

The Three Images of Hell

33 Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" 35 Some of those who stood by, when they heard that, said, "Look, He is calling for Elijah!" 36 Then someone ran and filled a sponge full of sour wine, put it on a reed, and offered it to Him to drink, saying, "Let Him alone; let us see if Elijah will come to take Him down." 37 And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. 38 Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!" (Mar 15:33-39)

The idea of Hell is of course very unpopular today. Not only do non-Christians criticise Christians for believing in it, but many Christians are very embarrassed or even silent about it. Some of this is because of the way the idea of Hell has been distorted and warped in some depictions of it. Part of it is that few people today believe evil is really evil. People believe flawed people need rehabilitation, imperfect people need growth, twisted people need to be straightened out, but fewer and fewer people believe that there is such a thing as evil, which must be punished.

The Cross of Christ, rightly understood proclaims to the world that there is evil, and God is committed to stamping it out. The Cross of Christ proclaims to the world that there is a Hell. Because on that Cross, we believe that Jesus faced the essence of Hell. If Jesus took the place of sinners, then justice demands that Jesus have faced what a sinner would have faced. What a sinner who rejects Christ faces in hell, is what Christ faced on the Cross.

1Jo 4:10 *In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

Propitiation means that God poured out His justice on Jesus, until the scales of justice were balanced. The Cross and Hell are not completely different punishments, they are the same in essence. What happens in Hell, happened to Jesus on the cross. Spurgeon: "No one goes free by the naked mercy of God. Every captive exposed to God's vengeance must be redeemed before he is delivered, otherwise he must continue a captive. Broad as the statement may appear, I venture to assert by divine warrant that there never was beneath the cope of heaven a sin forgiven without satisfaction being rendered. No sin against God is pardoned without a propitiation"

The difference between them was that Jesus, as an Infinite Person, could face an infinite punishment in a finite amount of time. Hell, is where finite people, sinners, go to face a finite punishment for an infinite amount of time.

If Jesus faced the essence of Hell for us, then we have a way of finding out what Jesus went through on the cross. In the Bible, we have three major images that are given to us to describe what Hell is. And as we study these images and compare them to what happened on the cross, we can understand the depth of Christ's sacrifice for us.

I. Banishment

33 Now when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. 34 And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

At midday, after three hours of crucifixion, the land goes completely dark, and stays that way for three hours, until 3pm. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report that the darkness fell upon the whole land, for three hours. This could not have been a solar eclipse, because Passover takes place during

a full moon, and you cannot have an eclipse and a full moon at the same time in the same place. What was happening?

We think of Hell, and we think of fire as the first thing. But often enough, there is an image which is quite different. It is the image of being cast out, of being abandoned, of being thrown out.

11 "And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. "But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Mat 8:11-12)

Here, as in several places, Hell is described as a place of darkness, which suggests the place abandoned by the light of God. Hell is where people who do not want God are banished. People who have lived their short lives on Earth, making choice after choice which says, I do not want God at the centre of my life, I do not want to worship Him, now get their wish. They get to be forever banished from the realm of God's light and favour. In fact, one of the Greek words for hell is Gehenna, which was taken from the Jewish words for the Valley of Hinnom. Gehenna was an actual place – a large garbage dump where the rubbish and refuse was thrown out, and burnt.

Hell is the garbage dump of the universe, the island prison of the cosmos, the leper colony of creation. Here is where you are cast, if you have contempt for the Creator. Daniel described this in his book

Dan 12:2 *And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, Some to everlasting life, Some to shame and everlasting contempt.*

Everlasting contempt. The experience of knowing you have been banished, and thrown out. Shame, regret, guilt, exclusion.

John Donne, the poet and preacher said, "When all is done, the hell of hells, the torment of torments, is the everlasting absence of God...to fall out of the hands of the living God is a horror beyond our expression, beyond our imagination."

