

Hell: The Self-exclusion from God

By: Benjamin D. Wiker

ISSUE: What is Hell? Where is it?

RESPONSE: “To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God’s merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called ‘hell’” (*Catechism*, 1033). Regarding hell’s location, while individual theologians have offered conjectures, the Church has not made a definitive proclamation on the subject, wisely following the advice of St. John Chrysostom: “We must not ask where hell is, but how we are to escape it.”¹

DISCUSSION: Since we live in a skeptical age, we should first address the question of hell’s existence, even before discussing *what* or *where* hell is.

Well, IS there a hell?

In regard to hell’s existence, we must begin by distinguishing what can be known by revelation and what can be know by our natural reason. The matter is very simple for revelation. The Bible, especially the New Testament, is so filled with references to hell that to doubt whether hell exists is to doubt the truth and authority of Sacred Scripture.²

Natural reason also attests to the existence of hell insofar as reason can establish two things: (1) that human beings have an immortal soul, and (2) that justice demands for punishments which remain ‘undelivered’ in this life, should be visited upon the immortal soul after death. We should not be surprised that both in the popular understandings of a wide variety of cultures, and in just as wide a variety of philosophies, we consistently find accounts of something like a place or condition of punishment in the afterlife.

The core of natural reason’s affirmation of the existence of hell in our natural desire for justice. To ask the question, “Why is there so much evil?”, affirms the desire for justice to which belief in hell corresponds. For we are not only saying, “Why do the good go unrewarded?” but also, “Why do the evildoers go unpunished?” Unless we are deluded by a fairy tale view of human existence, we see that all too often the good are the innocent victims of the malicious acts by the unrepentant wicked. What we are crying out for is some kind of Divine re-balancing of the scales, not only so that the good may receive the proper fruits of their holiness, but that evildoers, if they remain without remorse, may receive a taste of the suffering they have inflicted upon others.

Given the actual, perplexing dominance of wickedness in human affairs, we are faced with a decision: either we must give up our desire for justice and deny the necessity of punishment beyond this life, or we must accept this natural desire for justice and affirm the necessity of such punishment. For most of us, to give up on justice would be to make our existence in *this* life a kind of hell.

That is as far as natural reason can take us. If we affirm the natural desire for justice, we are then at least open to the revelation of what the negative aspect of Divine justice will be. We may then turn from the question of whether hell exists, to the question of what hell is.

WHAT is hell?

The most concise theological definition of hell is “the privation of heaven.” Since heaven is “the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (*Catechism*, 1024), then hell must be the deprivation or loss, of all that is heaven, that is, the ultimate frustration of the deepest longings, the state of supreme, definitive unhappiness. And just as in heaven there are degrees of bliss given in accordance with what by the Grace of God the individual souls have endured and accomplished, so in hell the Church has declared that there are degrees of misery, of separation from God, in accordance with what, in their rejection of the Grace of God, the individual souls have committed or failed to do.³

“Damnation consists precisely in definitive separation from God, freely chosen by the human person and confirmed with death that seals his choice for ever. God’s judgement ratifies this state”

John Paul II, General Audience
July 28, 1999

Theologians have divided the punishments of hell into the *poena damni*, the punishment (or pain) of loss, and the *poena sensus*, the punishment (or pain) of sense. These punishments simply correspond to our two-fold nature as creatures who are a union of intellectual soul and material body.

It is important that the very word “damnation” comes from the Latin word *damnum* which means “loss,” usually the loss inflicted by punishment. That gives us a clue that the very essence of hell is found in the *poena damni*. The *poena damni* is the ultimate frustration caused by the loss of eternal happiness, the deepest suffering brought about by “eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (*Catechism*, 1035).

The *poena sensus*, the punishment of sense, refers to the pain entailed in the eternal fire so often mentioned in Holy Scripture, the punishment most appropriate to our bodily nature. What the nature of this fire is, the Church has not said. We do know that fire is consistently given in Scripture as the most fitting image for an eternal punishment of the greatest physical severity which accords with the bodily nature of the resurrection.

E must be especially careful not to reverse the order of severity in the two kinds of punishment. However severe the torment of eternal fires may be, the punishment of the loss of eternal happiness is still the primary and most severe punishment of hell. The primacy of the pain of loss is rooted in an essential theological truth: the separation from God is not something inflicted *upon* us, but something freely chosen *by* us. If we focus on the fires of hell as most important—which given our bodily nature is certainly a temptation—we then come to believe that hell is something God does to us against our will. The startling and sobering truth is, that God is only affirming the separation from Him, and from eternal happiness, that *we* have willed. The existence of hell is, as many have said, the most radical affirmation of the freedom of the human will possible.

WHERE is hell?

In a recent General Audience, Pope John Paul II offered some reflections on hell. The English version of his speech (given originally in Italian) quoted him as saying, “Rather than a place, hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”⁴ This translation, however, was misleading, and caused some to misinterpret the Pope’s intentions. The original Italian for “Rather than a place” was “*più che un luogo*”, which means, “more than a place.” In the official English summary, read by the Pope himself after the initial address, he said, “More than a physical place, hell is the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”⁵

As we can see from the more accurate translation, the Pope was shifting our attention away from the location of the fires of hell, to the real essence of hell, eternal separation, the *poena damni*.

Yet, we may still wonder *where* hell is, for it certainly seems that since the resurrected bodies of the damned will suffer the eternal fires of hell, both the resurrected body and the fire have to be somewhere. To understand how hell can be a place, we must make some distinctions.

