

Does Hell Actually Exist?

The concept of a person spending an eternity in hell is so grave to me that I do not believe it is intellectually possible for me to fully conceive it. As a matter of fact—I believe that most Christians live as though there is no hell, because if we truly believed its existence, we would do much more to spread the good news of Jesus.

The debate over the existence of hell was just made front and center recently when Pope Francis allegedly stated that bad souls just disappear, and hell does not exist.

To quote the story: Eugenio Scalfari, 93, wrote an article in Thursday's *La Repubblica*. He asked the pope where "bad souls" go and where they are punished. Scalfari quoted the pope as saying:

"They are not punished. Those who repent obtain God's forgiveness and take their place among the ranks of those who contemplate him, but those who do not repent and cannot be forgiven disappear. A hell doesn't exist, the disappearance of sinning souls exists."

Whether the pope said this or not is not the concern of this article. My main concern is what the Bible teaches about this grave subject (I believe that Scripture trumps church tradition, creeds, catechisms, church confessions, canon law and statements or teachings by popes and other prelates).

Truly, if there is a hell, then a wise person would make a lifestyle choice to avoid an eternity in that place; if there is no hell—or if all people will eventually be reconciled to God irrespective of what they believe—then Jesus died on the cross in vain to save us and or it is not necessary to follow Jesus to reap the benefits of the cross.

What the Old Testament Jews Believed

Since this is a brief article, I cannot go into detail regarding all the texts about hell in both testaments. That being said, the Old Testament account of hell is sparse. However, the Jews of antiquity believed in such a place reserved to punish evildoers, as noted by the prophet Isaiah (66:24):

“And they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, nor shall their fire be quenched. And they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.”

The New Testament Teachings of Jesus and the Apostles

That Jesus believed in the existence of an eternal hell for unbelievers is incontrovertible.

Hence, if a person doesn't believe it exists—either they think they know more about eternity than Jesus or they think Jesus was mistaken— (I would never bet against Jesus!)

Jesus made it clear there was an eternal state of suffering for unbelievers when He told the story of “the Rich man and Lazarus” (Luke 16:19-21). Although cults like the Jehovah's Witnesses (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, who believe in soul annihilation) wrest the Scriptures and say this was a parable, Luke says “There was a rich man ...” If it was a parable, the New Testament writer would have mentioned it was a parable as they did in other passages (see Luke 18:1; 9; Mark 4:2, 13:30).

In this sober story, the rich man died and went to a place of torment—being fully conscious while suffering in agony in the flames of hell. Jesus also warned followers to remove everything in their life that causes them to stumble or they risked going to hell, into the unquenchable fire where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched (Mark 9:42-49). He also said to the Pharisees “You serpents! You generation of vipers! How can you escape the judgment of

hell?" (Matt. 23:33).

The belief in an eternal hell and judgment was carried over by the apostles of Christ. The apostle Paul warned that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, which should result in the fear of the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:10,11). The judgment seat for unbelievers is unpacked more fully by the apostle John as shown in the book of Revelation (20:11-15).

This eschatological passage regarding the final judgment is worth reading here:

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. From His face the earth and the heavens fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God. Books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. The dead were judged according to their works as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one by his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:11-15).

Notice—there were "books" opened for unbelievers and only one book ("The Book of Life") for believers. Why is this? Because all the sins and acts of disobedience against God are recorded and shown to unbelievers to demonstrate the justice of God before their final judgement; and only one book is needed for (perhaps) billions of Christ followers because their sins have been washed away through faith in the blood of Christ's vicarious death on the cross.

Hence, the only thing recorded in "The Book of Life" are the "names" (not the sins) of those who have received Jesus as Lord of their life (John 1:12,13; Rom. 10:9,10).

Finally, Jesus said that hell was not created for humanity but

for the devil and his angels (Matt. 25:41). God is not willing for any (humans) to perish but all to come to repentance because Jesus did not come to condemn the world but to save it (2 Pet. 3:19; John 3:17).

Consequently, the choice of where a person spends eternity is up to them; believe in Jesus, and you will not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life. He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36).