



## The Hotter the Better!

**H**ell is one of those subjects people get hot and bothered about. If you don't believe in their precise idea of hell—how hot it is, how long it is, how many degrees of suffering are available and the identities of some who are either already there or will eventually go there—well, they just might tell you to go see for yourself.

From time to time I get letters about hell from people who don't seem to care for me. Some of these letters have actually been written by self-described commandment-keeping folks who have invited me to tour the warmer climes of the netherworld.

One person wrote to say that he didn't believe in ever-burning, literal flames of hell

but nonetheless concluded his letter by praying that I would "roast in hell." One critic assured me that one day I will become a permanent guest in hell with an assigned parking place.

A radio listener asked for biblically-balanced teaching about hell. "I really appreciate

the plain and easy to understand way you explain biblical truth. I am a Lutheran and would like you to clarify the subject of hell."

Some churches just don't talk about hell—they have discovered it usually doesn't make parishioners "feel good." When churches are seduced by our cultural mandate of comfort and consumerism, hell is reduced to a theological "don't ask, don't tell." In such churches you have a much better chance of hearing about hell on the golf course that afternoon than you will in church that morning.

Then there are some churches at the other end of the spectrum that engage in self-righteous theological one-upmanship contests, each attempting to be more specific and rigorous about hell. If you attend this kind of church, you might not only hear about hell, you may personally experience a preview. Their views seem to "boil down" to the belief

that the more faithful and diligent a Christian you are, the hotter the hell in which you believe.

It seems to me that some who insist on a hell that's "seven times hotter" than the next guy's hell may be a little self-absorbed. They

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appear to be so devoted to saving their skins from being eternally char-broiled that they don't seem to recognize hell on earth. Those who love to hear "hell-fire and brimstone" sermons often spend lots of time and effort making sure they don't do bad things in an attempt to stay out of hell. But in their zeal to keep their own posteriors safe from the fires of hell (see Mark 8:34-37), they don't seem to have a clue about the hell that exists—and has existed—here on this earth.

### Hell On Earth

Hell on earth? For starters, within the last 100 years, the two major world wars. Then there's the hell of the Russian Revolution





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and the Holocaust. The killing fields of Cambodia. Places with names like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Rwanda, Vietnam, China, North Korea, Iraq and Iran. The African AIDS epidemic. Some of the people in those places never played cards, never had a beer, never went to the race track and never played bingo. Many were “good” people. But some of them went to hell, some lived there for a while and some died there. Many “good” people are in hell right now—on this earth.

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Many North American Christians seem to be oblivious of hell on earth. Best selling Christian books during the past several decades have offered graphic depictions of the Great Tribulation, and the time just before or just after the Rapture, when “times will really get tough.” And times aren’t already tough in other places in this world? Do these people read their newspapers? Since when was the biblical description



of the Great Tribulation confined to overstuffed North Americans?

Columnist John Leo reports that after the 1965 riots in Watts a story appeared in a Christian newspaper in California with the headline, “Watts Erupts in Rioting: No Priests or Nuns Hurt” (*U.S. News and World Report*, July 27, 2002). The secret Rapture teaching that some Christians believe is similar. This teaching is the theological equivalent of a “get out of hell free” card.

According to those who believe in the secret Rapture, the Great Tribulation spoken of in the Bible will amount to all hell breaking loose. That’s the bad news. But, according to the secret Rapture, the good news is that only pagans will be tortured, maimed and killed. All Christians (at least those who believe in the secret Rapture) will be saved from any pain, because they will be raptured. Are those who believe they will be raptured the only ones God will save from pain and misery?

## “Reaching Out” With Hell

For several centuries, many Christians have used hell as a big stick, dangling sinners’ feet over the hot coals until they repent. Not much about that kind of evangelism in the Bible, by the way. Every fall a few North American churches “reach out to the unsaved” by building Halloween “hell houses,” inviting pagans who play cards and drink beer to “come to Christ” by touring what is depicted as the “horrors of hell.”

While we can appreciate the motive to convert pagans, we should also understand that the vivid depictions in Dante’s *Inferno* are not part of the Bible. Further,

popularized ideas of hell, and heaven, for that matter, have never been considered part of the essential doctrines of Christianity.

Hell fire and brimstone preaching has historically been part of revivals, when sinners were given an old fashioned, down-home, scrub-brush, hard-sell last witness. But those who are converted by fear are not deeply convicted and they are certainly not free in Christ—they are captives of humanly derived ideology.

That may be one reason why Christianity is having such a battle with hell today. Humans today consider themselves to be more



Detail from *The Last Judgment*, a painting by the 15th-century Dutch artist Jan van Eyck.

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enlightened than at any other time in history, and archaic ideas about hell simply do not make sense. 21st century minds struggle with an ever-burning hell fire eternally existing in the middle of the earth, with hobgoblin-like demons stoking the flames and tormenting those who were incorrigibly evil as well as lesser sinners who couldn't quite kick the smoking, drinking or card-playing habit.

And that's another reason that the hell fire and brimstone marching and chowder society furiously stokes the furnaces of hell. Humanly, we don't like to think that someone will be able to do something "bad" and not pay for it. We want to believe that no one will ever get away with anything.

Hell reassures us that the bad guys will get it in the end (or at least in the neck). Hell appeals to a human need for fair play. But, the Bible teaches that God works in human lives by his grace, not by our definition of fair play.

The idea of a "seven times hotter" hell is an enemy of God's grace, because keeping one's posterior out of the flames of hell is based on what we do, not what God does. Vivid pictures of evildoers being barbecued and tortured in hell motivates us to do things to convince and obligate God to save us, and therefore keep us out of hell.

