



Topic: Death and the Afterlife

Option:

Essential Richer Reading – you must read this for your lessons ☒

Recommended Richer Reading – advised as it would enhance your understanding further ☐

Further Richer Reading – widening your knowledge beyond A-levels ☐

Richer Reading title: What is Hell?

Type: Catholic Magazine Article <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/what-is-hell>

Reading intention: (*importance of the text, what students will gain from it*)

- Important to understand the subtleties of the Catholic doctrine on Hell in comparison to Biblical understanding
- Clearer understanding of deep philosophical questions and theological responses such as can God be loving if Hell exists?

Core content to take away:

- Catholic understanding of Hell as a sort of “state”
- How Catholic and Biblical on Hell texts align together

Exam help...

- Explaining Catholic doctrine on Hell in more depth than basic breadth to be able to outline topical subtleties on Hell
- Scripture to use and apply to both AO1 and AO2 paragraphs
- Ability to justify beliefs and philosophical “big questions” with more confidence.

Task for this reading:

1. Highlight the text focusing on the question below: (remember not to highlight whole paragraphs or sentences)

- a. According to the RCC what is Hell?
- b. How did God create man?
- c. What is mortal sin?
- d. What does the Old Testament and Paul say about eternity and consequences?
- e. So why does Hell exist?
- f. What does the Bible teach about Hell?
- g. Is Hell Literal? Is Hell a place or a state of being?
- h. Can people who are in heaven be happy knowing hell exists?

2. Annotate what you have highlighted using what you know so far.

This post led to people asking more questions about the nature of Hell itself. What is it? Is it really “eternal?” and more.

Below find my answers to some of those questions.

By definition, according to CCC 1033, hell is “[the] state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.” Some people cannot fathom how Hell could be a reality if God is truly an “all-loving” and “merciful God.” Yet, Hell could be said to be both the definitive expression of God’s justice and of the lofty calling and dignity of man. What do I mean by this?

Let’s look at the latter statement first.

In his infinite wisdom, God deigned to create man with the immeasurable dignity of a free, rational, spiritual, and therefore, *immortal* soul. He did not create us as robots that can only “choose” the good. Man has been gifted with the incredible gift of being free to either accept or reject God and God’s plan for him.

The ultimate reason for this is love. CCC 1861 says it well: “Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself.” Without freedom there is no real love as we understand it. The Catechism goes on:

[Mortal sin] results in the loss of charity and the privation of sanctifying grace, that is, of the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God’s forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices for ever, with no turning back.

God has given to man his entire lifetime on earth to make that irrevocable decision of which the Catechism speaks. Thus, the “time” for choosing is now in this life, but the choice we make will have eternal consequences. Indeed, not only is this the “time” for choosing, but this is the only “time” there will be “time” at all. “Time” will be no more after we die, at least, not as we understand it. There will be some sense of sequentiality, some sort of “time,” if you will, but very different from “time” as we understand it now. Our “eternity” is thus sealed at the time of our death! But think about this: our choices affect not only us, but others as well and quite possibly for all

eternity! Consider these two texts: one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament:

If I say to the wicked, “You shall surely die,” and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked man shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked, and he does not turn from his wickedness, or from his wicked way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you will have saved your life (Ez. 3:18-19).

In I Tim. 4:16, St. Paul says to Timothy:

Take heed to yourself and to your teaching; hold to that, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

Ezekiel seems to indicate that if we choose not to evangelize someone God places in our life, it may well be that this will have been the last opportunity that person will ever have to choose God! This is daunting in one sense to be sure, but it also speaks of an incredibly lofty calling we all have as God’s faithful on earth. Some people, Calvinists in particular, simply cannot believe God would give to man this kind of responsibility. Yet, according to Scripture, this is the dignity and calling of man.

Now, I should also note that it may well be, and I would think it would most often be the case, that if we choose not to evangelize someone, he will be given any number of other opportunities to come to God, but both Ezekiel and St. Paul remind us of another reason why we need to evangelize: *we save our own souls as well*. “Educating the ignorant,” and “admonishing the sinner” are corporal works of mercy by which we will be judged on the Last Day. It is precisely because of this spiritual and free component in man that he has the ability to ascend the heights of a Mother Theresa or to descend to the depths of an Adolf Hitler. German shepherds have neither ability.

God considered this gift of freedom, and the ultimate fruit of that freedom—eternal life—as being worth all the evils that would eventually be brought about by the abuse of that freedom. As St. Paul said it, “... the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” in full at the end of time (Romans 8:18).

To chase a rabbit here for a moment: when considering the massive amount of evil that exists in the world we should also remember that God only even

permits this inasmuch as he knows that he will bring ultimate good out of that evil. The crucifix is the ultimate example of this. The greatest evil ever perpetrated in the history of creation—the crucifix where we killed God—results in the greatest good... the redemption of the world by the grace of Jesus Christ.

Answering Objections and Questions

1. The Bible Does Not Teach “Hell” – At Least, Not as an *Eternal* Hell

The truth is: Most of what we know of Hell and its eternity comes from the very lips of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. And he uses terms that are unequivocal. Pope St. John Paul II, in his book, “Crossing the Threshold of Hope,” pg. 185, says it succinctly:

... the words of Christ are unequivocal. In Matthew’s gospel [Christ] speaks clearly of those who will go to eternal punishment (cf. Matt. 25:46).