As that darkness came over the land, Jesus was facing banishment. For those three hours, He experienced being cast out and cast away from communion with God. For three hours, He was not simply in Jerusalem's darkness, but in the outer darkness of being God-forsaken. As He took upon Him the sin and evil of the world, God took Him as the substitute, and threw Him out of His presence, banished Him as far from His presence as could be, and treated Him as He would treat the vilest criminal of all.

After three hours, by human reckoning, the weight and load and horror of being so banished from God came out in a cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" He was quoting Scripture, - Psalm 22:1, showing he still trusted God, but the weight from a human point of view felt crushing. Of all the persons who have walked the Earth, no one was ever less prepared to experience banishment from God than Jesus, the Son. All he had known was fellowship. But here He is abandoned, and no concession is made for Him, no lessening of the sentence, no glimmer of light, no relieving of the burden. Here was the experience of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

The second major image of Hell is the one we know so well. It is the image of

II. Retribution

God's Word tells us that Hell is not simply the absence of God. Hell is also where God plants His

flag of justice in the soul of the sinner. No justice can occur unless good is rewarded, and evil is punished. The mass murderer, the child rapist, the slave-trader will not simply be deprived of privileges. Each one will know that God is balancing the scales of justice and giving punishments fit for the crimes.

46 "And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." (Mat 25:46)

9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, (2Th 1:9)

9 then the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptations and to reserve the unjust under punishment for the day of judgment, (2Pe 2:9)

It's a punishment, and a punishment depicted as a furnace, as a fiery lake. In one other place, the punishment is depicted as receiving a beating.

Now this is where most people get stuck. Is Hell an eternal torture chamber? Well, if Scripture said it was, then we'd have to wrestle with that, but it doesn't say that. It says it is a place of punishment, and the punishment is a kind of torment, but this is not a sadistic torture chamber. Remember the image of Gehenna – a rubbish dump where the rubbish is burned, and so the city kept cleaner? Here is a place where the evil of sin is covered by the righteous judgement of God balancing the scales, the holy wrath of God purifying the universe. Fire means many things in Scripture – it sometimes means judgement, sometimes purification, sometimes glory. Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:41 that He will say to the unrighteous **Mat 25:41** *"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels:*

Whatever the image of fire refers to, it must be the kind that would be a punishment for the devil and his angels, who do not have material bodies.

If the fire is an image, I don't think that takes away from the severity of this place. It must mean the reality is worse, something that only fire on skin could capture for us. What sinners face in hell is God's displeasure at their defiance, ingratitude and deliberate idolatry. They feel that displeasure. They experience it all around them.

How could that be fair?

A few answers. First, how great is the offence, if you offend infinite Perfection? The offence is infinite, and so what is a fitting punishment? Infinite punishment.

Second, who is to say that sinners stop sinning in hell? *11 "He who is unjust, let him be unjust still; he who is filthy, let him be filthy still; (Rev 22:11)*

If so, you would expect them to get worse and worse, and you would expect the punishment to last as long as they sin. Look around you on Earth. When you see people living with the horror of their own sin, do they stop? Or do they sin more?

For those three hours of darkness on the Cross, Now what did Jesus face on the Cross? We believe that for those three hours, God poured upon Jesus full retribution for sin. The fiery holiness of God now engulfed Jesus, and Jesus, coated with all the sins of the world, experienced the rage of God. The revulsion you feel for outrageous crimes, the harming of children, the acts of beastly torture, this God feels towards the slightest sin, and here all sins were combined and placed on one man.

21 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2Co 5:21)

5 But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed. (Isa 53:5)

And if all the fiery punishment of Hell, could be gathered up and concentrated onto one spot of Earth, and if its combined heat for burning for centuries and centuries could be added up and poured out at once, that's what Jesus experienced for three hours. God's outrage, God's determination to rid His creation of this horrible infection, God's anger at the hard, unrepentant nature of sinners. I want to suggest to you that no human or angel could have survived the wrath of God for three hours. Only the God-man could survive that.

