, but a spiritual mode of anguished suffering created by sinful creatures willfully separated from God. According to Isaac, sinners in this hell are not deprived of the love of God; only they suffer in the profound realization of having offended against love and of being unable to participate in it. Hell is none other than this bitter awareness of separation and regret...” ([Fr. Theodore Stylianopoulos](#))

“Those who proclaim the infinity of torments also necessarily affirm the eternity of evil and its coeternity with good, as well as the invincible fury of the hatred that sinners direct toward God.” (Fr. Sergius Bulgakov)

“But it is even more difficult to admit the eternity of evil, attributing to an inexhaustible creative activity, at least without a clear acceptance of Manichaean dualism. Evil is a negative; it is the minus of being. Evil has a bottom; and if it appears bottomless or poses as bottomless, this is

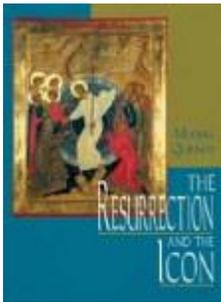


only a deception or a self-deception. ... Inasmuch as hell is not a creation of God but a product of the self-determination of the prince of this world and of those

enslaved by him, it does not have being in itself, nor, therefore, its proper eternity; its 'eternity' is only a temporary state of life. These ontological arguments oblige us to deny the infinity of hell; in the ages, hell dissolves into nothing, which is its genuine foundation." (*Fr. Sergius Bulgakov*)

"Over many centuries, the conception of the eternity of torments as unchangeable and infinite in duration appeared to offer the most appropriate and effective means to strike the souls of sinners with the fear of God, to conquer their wickedness and spiritual laziness. But at the present time, this pedagogy does not attain its goal. Not terrorization but God's love, manifested even toward those in hell, most effectively touches the soul and awakens it from spiritual sleep. ... it is a question of the impossibility of recognizing 'eternal torments' as compatible with God's justice and love, of the inability of the human consciousness even to entertain this notion. ... the pedagogy of [St. Gregory of Nyssa](#) and his followers, which has not been condemned and which, in any case is permitted by the Church, is, even today, more appropriate and more convincing than the pedagogy of terrorization. To be sure, 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7), but not is end, for 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear' (1 John 4:18)... It was love, not fear, that engendered the prayer of the early Christians: 'Even so, come, Lord Jesus.'" (*Fr. Sergius Bulgakov*)

"Hell is nothing else but separation of man from God, his autonomy excluding him from the place where God is present." ([Paul Evdokimov](#))



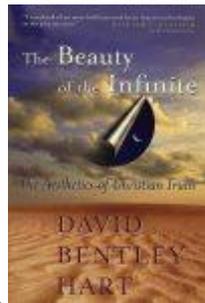
"Hell is none other than the state of separation from God, a condition into which humanity was plunged for having preferred the creature to the Creator. It is the human creature, therefore, and not God, who engenders hell. Created free for the sake of love, man possesses the incredible power to reject this love, to say 'no' to God. By refusing communion with God, he becomes a predator, condemning himself to a spiritual death (hell) more dreadful than the physical death derives from it." ([Michael Quenot](#))

"Hell – that is to say, the place where God is not – can only be created as a result of an estrangement between our world and God." ([Fr. John Chryssavgis](#))

“The last word of Christianity is not hell but victory over hell; God does not promise us universal salvation because he can only offer it to us and wait for our response, our love, to let it happen.”
([Olivier Clement](#))

“Hell is not a place created by God for the punishment of sinful people. Indeed, hell is not a place at all, but a state of being. For those who may experience hell after the last judgment, that state or condition will be a product of their own conscience, a result of a free choice which they themselves have made. Hell is an affirmation, not a rejection. No one experiences hell because he has been rejected by God or deprived by God of His love. Hell is an affirmation of our own choices, of the fact that God respects us and respects our choices for all eternity.”
([Archbishop Lazar Puhalo](#))

