

Hell: Spiritual or Physical or Both?

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This piece is a specific response to the question of whether hell is simply spiritual separation from God or is a place of conscious physical torment.

Looked at one way, the question is about whether we should interpret the Bible literally in places which discuss hell. Cf. especially Rev 20:10 (“lake of fire”). The book of Revelation speaks more about hell than virtually any other book, yet the language of this very book is rather symbolic. Sometimes an interpretation is given by an angel: when this happens, we should seek no other interpretation. But this is not the case here. Nevertheless, in interpreting the symbolism of Revelation and of the Bible as a whole we must keep in mind one key factor: the figure symbolizes *something*. Thus, for example, one cannot simply take the 1000-year kingdom and the seven-year tribulation and say they both refer to a long time. Further nuancing is required.

On the one hand, I would emphatically insist that the fundamental *nature* of hell is separation from God and his goodness. Second Thessalonians 1:9 refers to it as “exclusion from the face of God.” It is as if God turned his back on non-believers. Just as we only know about God on earth by what he reveals, hell makes a theological statement: only the justice of God is revealed there. That is its fundamental nature.

But this does not answer the question of how that nature is displayed. We have one very real and tangible display of hell (though only partially perceived) recorded in Scripture. When Jesus was hanging on the cross he was, for the three hours of darkness, in hell. He was separated from God, receiving only God’s justice. When he cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” it was the only time he ever referred to God merely as God. His normal term was “Father.” It is evident in this quotation from Psalm 22:1 that Jesus was viewing God as his judge. What do we see in this concrete portrayal of hell? We certainly see physical suffering. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. The deeper suffering came spiritually. The Trinity was ripped apart while Christ lay hanging in our place. We can only imagine what suffering he endured! Hence, although the torment was very much on a physical level, that was only a window into the soul of Christ. To argue, then, that hell is *only* spiritual separation from God misses the point about the nature of hell. It is certainly spiritual separation from God. But, as in the case of the Son of God, this not only does not deny physical suffering, it is also more severe than physical suffering.

Let’s suppose that Christ’s experience is not archetypal for non-believers. In some ways this is true—for example, his was a temporary suffering. We should turn to other passages that specifically deal with hell for humans. The key text is Rev 20:10, where the lake of fire is described. What do we see about the lake of fire? Revelation 20:10 says: “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur where the beast and the false prophet also were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.” Several key points can be made here: (1) the lake of fire is obviously a place that *envelops* the individual (“into the lake”); (2) it is a place from which he cannot escape; (3) the imagery of fire and sulphur is intended to show extreme pain and suffering that extends to all the senses (even smell); (3) the punishment is evidently eternal, continual, and conscious (“tormented day and night for ever and ever”); (4) human beings will be there (“the beast and false prophet” are humans). This is confirmed by vv 13-14: “Death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them . . . Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.” John does not need to describe the nature of suffering for humans at this point, since he had already described the lake of fire in v 10. There is no reason to believe that their suffering will be substantially different from that of the beast and false prophet mentioned in v 10.

Now, is this necessarily physical? If we had this verse alone, I do not think we could conclude such. We could conclude, however, that it is sensual. Modern science knows that pain centers are in the brain; hence, it is theoretically possible that one’s body could be annihilated and yet he could *feel* pain. So whether the torment is physical or not is inconsequential; it will certainly feel that way.

But the Scriptures are clear on other fronts. The Jewish-Christian view of humanity is consistently that we all have an eternal soul *and* an eternal body. The notion of the immortality of the soul (without an accompanying body) is of gentile origin, not Jewish. Daniel 12:1-2 speaks to the issue: (1) “. . . but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. (2) And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.” The point here is that

both the wicked and the righteous will be reunited with their bodies in resurrection and as such (i.e., as whole persons, body and soul) will either go to heaven or hell.

Matthew 10:28 is also significant along these lines: “Fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.” What is important to note here is that the place of the destruction of the body is hell. If the body were dead before the soul goes to hell, Jesus could not have said this.

Matt 25:46: “The [wicked] will go into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” The parallel (as well as the discourse up until this point) leads us to only one conclusion: the place of torment parallels the place of blessing in its eternal nature. Further, there is no hint of distinction between the righteous and the wicked in terms of body-soul combination. If the righteous go to heaven in body and soul (what else could the resurrection mean?), then the wicked go to hell in body and soul.

2 Cor 5:1-10: Paul discusses the prospects of dying and being in the presence of the Lord, awaiting the reunification with his body (that will be raised at the rapture--cf. 1 Thess 4:13-18).

The consistent message of the Bible is that the resurrection is an essential part of salvation because our bodies cannot be permanently separated from our souls (cf. 1 Cor 15:13-14). This does not mean, of course, that our new bodies are identical, molecule for molecule, with our old bodies (again, cf. 1 Cor 15). The whole thing is a mystery, but we do know that the resurrected body is not a phantom (cf. John 21). Further, there is no shred of evidence (that I am aware of) to suggest that the resurrection of the unbeliever is radically different. That is to say, the body of unbelievers must be reunited with their souls as well (Dan 12:1-2; John 5:28-29). The notion either that disembodied spirits will permanently occupy heaven or hell is not founded on Scripture, but has its roots in Greek philosophy (cf. Acts 17).

In sum, although it is an intriguing notion to think that hell is a place merely of spiritual separation from God, we must reckon with the biblical teaching that this is the fundamental nature of hell, but that such a description does not account for all the particulars. Further, one has to answer the question: **Why, then, are non-believers resurrected if hell is only spiritual?** The whole point of the resurrection is to reunite body and soul. God could easily send souls directly to hell. But he does not. He raises all people from the dead and then sends that person to hell.

There is another issue at stake I believe: to separate body from soul is both a part of hedonism and stoicism (in its extreme forms). One philosophy said that we should indulge the body since it is evil and we can't conquer it; the other said that we should deprive the body since it is evil and we can conquer it. But the biblical teaching is that the body is inherently no more evil than the mind: both have been tainted with sin through and through at the Fall. But with the Incarnation, we have a paradigm of perfect man, body and soul. The separation of body from soul when it comes to eternal punishment results, ultimately, in a schizophrenic view of man, leading either to hedonism or extreme stoicism.¹

¹ We are reaping the harvest of the former view, hedonism, today. The entire approach to sex education that does not view abstinence as a viable option starts with the assumption that human beings cannot control their bodies so they might as well indulge them.