The CCC 1035 concurs:

The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of Hell and its eternity.

Most importantly, Scripture itself could hardly be clearer:

In Revelation 20:10, St. John describes Hell (“the lake of fire,” more specifically) in relation to the Devil and the False Prophet of the end times in terms difficult to misunderstand:

And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.

Then, in Revelation 20:14-15, St. John again mentions this same “lake of fire” and explicitly and specifically declares that humans will go to the same place—and that means “for ever and ever.”

This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown in the lake of fire.

Revelation 21:8 says it as well and includes all those who die in mortal sin:

But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, as for murderers, fornicators, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death.

In Matthew 25:41 and 46, Jesus says just as heaven represents *eternal* life, Hell represents *eternal* punishment:

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, in to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels...

And they [the unrighteous] will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Matthew 13:41-42, 47-50:

The son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth...

So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.

3. Are the "Flames" of Hell Literal?

It should be understood that both the joy of heaven and the pains of Hell are indescribable this side of eternity. And just as the Church warns against seeing heaven as a "worldly" sort of extension of life on this earth, so it is with Hell. The inspired authors cannot describe Hell adequately using human language; thus, the "flames of fire" are simply the most painful things we can imagine on this earth used to attempt to describe the indescribable to some degree.

So, are the "flames of fire" of Hell literal? No, they are not. In fact, it should be obvious that they are not literal *right now* because the souls in Hell do not presently have bodies. You can't "light up" a soul with a match.

If this is true, then, what is the nature of "the pains of Hell?"

CCC 1472 answers this question succinctly:

These two punishments [the Catechism is here speaking of both Purgatory and Hell] must not be conceived of as a kind of vengeance inflicted by God from without, but as following from the very nature of sin.

Again, the Catechism emphasizes the fact that Hell is *primarily* eternal separation from God. As CCC 1033 says, “The state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed.” It is absolute emptiness and isolation beyond anything we can fathom. The “pains” that are quite real, quite literal, and consist of both the pain of loss, and the pain of sense, i.e., they involve the body after the resurrection of the body, “follow from the very nature of sin,” or, they arise *from the inside out*, not from *the outside in*.

What is mortal sin but the rejection of the love of God and neighbor? It is ultimate selfishness. Ultimately, the damned will simply get what they wanted—themselves for all eternity!

It is said that a man will go insane if he is kept in isolation for too long because human beings are so ordered toward communion with God and others. Hell will be that isolation that would lead anyone to insanity, but the condemned will never be able to lose their faculties. They will be fully cognizant of the pain of their isolation.

Some may ask as a follow-up, “What about, for example, the private revelation of St. Faustina that speaks of ‘the company of the devil’ as being part of the pains of Hell? How does that square with this ‘isolation’ that we are talking about?”

Answer: the “isolation” we are talking about here does not mean necessarily that there will be no other persons present. Think of it this way. Have you ever seen a person who is “all alone” in the middle of a party with people all around? For example, a person who is angry or having a “pity party” and wants nothing to do with anyone? In fact, the presence of people having fun can be an occasion for increased rage for someone like that!

That is an imperfect glimpse of Hell.

4. Is Hell a “Place” or a “State of Being?”

Hell is *primarily* a state of being, but inasmuch as the souls there will have bodies after the resurrection of the dead, they will have location as well. So, in that sense, we can say Hell is a “place.” In fact, we could say the same of heaven. But both heaven and hell are not “places” in the sense that the people there could “leave” and “return.” Inasmuch as these are states of being, “heaven” and “hell” are present wherever the saints and damned are.

5. How could it be possible that the just in heaven will be able to rejoice for all eternity in God, when they know that loved ones, for example, are in Hell for all eternity?

In other words, it has been asked of me, how could the angels and saints rejoice in heaven, for example, in Rev. 21, knowing the damned are suffering terribly as we see in Rev. 20? Or even more, we see in Rev. 14:11, the damned, “shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the lamb.”

Perhaps an analogy would work best in explaining this: Imagine you are in a court room and a man whom *you know* is guilty of murder is standing before the Judge and jurors where his fate is about to be determined. The foreman of the jury stands up and says, “Your honor, we find Tom Smith (insert your own name here) “not guilty” of all charges.

Your immediate reaction would most likely be to say, “That’s unjust!” At least, it should be. This would be an injustice because this man was, in fact, guilty! You *should* feel outraged at an injustice like this. Yet, on the flip side, if that same juror were to say, “We find Tom Smith guilty,” there would be a sense in which you could rejoice in this that is just. We should not rejoice in the suffering that awaits this man. We should not allow ourselves to fall into a sense of vengeance for vengeance’s sake, but we can, and indeed we should, rejoice in the good that is justice. You could say in a joyful way, “Justice was served today! And that is a good thing!”

On Judgment Day, all will know that every person will have been judged rightly and we will be able to see this with “God’s eyes,” so to speak. The blessed will be able to rejoice in God’s justice and mercy. In fact, only heaven will reveal in full the reality that that Justice and Mercy are actually absolutely one in our infinitely just and infinitely merciful God!