“Hell is the name of that false history against which the true story, in Christ, is told, and it is exposed as the true destination of all our violence, by the light of the resurrection, even as Christ



breaks open the gates of hell and death. Hell is with us at all times, a phantom kingdom perpetuating itself in the wastes of sinful hearts, but only becomes visible to us as hell because the true kingdom has shed its light upon history. In theological tradition, most particularly in the East, there is that school of thought that wisely makes no distinction, essentially, between the fire of hell and the light of God’s glory, and interprets damnation as the soul’s resistance to the beauty of God’s glory, its refusal to open itself before the divine love, which causes divine love to seem exterior chastisement (so [St. Maximus the Confessor](#), [Origen](#) and [St. Gregory of Nyssa](#) – my note). Hell is the experience (a possibility in each moment) of divine glory not as beauty, but as a formless sublimity ... The ‘fire’ of hell is ... the soul’s refusal to become (as Gregory says) the expanding vessel into which the beauty of God endlessly flows.”
([David Bentley Hart](#))

I’ll conclude with an excerpt from [Scott Cairns’](#) poem “Gehenna, Its Duration” from his book [LOVE’S IMMENSITY: MYSTICS ON THE ENDLESS LIFE](#). The poem is based on the writings of [St. Isaac of Nineveh](#).

That we should think that hell

is not also full

*of love and mingled with compassion
would be an insult to our God.
By saying He will deliver us
to suffering without purpose, we
most surely sin. We blaspheme also if we say
that He will act with spite or with a vengeful purpose,
as if He had a need to avenge Himself.*

God's Judgment Does Not End Free Will

“God is love” ([1 John 4:8](#)). This theological statement is at the heart the Christian understanding of God. It has led some to believe in the idea of *apokatastasis*, the idea that ultimately God will restore all thing to union with him and will destroy hell. It is the notion that a loving God in the end will save everyone and all things.

Dr. Alexander Kalomiros explained in his talk [“River of Fire”](#) that the idea of *apokatastasis* becomes popular and perhaps even necessary among Christians because of a mistaken idea of God's judgment. His basic notion is that God created humans with free will, and God in His love for His creation, limits His own power in order to fully respect the free will of humans. Thus God will never force humans to love Him, believe in Him or obey Him. Kalomiros argues *apokatastasis* is in fact incompatible with God's own choice to respect human freedom. God will not in the end save those who do not wish to be saved. However, he says for those who believe God is good, any sense of His judgment seems incompatible with His love, and they find *apokatastasis* a way to hold to an idea of God's goodness.



Kalomiros, on the other hand, argues that what happens to each of us in the end is exactly what we choose to happen to us – this is what God allows and respects. God's judgment in the end is not God weighing every sin and punishing sinners, but rather God respecting the

wish of each human being and allowing each human to experience God's eternity as they chose by their way of life and relationship to God. In the end, those humans who do not wish to abide in God's presence, will by their own choice be banished from God's presence for all eternity – they will fully experience their choice in the afterlife, totally separated from God or any hope in God. Those who hate God and see God's commands as oppressive will find God's presence unbearable for all eternity. Those who love God will rejoice in the eternal presence of their Creator. God will in His love respect the choices we make and made. What will be different for each of us is not how God treats us, but how we experience God's presence and love because of our beliefs and choices, not because of what God is doing. In this sense our final judgment is our own choice, not God's wish for us on sentence on us. "Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" ([Ezekiel 33:11](#); see [1 Timothy 2:3-4](#))