A preoccupation with hell can drive us to become self absorbed. Soon we start to live our lives by arbitrary lists of things we ought to do and ought not to do. You may have heard about the man

who used to lie awake at night, unable to sleep, because he was convinced that somewhere, someone was getting away with something.

Do you remember when you were a young child—taking pains to point out to your parents something that your sibling was doing that warranted punishment? Ever do that?

## Eternal Separation

But in spite of unbiblical speculation and dogmatism about hell, and the motives behind them, I believe in hell. Perhaps the best definition of hell is eternal separation from God—the very opposite of heaven, which is eternity spent in God's presence.

I believe in hell because I believe what the Bible teaches about good and evil. I believe in hell because I believe in heaven. I believe in the grace of God and the judgment of God.

I believe that we are saved from being eternally separated from God by God's grace. People who never, ever play cards, see a movie or drink the beverage that Jesus created in his first miracle do not earn a "get out of hell free" card. We can neither be good enough to obligate God to accept us into his kingdom of heaven, nor will our good deeds earn or merit a divine guarantee that we will not roast in hell.

On the other hand, we should not underestimate God's holiness and perfection. He does not and

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will not co-exist with evil. There has been, is and will be a judgment for sin. Some are and will be eternally separated from God. They, in effect, choose hell, because they refuse to repent. Chronic sinners who perpetuate unremitting evil are judged by God. No one "gets away with" anything—but that fact is not the cornerstone or foundation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But please, enough of the speculation, dogmatism and fear tactics. Enough already. Hell is not a "place" (neither is heaven). Suffering that will be experienced in hell will not be the kind of physical suffering we endure in this body of flesh. God intervened and allowed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to survive the furnace that Nebuchadnezzar stoked up "seven times hotter" (Daniel 3:13-26).

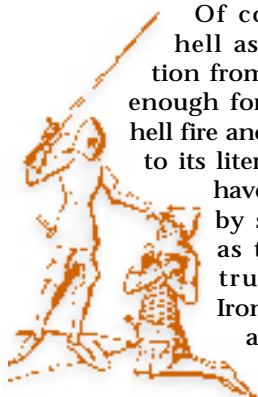
It was Nebuchadnezzar, a man who did not worship the one true God, who stoked up the furnace "seven times hotter." It seems that Nebuchadnezzar considered these three young Jewish men to be "sinners in the hands of angry gods." We should also notice that the guards who were helping to "convert" Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego by throwing them into the furnace that was "seven times hotter" were themselves killed by the severe heat, and they were not even within the flames of this hell.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego would have been incinerated by the

intense heat, but God saved them. How then can we, in good conscience, teach about physical suffering in literal fire in the after life?

How hot is hell? Where is it? Does it exist right now, or will it be fired up at some later date? Is it literal fire, and if it is, how will it cause pain to the souls of individuals who no longer have bodies with nerve endings that feel pain? What is or what will be the population of hell compared to heaven? Less than or more than?

## Hell Now or Hell Later?



Of course, defining hell as eternal separation from God is not hot enough for some. Belief in hell fire and one's allegiance to its literal characteristics have come to be seen by some Christians as the acid test of true Christianity. Ironically, the beliefs and assumptions that produce such a perspective

have often been the ones that inflict hell on others in the name of God, in the interest of keeping others out of hell fire.

Remember the Crusades? The objectives were not that much different than Nebuchadnezzar's furnace that was "seven times hotter." We Christians are still dealing with the repercussions of the Crusades—a program (or was it a pogrom?) of "education and evangelism." The basic idea of the Crusades seems to have been to

convert pagans using any means of persuasion necessary—ensuring that they did not go to hell by giving

them hell. Ever wonder why the followers of Islam and Judaism can't seem to forget the Crusades? Is that the idea? Hell now or hell later? Sounds a little sick, and not at all like the teachings of Jesus Christ. And let's not forget the Inquisitions—after all, those who are skeptical of Christianity won't. Another hell on earth, courtesy of some zealous religious folks who felt that they were representing God (Matthew 10:17,21; John 16:2).

Just the other day I heard that a tele-evangelist is planning a cradle-to-the-grave Christian community. It will be a place where Christians will never have to leave the holy huddle, as Christian grade and high schools and colleges will provide education. Products will all be sanitized by having the word Christian placed in front of them—Christian books, Christian music, Christian nursing homes, Christian food, Christian movies and Christian-only suburbs. People will be able to spend their entire lives there without ever being contaminated by a pagan.

The perfect holy huddle. What a nightmare! Is that what Jesus had in mind when he told us to let our lights shine, not to light a candle and put it under a basket, but instead to put it where everyone can see it?

If that holy huddle ever happens, it will be another hell on earth.



Hell. What it is. "Where" it is. How "hot" it is. Who and how many get invited. Those are God's decisions. The Bible is not specific enough for us to offer dogmatic conclusions.

What would God have us understand about hell?

1) Be careful that you don't get involved in some crusade that creates or assists hells on earth, even if what you are doing is called "God's work."

2) Remember that each one of us is a flawed, sinful and imperfect human, who, based on merit alone, deserves the punishment of hell. But, thank God, we are saved by his grace.

3) The path of God's kingdom of heaven does not require that Christians dangle the feet of the uncommitted over the flames of hell. Don't try to scare people into God's kingdom with vivid descriptions of a mythical hell, that may or may not be accurate, but certainly are not specified in the Bible.

4) Leave the assignment of specific people who will go to hell up to God. God, according to my Bible, is not real happy with us condemning others. "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to the trouble of sending his Son merely to point

an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again" (John 3:16-17, *The*

*Message*).

Now, pour me another glass of iced tea and deal those cards. □

—Greg Albrecht

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