The everyday word “place” is not as simple and everyday as it sounds. There is “place” as understood in common usage; there is “place” as a philosophical category; and there is “place” as related to revealed theology.

In the common sense of the word “place,” if you were to say “Hell is not a place,” you would be denying that hell exists. Unfortunately, some thought that the Pope, in the statement quoted above, was denying that hell is a place in this sense. He was, of course, doing nothing of the sort.

“Place” as a philosophical subject is quite complex, and we have to remember how much philosophy the current Pope has studied. Aristotle’s *Physics*, written in the 4th century B.C., has an entire chapter devoted to “place” (in Greek, *topos*), and philosophers have been arguing about it ever since. We, who may not be philosophers, can grasp important aspects of “place” which will help us understand its relation to hell.

First, “being in a place” and “existing” are not identical. Let us look at how this might be. Immaterial beings exist, but do not occupy space. That is, they are not in a place. Therefore, neither God nor angels exist in a place because immaterial beings, not having bodies, cannot have “place-ness.” Indeed, until there were physical things in the universe, there was no “place” at all. So the old gibe, “Where was God before He created the universe?” makes no sense because God was never, either before or after creation, in a place.

Second, *relations* are not in a place. The relation of half and double which *exists* between the numbers 4 and 8 is not *anywhere*. Likewise with other relations, for example, that of father and son. Fatherhood and sonship are not in a place,

but really exist as the *relation* between one being and another.

Returning to the Pope's audience, it is clear that he wished to emphasize that the primary and defining punishment of hell is the "definitive separation from God," that is, the *poena damni*, the self-chosen loss of beatitude. This loss, this separation, is a *relation*, not a place. It is the opposite of the relation which is the essence of beatitude, that is, union with God.

Insofar as we consider the *poena damni* as the relationship of separation which exists between God (who is immaterial) and the human soul (which is immaterial), then we are likewise not focused on a place, but on a relation between two beings who, because they are immaterial, have no "place-ness."⁶

Complications arise when speaking of the state of human beings after the resurrection, a state which we know about only by revelation. Since we know that we shall receive a body at the resurrection of the dead, we know that, in some way, we shall have to be in a place. Our knowledge of what our resurrected bodies will be like is very limited. Even then, what has been revealed in Scripture pertains more to the "glorified body."⁷ What the resurrected body of the damned shall be is almost completely shrouded in mystery. However, by the very fact of having a body, the damned will have to be in a place.

We also know by revelation that the *poena sensus* will be primarily related to the resurrected body of the damned, and the image of that punishment is of fire. We know by Scripture that the resurrected bodies of the damned will be different from the ones which we have now. Given this, we may also infer that the fire will be different as well. For example, it must be able to burn eternally. And since the corporeal nature of both the resurrected body and the fire are different, then we may also infer that "place-ness" will also be transformed. In this respect, we may say that hell is a place, but not one such as we know in this life.

Thus, to return to the Pope's words again, John Paul II must not be misinterpreted when he said "Rather than [or more than] a place, hell indicates [a] state . . ." He certainly was not denying that it is a place, but instead was shifting our focus to the real essence of hell—what the term "hell" truly indicates—the self-chosen separation from God. The "place" or "location" of hell is secondary, and considerations of *where* it is should not deflect us from our most important concerns: *what* it is, and *how* to avoid it.

1. *Homily on Romans*, 31.5; Migne, *PG*, 60.674, as translated in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1910), "Hell."

2. See, for example, Matthew 5:22, 8:12, 13:42, 18:8-9, 25:30, 25:41; Mark 9:43-46; Luke 3:17, 13:27-28; Romans 2:8; James 3:6; Revelation 19:20, 20:10, 21:8.

3. That those who are punished should be afflicted with "unequal punishments" (*poenis disparibus*) is in accordance with natural justice, and was formally declared at the Second Council of Lyons (1274) and the Council of Florence (1438-45). See Henricus Denzinger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, nn. 464, 693, which is translated in John Clarkson, S.J., et al, *The Church Teaches*, nn. 884, 889.

4. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 4 August 1999, p. 7.

5. As reported by Trinity Communications, www.petersnet.net/research by correspondent (Mrs.) Darden Brock, darden.brock@trincomm.org.

6. The immateriality of the human soul leads to an interesting complication. According to Church teaching "Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, 'eternal fire'" (*Catechism*, 1035; See also Pope Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* [1336] in Denzinger, n. 531 and Clarkson, n. 887). The question arises, if we have no body in the interim, then how can our immaterial souls be in a place so as to suffer from material fire. A few theologians take the fire here to be metaphorical, standing for the even more severe spiritual torments. Some, like the poet Dante, thought that, since the immaterial soul is the form of the body, then the soul could by a special action of God, feel the punishment of fire as if it were united to an actual human body (*Purgatorio*, Canto III). St. Thomas argued that in the interim God unites the immortal soul to fire itself, as its body (*Summa Theologiae*, III,70.3). The Church has refrained from defining the issue.

7. See especially Philippians 3:21 and I Corinthians 15:42-44. The Church has gleaned four properties of the resurrected bodies of the just from Scripture: (1) incapability of dying or suffering [*impassibilitas*]; (2) subtility [*subtilitas*], such as seen in Christ passing through doors; (3) agility [*agilitas*], allowing for immediate movement; and (4) clarity [*claritas*], that is, being radiant. For more detail, see Ott, Book IV, ch. 2.7.3.

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