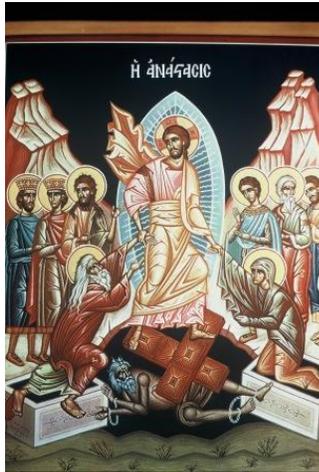
In this thinking, when Adam and Eve sinned and chose to live lives separated from God, God did not punish them with eternal hell. Rather he let them experience their choice – separation from God. Eternal punishment is not mentioned in the Genesis story. Rather death, something which exists in time and whose effect is limited by time, is introduced into the human story. In this sense, seeing death around us and experiencing the pain it causes us are things which gives us a chance to consider what separation from God really means. Death can thus serve as a corrective to our thinking – separation from God is painful.

Death is not something which existed from all eternity, and neither is hell – that place of punishment. Death and hell cannot be eternal because they are the antithesis of God, not godliness. Thus death and hell are limited to the existence of time and space – to this world. They have no existence in the eternity of God. Death's purpose – to allow us to experience our choice and the pain of separation from God – holds no meaning in eternity and will in fact be brought to an end by Christ destroying death ([1 Corinthians 15:26](#)).

The Kingdom of God is eternal and all things will become part of God's holy Kingdom. The only difference for sinners and saints will be how they experience this Kingdom and God's eternal presence. They will rejoice in it if that is what they sought in this lifetime. They will suffer in it if they found God and His way oppressive to their self will in this lifetime. God will not impose judgment on anyone; rather, He will make this world to be His Kingdom, and He will limit His power and allow His eternal presence be experienced by what we humans chose for all eternity. He won't save us from our choice but will respect our free will. Thus God does not condemn people to hell for eternity, rather He accepts our choice for how we want to relate to Him. We get a glimpse of this in the parable of the laborers and the vineyard in [Matthew 20:1-16](#). Jesus is telling us what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. The Master in the parable at the

time of reckoning is incredibly generous to the people who came last to His field and who labored the least. Those who worked the longest grumbled and experienced the Master's generosity in a very negative way and as totally unfair. They could not rejoice in the Master's goodness. Such it will be for all of us in the final judgment of God – we will each experience God's presence as we choose to judge God!

Orthodox Hymns On Hell



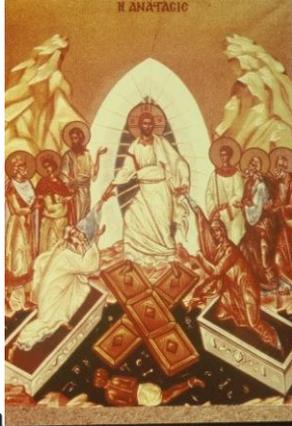
Below are a few Orthodox Resurrection Hymns sung during the regular Octoechos cycle on Sundays throughout the year. These hymns would be very familiar to most Orthodox. Take note of their attitude toward hell. Hell is not something to be feared, nor welcomed. These hymns portray Christ as slaying hell, delivering us from hell, shattering the gates of hell, capturing hell, binding hell and destroying its powers. Additionally the hymns portray hell fearing Christ.

Orthodox Resurrection hymns portray hell's powers as being destroyed by Christ. They show hell being emptied of all its people because of Christ: of Christ entering into hell and defeating it. They certainly do not portray Christ as using hell for his purposes, nor of Christ sending people to hell – he came to empty it and destroy it, not fill it with sinners.

When we Orthodox think about hell, we need to think what it is that we prayerfully sing and proclaim in church each Sunday when we celebrate the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. Christ came to save people from sin, death and hell, not hand them over to these enemies of God.

Resurrection Tropar [Tone 2]: When thou didst descend to death, O Life Immortal, **Thou didst slay hell** with the splendor of Thy Godhead! And when from the depths Thou didst raise the dead, all the powers of heaven cried out: O Giver of Life! Christ our God! Glory to Thee!

Resurrection Kontak [Tone 2]: **Hell became afraid**, O Almighty Savior, seeing the miracle of



Thy Resurrection from the tomb! The dead arose! Creation, with Adam, beheld this and rejoiced with Thee! And the world, O my Savior, praises Thee forever!