Here for those hours, Jesus was not looking up to Abba, Father, but to Judge. The Father was not looking down on the beloved Son, but on the Cursed One. And as Jesus descended deeper and deeper into that bottomless pit of sin, He felt the guilt and weight of being, as Martin Luther put it, the Greatest Sinner of all. And here is God's statement on how irrational and chaotic evil is, for here is God punishing God for what God did not do. This is chaos, paradoxical, but it was the only way to save sinners from their evil. And after three hours, Jesus the God-Man, can only cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Ye who think of sin but lightly
Nor suppose the evil great
Here may view its nature rightly,
Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the sacrifice appointed,
See who bears the awful load;
'Tis the Word, the Lord's anointed,
Son of Man and Son of God

The third image of Hell is the one of

III. Death

In fact, the Hebrew word for hell is Sheol – the place of the dead, as is one of the Greek words – Hades. Hell is synonymous with death. Paul in Romans speaks of Hell as death.

23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

With death comes corruption, so Hell is described as the place where the worm, or the maggot does not die. We don't have to look for literal maggots; we understand that this is a place where in some way, the experience of death goes on and on.

We also read several times that Hell is a place of destruction.

13 "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. (Mat 7:13)

28 "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell. (Mat 10:28)

9 These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, (2Th 1:9)

15 "that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. (Joh 3:15)

Now we know from other Scriptures that the soul is not snuffed out of existence. So what could be meant by eternal death, eternal destruction? We know in physical death there is a separation of body and soul. We know that the person leaves the land of the living, and the body suffers decay.

All we can surmise is that Hell is a place of separation from God, where perhaps you recede further and further from the source of Life and Light, never going out of existence, but perhaps eternally shrivelling and shrinking in life, till you are so distant and so small from God, that you may as well not exist.

Those three hours of darkness were all the horrors of death poured into One. For those Three hours, Jesus dropped into the abyss of the wages of sin, with the light of God receding to a pinprick, while the blackness of death choked Him.

Martin Luther said of Jesus, "No one ever feared death so much as this man." Why would he say that? Because no one deserved to die less, no one was more alive, and no one else would be facing death in such an unmodified way. Jesus faced death with the sting, death, unmitigated, death without God. Donald MacLeod wrote, "The wonder of the love of Christ for His people is not that for their sake he faced death without fear, but that for their sake he faced it, terrified. Terrified by what He knew, and terrified by what he did not know, he took damnation lovingly."

For three hours, Jesus died. For three hours, He tasted death for every man. And when it seemed as if He was so far from the light and Life of the Father, he cried out, "My God, My God, why Have You Forsaken Me?"

But even then, he said it in hope. Despair never took him, but profound pain, profound distress, profound horror. Because after those three hours were over, the Son of God had completed the greatest task ever. He had completed the task that seemed overwhelmingly horrific in Gethsemane. He had finished the task for which He really came: to experience the wrath of the Triune God, and be a substitute for all who would believe. *17 "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. 18 "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (Joh 3:17-18)*

And so, a few moments later, He would ask for His mouth to be wetted, so that he could make an announcement, and the announcement was this: It is finished – Paid in full. And then, having won, having triumphed, he surrendered His spirit up to His Father, voluntarily laying down His life, and sealing the atonement with His actual death.

Jesus did not go to the Lake of Fire. He did not have to. What He experienced on the Cross was all that Hell is, and I think, more. Hell is banishment from God, and Jesus experienced that. Hell is retribution from God, and Jesus experienced that. Hell is death, and Jesus experienced that.

So this is what the Cross says to the world: evil is real. Sin is real. God is committed to destroying and punishing sin. As sinners, that means God's target lands on us, and we face banishment, punishment, and death. Or, we hide in and under the One who, because of His holiness, faced that for others: God the Son, Jesus Christ.

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (Joh 3:16)