



**9Marks eJournal**  
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*Editor's note:*

Wisdom so often in life prescribes moderation. It's wise to eat with moderation, to speak with moderation, to feel with moderation, some would even say to believe with moderation.

But there's absolutely nothing moderate about the doctrine of hell. It's extreme in every way. It's an extreme idea for the mind. It's an extreme confrontation for the heart. And it blows against all the rules of social etiquette.

Embracing the reality of hell means setting aside moderation. It means admitting that our sin is dark and heinous to the point of eternal damnation; that the white light of God's character and glory justly destroys those who have fallen short of his glory; and that that our non-Christians friends have nothing greater to fear. That's tough to do when you have moderate views of your sin, your friend's sin, and of God's glory.

Embracing the reality of hell also means going against the fallen cultural structures and belief systems of this world, all of which conspire together with our own hearts to repeat the serpent's promise of a moderate outcome, "You will surely not die."

As hard as it is to stare at the doctrine of hell, surely it must be salubrious to our faith to do so from time to time. It forces us to once again reckon with who God is and who we are. We hope this issue of the 9Marks eJournal will help all of us to do just that.

—Jonathan Leeman

## PASTORAL PERSPECTIVES ON HELL



### **Pastoral Fearmongering, Manipulation, and Hell**

Our culture sneers at fear, as if there really is nothing to fear but fear itself. Yet Jesus told people to fear hell, and pastors today should do the same.

*By Mark Dever*

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### **There's Something Worse than Death**

The doctrine of hell is ballast for our ministries, which will help us sail straight toward our most urgent task: proclaiming the gospel.

*By Kevin DeYoung*

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### What Then Shall We Preach on Hell?

Hell is an awful and overwhelming reality. Yet where Scripture speaks, pastors must not be silent. Here's some practical help for this demanding calling.

By *Sinclair Ferguson*

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## HELL IN BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



### Why Hell Is Integral to the Gospel

Some think that by minimizing or ignoring hell, they are making God more glorious and more loving. Far from it! The horror of what we have been saved *from* only intensifies the glory and wonder of our salvation.

By *Greg Gilbert*

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### Hellfire and Brimstone: Interpreting the New Testament's Descriptions of Hell

The New Testament graphically and horrifically describes hell, which raises a thorny question: how should we interpret those dreadful images?

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### How Does Hell Glorify God?

Hell glorifies God by vindicating his holiness and faithfulness to his word, demonstrating his infinite worth, and magnifying his mercy and love toward the redeemed.

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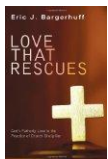
### An Annotated Bibliography on Hell

This article contains brief reviews of seven key books on hell.

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## RECENT BOOK REVIEWS



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## Hellfire and Brimstone: Interpreting the New Testament's Horrific Descriptions of Hell

By Andrew David Naselli

The New Testament graphically and horrifically describes hell. And that raises a thorny question: How should we interpret those dreadful images? May we simply label them “metaphors” to soften their bite?[1]

### HOW DOES THE NEW TESTAMENT DESCRIBE HELL?

In their recent little book *What Is Hell?*, Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson succinctly summarize what the Bible teaches about hell in the following five truths.[2]

1. “Hell is punishment” (2 Thess. 1:5–10; Rev. 20:10–15). God justly punishes people as retribution for their moral crimes against him. Hell is not even close to a big party. Jesus teaches that it would be better to cut off your hand or foot or to tear out your eye than to use them to sin and consequently suffer the just penalty in hell (Matt. 5:27–30; Mark 9:42–48).
2. “Hell is destruction” and death (Matt. 7:13–14; John 3:1; 2 Thess. 1:9). It’s the ultimate way to waste your life.
3. “Hell is banishment” (Matt. 7:23; 25:41; Rev. 22:15). Hell is the place where God banishes rebels from his kingdom once and for all.
4. “Hell is a place of suffering.” The Bible depicts hell with images that produce shock and fear: darkness, fire, and suffering.

*Darkness.* Those in hell are bound “hand and foot” and then thrown into “the outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30). “The gloom of utter darkness” awaits them (Jude 13).