Resurrection Tropar [Tone 3]: Let the heavens rejoice! Let the earth be glad! For the Lord has shown strength with His arm! He has trampled down death by death! He has become the first born of the dead! **He has delivered us from the depths of hell**, and has granted the world great mercy!

Resurrection Tropar [Tone 4]: My Savior and Redeemer as God rose from the tomb and delivered the earthborn from their chains. **He has shattered the gates of hell**, and as Master, he has risen on the third day!

Resurrection Kontak [Tone 5]: **Thou didst descend into hell, O my Savior, shattering its gates as almighty**; resurrecting the dead as Creator, and destroying the sting of death. Thou hast delivered Adam from the curse, O Lover of Man, and we all cry to Thee: “O Lord, save us!”

Resurrection Tropar [Tone 6]: The angelic powers were at Thy tomb; the guards became as dead men. Mary stood by Thy grave, seeking Thy most pure Body. **Thou didst capture hell**, not being tempted by it. Thou didst come to the Virgin, granting life. O Lord who didst rise from the dead, glory to Thee!

Resurrection Kontak [Tone 7]: The dominion of death can no longer hold men captive, for Christ descended, shattering and destroying its powers! **Hell is bound**, while the prophets rejoice and cry: The Savior has come to those in faith! Enter, you faithful, into the Resurrection!

Hell: It's No Place to Go

Posted on [August 10, 2009](#) by [Fr. Ted](#)



Writing the blog series on the Christian understanding of hell caused me to reflect on the fact that despite the emphasis the threat of hell has in much modern Christian preaching or the prominence the threat of hell has in modern end time Christian writings (like the [“left behind”](#) literature), hell as a place where God keeps sinners alive just to torture them is not the emphases of our Scriptures. The term “hell” is not part of the early Jewish Scriptures – for example it is never mentioned in the Adam and Eve story of the “fall” of humankind nor anywhere in Genesis or the Torah. Relatively speaking [the terms “hell” or “Hades” occurs very seldom in the New Testament](#) with the Evangelists Mark and John and the Apostle Paul never using the term hell, which after all was not a Jewish term.

This leads to asking the question do the New Testament writers believe in the idea of [Apokatastasis](#) – that in the end everyone will be saved? Is the power of God’s love ultimately greater than Satan, evil, death, sin, human rejection of God? The Scriptures surely do present God as being omnipotent, and they do **not** present Satan or evil as being God’s equal and opposite, not even close. Neither Satan nor death nor hell are eternal - none of them can resist the power of God.

However, the Christian Scriptures do clearly speak about a final judgment, a winnowing or separation of those who loved Christ from those who didn’t, of the righteous from the wicked. John in his Gospel even speaks of the unbeliever being “condemned” but does not spell out what that implies for he does not use the words hell or Hades and thus presents us a Jesus who does not teach those ideas either. Certainly the Christian Scriptures do present the notion of universal salvation – what Christ did He did for all of humanity - not just for Jews or Christians. God is the Lord of the universe, not just the Lord of believers. Christians should be careful not to read too much into what the Judgment Day will be like for the New Testament



does use a language of metaphor and imagery to convey to us ideas of hell.

Hell is not the ultimate goal God has for his fallen creatures; the entire story of the Gospels is about Christ overcoming those powers associated with hell – sin, death, demons and evil.

