

# What Does Scripture Say about the Nature of the Degrees of Hell?

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Scripture, while being all-sufficient for salvation, does not answer our every question. That is the case for the subject of this paper. The Bible is quite clear on the fact that there is a heaven and a hell, that both are eternal<sup>1</sup> and that the former is endless joy and blessing while the latter is unending torment. There are other facets of hell, however, which Scripture does not fully explain. In this paper we shall look at one of these matters, the concept of degrees of hell.<sup>2</sup>

It must be kept in mind as one examines this topic that apart from the few passages that might suggest degrees, Scripture is quite uniform in its description of hell. That is, whatever variation there might be, the essential characteristics of hell remain the same. Hell is described as eternal (Mt. 25:46 temporally equates eternal life with eternal punishment—they both last equally long). In hell there is a complete lack of God’s blessing (II Th. 1:9, “shut out from the presence of the Lord”; Is. 48:22, “There is no peace for the wicked”; Lk. 13:28, “There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out.”). In hell there is the presence of suffering and torment (Lk. 16:23,28, “In hell, where he was in torment...so that they also will not come to this place of torment”; Mt 13:50, “...and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”).<sup>3</sup> Gerhard gives a reminder of how the terror of hell is beyond the grasp of the finite mind: “Gravitas poenarum infernalium a nobis hominibus nec mente comprehendendi, nec verbis plene explicari potest.”<sup>4</sup>

These absolute facts about the nature of hell must be remembered for a discussion of the degrees of hell, lest one conclude (a) that parts of hell are better than others or (b) the fact that one’s sufferings are less severe than another’s therefore makes hell more tolerable for the former person. Despite the offense that it gives to human reason, the description of hell found in Scripture is true for all who suffer there, no matter what degree of torment they experience.

If there is such uniformity in Scripture’s description of hell, where does the idea of degrees or levels in hell come from? Certainly this idea is found in literature. Dante’s vivid description of the levels of hell accords nicely with the Roman Catholic doctrine of works that have merit for salvation. If there are levels of good works (e.g., a work of

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<sup>1</sup> Matt. 25:41,46 “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels,’ ...Then they will go away to *eternal punishment*, but the righteous to *eternal life*.”

<sup>2</sup> Editor’s note – As the author has suggested, the reader should expect more questions than answers in this paper. With this expectation, the reader will avoid disappointment. At the end of the paper, the author only presents his personal understanding of the issue. This is consistent with the author’s proposition that Scripture does not fully explain his topic.

<sup>3</sup> Prof. Meyer in his Dogmatics notes mentions another case of the descriptions of the torments of hell found at the end of Isaiah (66:24, “their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched,”) and in Jesus’ warnings to his disciples (“if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off”). The question in these cases is whether they are meant metaphorically or literally. Either way the description of hell is quite clear.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard, Tomus Nonus (Book Nine), p.233. “We human beings can neither understand with the mind the magnitude of punishments in hell nor can it be fully explained by words.”

supererogation) and of sins (venial or mortal), why not also clear-cut degrees of punishment? For example, Dante finds in the very bottom circle of hell the Devil devouring the traitors Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot. These pictures, however, come from a false understanding of good works and sin.

Is there a Scriptural basis for the idea of degrees of hell? Two main kinds of passages are used to support this idea. First is Luke 12:47-48:

That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

Gerhard understands these verses of Luke to be referring to differing punishments in hell. In his section "De inferno seu morte aeterna," Gerhard concludes, "Ordo erit *in quantitate poenarum*, qui enim gravius peccaverunt, etiam gravius punientur; sed ordo non erit *in qualitate rerum*, quia omnis generis tormenta sibi inferri experientur,"<sup>5</sup> (emphasis in the original). Becker clearly concludes degrees of damnation from these verses.<sup>6</sup>

Also in this connection the Seminary Dogmatics notes cite Romans 2:11,12: "For God does not show favoritism. All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law." One weakness of this passage in discussing degrees of hell is that the context is not about hell—it's about how all humanity is without excuse before God's judgment throne. The Law of God is universal, and so the Jew with the law and the Gentile without both stand condemned for violating the law, for no matter how much of the law they knew, they did not keep it. Paul does not seem to be drawing any eternal consequences out of this.

The second group of passages cited are those that refer to Judgment Day as being more bearable for one group than for another. Mt. 10:15, "I tell you the truth, it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town,"; Mt. 11:22, "But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you,"; Mt. 11:24, "But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you,"; Lk. 10:12, "I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town,"; Lk. 10:14, "But it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon at the judgment than for you."