*Fire.* Those in hell are thrown “into the fiery furnace” (Matt. 13:42, 50), and they burn with “unquenchable fire” (Mark 3:12; 9:43). “Their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). God’s judgment is “a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27). Those in hell “drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger” and are “tormented with fire and sulfur” (Rev. 14:10). They are “thrown into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15; cf. 19:20; 20:10, 14; 21:8).

*Suffering.* Nothing on earth hurts like hell. The severe conscious punishment in hell hurts physically, emotionally, and mentally. That’s why “there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). God warns the wicked who are rich, “Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire” (James 5:3).

5. “Hell is eternal” (Matt. 25:41, 46; Jude 7, 13; Rev. 14:10–11; 20:10). It lasts forever and ever. It never ever ends. There’s no relief in sight, ever.

The New Testament—especially Jesus himself—vividly and repeatedly depicts each of these five truths, but the way it depicts the fourth raises the particular issue that this article addresses.

### HOW DO PEOPLE INTERPRET THE NEW TESTAMENT’S HORRIFIC DESCRIPTIONS OF HELL?

People interpret the ghastly descriptions of darkness, fire, and suffering in at least three ways.

1. Mythically. Some argue that traditional Christian conceptions of hell are a product of Roman and pagan myths.

2. Literally. Some think that the descriptions are literal, meaning that the darkness, fire, and suffering are actual darkness, fire, and suffering.
3. Metaphorically. Others say that some or all of the descriptions are metaphorical in the sense that the darkness, fire, and suffering may not be actual darkness, fire, and suffering.

The terms “literal” and “metaphorical” are notoriously slippery and prone to misunderstanding. In this case, I’m using literal in the sense of actual, non-metaphorical, in contrast to those who use literal in the sense of normal or natural and thus include figures of speech like metaphor. One of the finest definitions of metaphor is by Janet Soskice: “Metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.”[3]

### HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET THE NEW TESTAMENT’S HORRIFIC DESCRIPTIONS OF HELL?

How then should we interpret the New Testament’s descriptions of hell as fire, darkness, and suffering?

1. We can rule out interpreting the descriptions mythically because the imagery of hell is rooted in the Old Testament (see esp. Isa. 66:24; Dan. 12:1–2), not Roman or pagan myths.

2. But we can’t quickly rule out interpreting the descriptions literally. Charles Spurgeon preached,

Now, do not begin telling me that that is metaphorical fire: who cares for that? If a man were to threaten to give me a metaphorical blow on the head, I should care very little about it; he would be welcome to give me as many as he pleased. And what say the wicked? “We do not care about metaphorical fires.” But they are *real*, sir—yes, as real as yourself. There is a real fire in hell, as truly as you have now a real body—a fire exactly like that which we have on earth in everything except this—that it will not consume, though it will torture you. You have seen the asbestos lying in the fire red hot, but when you take it out it is unconsumed. So your body will be prepared by God in such a way that it will burn for ever without being consumed; it will lie, not as you consider, in metaphorical fire, but in actual flame.[4]

The literal view argues that it takes the text at face value without domesticating or blunting it. And the view is feasible because God is certainly able to sustain material objects in flames. Scripture records two such examples: the burning bush (Ex. 3:3) and Daniel’s three friends (Dan. 3:24–27).

But it’s difficult to dogmatically insist that all the descriptions of hell must be interpreted literally because some of the images (for example, fire and darkness) seem contradictory when taken literally. Such apparent contradictions may be clues that we should interpret the text metaphorically.

3. Evaluating metaphorical interpretations requires some nuance. While we should reject the way that some people interpret the descriptions of hell metaphorically, interpreting the images metaphorically is plausible.

On the one hand, we can’t know for sure whether the horrible descriptions of hell are literal or metaphorical because they depict another realm that is foreign to our experience. Scripture’s language for heaven is similar. Will heaven have actual roads paved with gold? I don’t know. It’s challenging to describe another realm like heaven or hell to earthlings because our only experiential reference-point is earth. How would you describe something like an iPhone to a young child who lives in a remote jungle as part of a secluded tribe that doesn’t even have a written language?