Discerning what the balance will be on Judgment Day between God's love, mercy and forgiveness on the one hand and His justice, holiness and judgment on the other is for the Christian a heart wrenching experience which requires the Wisdom of God to discern. What will triumph in the end? I am reminded of imagery Chrysostom once used to contrast arrogance and humility:

To learn how good it is not to imagine that you are something great picture to yourself two chariots. For one, yoke together a team consisting of justice and arrogance; for the other, a team of sin and humility. You will see that the chariot pulled by the team which includes sin outstrips the team which includes justice. Sin does not win the race because of its own power, but because of the strength of its yokemate, humility. The losing team is not beaten because justice is weak, but because of the weight and mass of arrogance. So humility, by its surpassing loftiness, overcome the heaviness of sin and is the first to rise up to God. In the same manner, because of its great weight and mass, pride can overcome the lightness of justice and easily drag it down to earth." ([*St. John Chrysostom, ON THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE NATURE OF GOD, Homily 5*](#))

Does God's love triumph over justice? Or is justice an expression of God's love? Part of the faith



of Jews and Christians is that God as Lord of the universe is capable and free to judge the world as He chooses. God is not bound by [karma](#) – some universal rule of justice which binds all things even limiting God's decisions and power. In the Western monotheistic tradition, God is able to forgive, grant pardon, and resurrect even the worst of sinners. He doesn't exist just to enforce an impersonal law of justice. God is gracious and free to act even overcoming karma and the effects of sin on humanity. That is the notion of grace which when comprehended can so overwhelm the heart of those who think purely rationally and who see justice as triumphing over all in the end.

For the Christian perhaps the thing to consider is what should we hope for on Judgment day – justice or mercy?

If God is only just, and justice demands that even one sinner be cast into hell for eternity, won't that mean that all sinners must therefore be justly punished, since as the Scriptures claim all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)? Pure justice demands punishment for all – equally and fairly.

On the other hand, if God is merciful, and even the worst of sinners can be forgiven, won't that mean that the rest of us can be forgiven as well? Praying for the salvation of the world is what we do liturgically. We are warned of judgment and justice, but we pray and hope that God will show mercy on sinners, including ourselves. *“For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God; if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And “If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinners?”* (1 Peter 4:17-18, NRSV)

We do sing endlessly in Church, “Lord, have mercy.” We do not respond to every prayer and petition by singing, “God be just” or “Judge us, O Lord.” Jesus Christ did not come into the world to condemn sinners but rather to save them (John 3:17). God could have condemned sinners quite well thank you without having His Son become incarnate and dying miserably on the cross. The coming of Christ into the world is Good News – Gospel. At Pascha we don't proclaim, “Christ is risen and all sinners are condemned to hell.” Our message is that the risen Christ triumphs over hell in order to save humanity. He came to fill hell with Himself, not to fill it with the souls of those who don't believe.

Christ, Not Hell, Has the Final Say About Sinners



We may very much want certain people to be consigned to hell for all eternity for the harm and damage they have done to people in this world. It is comforting to many to think that in the end God is going to clean up all of the evil messes humans have caused by holding all evil doers completely accountable for their deeds. That idea of [retributive justice](#) gives us a sense that what we do in the world truly matters to God and it can give us some sense that suffering in this world will be shown to have meaning in the world to come where the wicked get their comeuppance and the meek inherit the earth. It helps us balance the evil we see all around us knowing that though evil people may escape judgment in this world, they do in the

world to come have to answer for what they did. This helps many to find meaning in a fallen and even tortured world knowing that evil does not triumph in the end.

However in Christianity we also see God at work giving meaning to a fallen and tortured world by resurrecting Christ from the dead. Evil does not triumph nor have the final say. On the cross, Christ forgives his tormentors, and then is raised from the dead trampling down death, the means used by a wicked world to try to destroy Him. Torture and execution do not bring an end to Christ's mission or message – the Church is the witness to this fact.