On the basis of these passages Pieper says briefly, "Degrees of torment, determined by the nature of the sins to be punished, are plainly taught in the Bible. [cites Mt. 11:22]...The severest punishment follows on the rejection of the Gospel by

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhard, Tomus Nonus (Book Nine), p.273. "The order [ranks of punishment] will be in the quantity of punishments, for those who sin more severely, they will also be punished more severely. But the order will not be in the quality of the punishments, because the tortures of every class to be inflicted upon one's self are experienced (*sic*)."

<sup>6</sup> Becker, p.17-18. Becker does not use these same verses to conclude that there are also degrees of heaven as Hendriksen does (*Luke*, p.681). In fact, Becker sees the case for degrees of heaven to be less certain than the case for degrees of hell (Becker, p.18).

those to whom it had been preached in rich measure, as Christ testifies in regard to Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum (Matt. 11:16-24).”<sup>7</sup>

Hendriksen commenting on these verses states, “Jesus says that in the day of judgment the punishment awaiting the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, classical examples of wickedness...will be lighter than that which is in store for the city that rejects the gospel. The reason why this is true is clearly stated in Luke 12:47, 48.”<sup>8</sup> In that place Hendriksen comments on the difference in severity of punishment and concludes, “This shows that not only are there degrees of glory in the new heaven and the new earth (I Cor. 15:41,42), but there are also degrees of suffering in hell.”<sup>9</sup>

There is a feature in these verses that really is not explained by most commentators. In each of the cases, Matthew and Luke refer to the “day of judgment,” and not “eternity” or words to that effect, as the context for the difference in the “bearability” of each cities’ judgment. The Greek in the three uses in Matthew is ἐν ἡμέρᾳ κρίσεως. Luke has slightly different wording; in 10:12 he uses ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ ἐκείνῃ and in 10:14 ἐν τῇ κρίσει. In each case, however, Jesus speaks of things being more bearable (ἀεικτότερον) “on the day of judgment.” What, if any, is the significance of the preposition ἐν? Is this saying that the “more bearable” nature of Sodom’s punishment is restricted to (that is, entirely within the sphere of) judgment day, without any reference to eternal punishment? That is, when Jesus makes his judgment on all the world publicly known, can Sodom feel less shame because it did not reject the Gospel as Capernaum did, yet they both then endure the same eternal suffering? Most commentators do not mention this point. Lenski does have a comment on this phrase and sees the phrase, “in the judgment day” as entirely detached from “being bearable.”<sup>10</sup>

In summarizing this matter, it is interesting to note that Northwestern Publishing House’s *People’s Bible* series, which is intended for laypeople, is less definite about the levels of heaven and hell, leaving that as a definite possibility but not an absolute certainty. Albrecht says, “On the other hand, these words of Jesus do seem to suggest that there will be different degrees of punishment in hell. Those who once believed and later turned away from their Lord and Savior as well as those who had many opportunities to hear the gospel but stubbornly rejected it, will somehow be worse off than those who had lesser opportunities.”<sup>11</sup> In speaking on the verses from Luke 12, Prange draws no conclusions about hell, but leaves the “more blows/fewer blows” in the realm of temporal punishments: “This punishment may not refer so much to eternity, but to what a disgraced leader of the church experiences in this present earthly life.”<sup>12</sup>

Note that there has been little discussion of what the degrees might be in damnation, how the punishment of hell might vary from one to another. This is because Scripture does not address this point and human reason has problems harmonizing the absolute nature of condemnation with variety. This does not mean that it cannot be—only that human minds have difficulties with this concept.

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<sup>7</sup> Pieper, p.547.

<sup>8</sup> Hendrickson, *Matthew*, p. 460.

<sup>9</sup> Hendrickson, *Luke*, p. 681. His is the very opposite of Becker’s approach to this verse!

<sup>10</sup> Lenski, p.397.

<sup>11</sup> Albrecht, p.151.

<sup>12</sup> Prange, p.151.

Ultimately as I understand it now, there are not set levels or degrees of damnation into which one is assigned after judgment (those like Sodom over here, those like Chorazin over there). Rather, it seems that each person uniquely suffers the eternal torment of hell, each one regretting the particular times and manner of his or her rejection the Gospel, each one individually experiencing as Luther describes “the torment of hell...fear, terror, horror, fleeing, and despairing.”<sup>13</sup> Though this seems to produce a multiplicity of degrees of hell, it seems the best way of understanding the principles put forth in Scripture.

This still does not answer the question of whether “more blows” is equal to greater regret and knowledge of one’s rejection of the Gospel or is it greater physical punishment. Indeed many questions still remain and must. We cannot speak more than Scripture says concerning degrees of hell. We are assured that God’s justice will be done. Finally the important thing is not that we receive answers to these questions. The important thing is that Jesus has died to save us from learning the answers from own experience. May God keep us in this grace!

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<sup>13</sup> Luther, p.626, paragraph 1916.

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