

**Grace to You** :: *esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

## **For Those Who Rail Against Hell**

Scripture: Luke 12:5; Revelation 14:10–11

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For the last two weeks, we've posted a series of articles from John MacArthur addressing the teachings of Rob Bell. It didn't take long for one of the primary areas of contention to emerge from the comment thread—the *nature* of hell.

To be clear, we're concerned here with the *nature* of hell, not just its *existence*. In fact, you can't escape the reality of hell or final judgment in Scripture. It's a topic taken up by every New Testament writer and it dominates the teaching of Jesus. Of the 12 times the Greek word for hell (*Gehenna*) is used in the New Testament, 11 come from the lips of Christ. He said the most about hell, so to deny the existence of hell is to deny the teachings of Jesus.

But as you know, false teachers are more subtle than to deny the doctrine outright. They just raise *questions*, questions like: Is hell really a *literal* place where unbelievers suffer eternal, conscious punishment, or merely a state of mind? Does hell *really* last forever, or will God annihilate unbelievers? Is the fate of unbelievers *really* sealed forever, or will God give them a post-mortem opportunity to believe the gospel—and escape hell?

Perhaps you've entertained those questions, but never found definitive answers. Maybe you've struggled over the certainty of doctrines like hell. The answers are not elusive.

But take care what sources you consult. If you're seeking answers to your questions about hell from liberal scholars, post modern, pseudo-Christian pastors, or people claiming to have visited hell, then your view of hell is certain to be distorted.

Before we survey the biblical teaching on hell, here are few preliminary thoughts to consider:

From the outset, let's acknowledge that hell is a hard doctrine to digest—perhaps *the* hardest doctrine. It stretches our puny human minds to comprehend how divine justice responds to human guilt. We naturally resist the idea of God tormenting human beings in a lake of fire for all eternity. If you've never struggled with those issues, you've probably not thought deeply or seriously enough about hell. If you have struggled, you're not alone; some of God's choicest saints have shared your experience:

Jonathan Edwards wrote of hell:

This doctrine is indeed awful and dreadful. It is dreadful to think of it, but yet tis what God the eternal God who made us and who has us soul and body in his hands has abundantly declared unto us, so that so sure as God is true there will absolutely be no end to the misery of hell. ("Concerning the Endless Punishment of those who die Impenitent").

Spurgeon said from his pulpit:

Until we know the power of divine grace, we read in the Bible concerning eternal punishment, and we think it is too heavy and too hard, and we are apt to kick against it, and find out some heretic or other who teaches us another doctrine; but when the soul is really quickened by divine grace, and made to feel the weight of sin, it thinks the bottomless pit none too deep, and the punishment of hell none too severe for sin such as it has committed. (“Confession of Sin Illustrated by the Cases of Dr. Pritchard and Constance Kent”)

John MacArthur had this to say about *preaching* on the subject of hell:

This truth of eternal punishment to come on those who do not believe the gospel savingly is a painful message to preach. I can give you testimony to that. It is not only a painful message to preach, it is a painful message to hear. It is a painful message to process. It is a painful truth to apply, but it is biblical. (“A Testimony of One Surprised to Be in Hell,” Part 1: 42-212)

One factor contributing to the difficulty of pondering hell is that we all probably know someone especially resistant to the gospel—a parent, child, neighbor, or friend—who at the same time lives an outwardly moral life, exhibits kindness, engages in acts of philanthropy, gives to charity, someone who is the model of the ideal citizen. Imagining *that* person as the object of God’s eternal wrath makes hell seem even more unbearable.

And maybe that’s part of the problem. When the subject of hell comes up, we often think of others—and not ourselves. C. S. Lewis, no stranger to the difficulty of hell himself, once wrote, “In all discussions of hell we should keep steadily before our eyes the possible damnation, not of our enemies nor our friends . . .but of ourselves.”

It’s important to keep that in mind. The biblical context for hell and final judgment is often an address to professing believers or an epistle to the church, not a fiery sermon aimed at atheists and murderers. So the next time you hear a message on hell, or read about hell in Scripture, think of your own fate *first*, then consider your family and neighbors.

That being said, What does the Bible say about hell? We’ll take that question up next time. Until then, the comments will remain closed.

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