Many non-believers point out that if the threat of hell is the only thing that deters believers from doing evil, that does not speak well of those who believe in God. For they would say many who never believed in God or hell have done good things and have avoided doing evil to others. Is it really the case that believers have so little love for God and His goodness that unless God threatens us with hell we would be purely evil? If preachers did not threaten believers with hell would they never wish to follow the Gospel command of Jesus to love God and love neighbor? At least in



Orthodox Exorcism in Kenya

Orthodoxy, Satan is not recognized as being more powerful than the Church. In the [baptismal exorcism](#), the Orthodox believers command Satan to leave the baptismal candidate and never meet or influence him/her again. Satan is said not even to have power over swine (referring to the Gospel lesson in [Matthew 8:28-32](#) in which the demons have to ask Christ for permission to depart as they have no power to do so on their own in the presence of Christ). The believers even spit on Satan to show their fearless contempt of him. If the baptismal prayers mean what they say, and if we believe what they proclaim, we have power over Satan, not he over us. We are quite capable of commanding him to do our and God's will, and he must obey the godly command as he is not so powerful as to resist God.

Nowhere in the Scriptures is evil or hell said to have such power over us that we can't resist them no matter how much they may terrify us. As the Patriarch Abraham tells the rich man in

the Parable of Lazarus – if they don't believe God's promises found in the Scriptures, the threat of hell is not going to have any impact over their behavior and choices ([Luke 16:19-31](#)). [And, note, this Gospel Lesson is a Parable of Jesus used for didactic purposes, not virtual tour of hell.]

If in the end, everyone is predestined by God's choice to heaven or hell, or if in the end everyone is simply forgiven, then what difference does our behavior make in this world since all is simply fore-ordained by God and He will judge or forgive by His predetermined will not according to what we have done? In the Q'uran God creates hell from the beginning and promises to sentence sinners to hell for eternal physical torture – God will keep them alive just to torture them. But this is an Islamic idea, not the Gospel's. The Christian Scriptures present hell as having been created for Satan (Matthew 25:41), not for humans and God is presented as finding no pleasure even in bringing about the death of the wicked ([Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11](#)), let alone



condemning them to their eternal punishment. God sends His Son into the world to save the world, not to justify sending unbelievers to hell even though their unbelief condemns them.

The Christian idea of "hell" is surely better represented in that tradition which says hell is our personal choice to be excluded from the presence of God – hell is our own refusal to love God and/or to love neighbor. God will be everywhere present when His Kingdom comes – even in hell. Christ according to Tradition has already filled hell with Himself. But for those who hate God, the very presence of God will be torture. It will be God's love, not His hatred which they will find so horrible.

The Scriptures do offer to us that God is merciful, faithful, wise and just. The Scriptures do tell us that our behavior and choice – virtue or vice as well as repentance and forgiveness – matter in how we will be judged by God on Judgment Day. But the Tradition suggests God will simply allow us to have our own way. Either we will choose to be in God's presence and realize this as heaven or we will be so repulsed by God's love as to live in total and tormented isolation from all else in the universe.

We Orthodox do believe with the New Testament that death is the final enemy of God to be destroyed ([1 Corinthians 15:26](#)). Hell – eternal damnation – is not the final victory over sin and



sinners. The final victory belongs to Jesus Christ the Conqueror triumphantly trampling down both death and Satan while shattering the gates of hell which had held death's captives. Hell itself is emptied by Christ – He liberates all of those bound in hell and thus empties hell of its prisoners and its power and thus takes away the sting of death and shows hell does not have the final word on anyone including sinners. Christianity celebrates the victory of Christ over sin, death, Satan and hell; it doesn't proclaim hell's eternal power, rather it celebrates the final destruction of all that hell represents and proclaims that Christ is risen leaving not even one dead in hell. There is no place in God's universe where God does not reign supreme. Take a look at Revelations 20:11-15, below. The sea, death and Hades all give up the dead they are holding, and these dead are judged by God. But then note – it is Death and Hades which are then thrown into the lake of fire to be destroyed – no mention is made of Death or Hades being kept as permanent states of existence. [Here too I would note the language and imagery being used is very symbolic and figurative - Death and Hades themselves are anthropomorphized. This is not intended to be a photographic image of the end, but it is a descriptive one.]

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.