On the other hand, we can know with certainty whether the horrible descriptions of hell are really bad news or just semi-bad news. Some people say that “darkness,” “fire,” and “suffering” are metaphors in order to *minimize* the shock and fear that the images produce. “It’s really not as bad as it sounds because the images are just metaphors.” Or worse: “Hell isn’t a literal place because the images are just metaphors.” This is exactly what we must *not* say if we interpret the images metaphorically. “Even if we assume that the language is metaphorical,” argues D. A. Carson, “it is metaphorical language that has a

referent; and if the metaphors are doing their job, they are evoking images of a horrible existence.”[5]  
John Piper explains,

Consider some of the word pictures of God’s wrath in the New Testament. And as you consider them remember the folly of saying, “But aren’t those just symbols? Isn’t fire and brimstone just a symbol?” I say beware of that, because it does not serve your purpose. Suppose fire is a symbol. Do people use symbols of horror because the reality is less horrible or more horrible than the symbols? I don’t know of anyone who uses symbolic language for horrible realities when literal language would make it sound more horrible.

People grasp for symbols of horror (or beauty) because the reality they are trying to describe is worse (or better) than they can put into words. If I say, “My wife is the diamond of my life,” I don’t want you to say, “Oh, he used a symbol of something valuable; it’s only a symbol. So his wife must not be as valuable as a diamond.” No. I used the symbol of the most valuable jewel I could think of because my wife is far more precious than jewels. Honest symbols are not used because they go beyond reality, but because reality goes beyond words.

So when the Bible speaks of hell-fire, woe to us if we say, “It’s only a symbol.” If it is a symbol at all, it means the reality is worse than fire, not better. The word “fire” is used not to make the easy sound terrible, but to make the exceedingly terrible sound something like what it really is.[6]

John Calvin likewise argues that interpreting graphic images of hell metaphorically should result in dread, not relief:

Now, because no description can deal adequately with the gravity of God’s vengeance against the wicked, their torments and tortures are figuratively expressed to us by physical things, that is, by darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:12; 22:13), unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:12; Mark 9:43; Isa. 66:24), an undying worm gnawing at the heart (Isa. 66:24). By such expressions the Holy Spirit certainly intended to confound all our senses with dread.[7]

We may disagree about some finer nuances of our literal and metaphorical interpretations of hell’s darkness, fire, and suffering, but we should agree that, at the very least, the New Testament teaches that hell is eternally miserable, terrifying, and painful. It’s certainly no *better* than being cast into literal “outer darkness” or being tormented with literal “fire and sulfur.”

The New Testament’s message couldn’t be clearer: “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29), and “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (Heb 10:31); so we should “fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28).[8]

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[1] This article does not comprehensively explain what the New Testament teaches about hell, nor does it refute annihilationism or conditional immortality. Many others have ably done that. See, for example, William V. Crockett, ed., [Four Views on Hell](#) (Counterpoint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992); Robert A. Peterson, [Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment](#) (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995); D. A. Carson, “On Banishing the Lake of Fire,” in [The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 515–36; Edward Fudge and Robert A. Peterson, [Two Views of Hell: A Biblical and Theological Dialogue](#) (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., [Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004); Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, [What Is Hell?](#) (Basics of the Faith Series; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010).

- [2] Morgan and Peterson, *What Is Hell?*, 10–20. For a fuller treatment of these themes, see Christopher W. Morgan, “Biblical Theology: Three Pictures of Hell” and “Annihilationism: Will the Unsaved Be Punished Forever?” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 135–51, 195–218.
- [3] Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 15.
- [4] C. H. Spurgeon, “The Resurrection of the Dead,” in *The New Park Street Pulpit* (1857; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 104. Cf. John F. Walvoord, “The Literal View,” in *Four Views on Hell* (ed. William V. Crockett; Counterpoint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 28.
- [5] D. A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 90.
- [6] John Piper, “[God’s Wrath: ‘Vengeance Is Mine, I Will Repay,’ Says the Lord \(Romans 12:19–21\)](#),” sermon preached at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, February 27, 2005. Cf. Sinclair B. Ferguson, “Pastoral Theology: The Preacher and Hell,” in *Hell under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents Eternal Punishment* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 226–27.
- [7] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Library of Christian Classics 20–21; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 20:1007 (3.25.12).
- [8] Special thanks to Chris Morgan and Justin Taylor for examining a draft of this article and sharing insightful feedback.

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