

**What are your personal beliefs about hell? What Scripture do you rely on to support your belief? (published 9/28/2011)**

It is very difficult to answer this question—not because I don’t believe in hell, but because it doesn’t make sense for me to offer an opinion about something which it is impossible to form an opinion about. If I were asked my opinion about the existence of the sun, my opinion about its existence—whether I thought it existed or not—wouldn’t affect the reality. If I were to say that it didn’t exist, I would be a fool because the facts invalidate my opinion. If I were to say that it did exist, my opinion would be of no value because it adds nothing to the truth. Likewise, my personal belief in hell doesn’t change the reality of its existence.

In addition, it is impossible to separate my “personal beliefs” from what the Church believes about hell. A Catholic who thinks he can pick which tenets of the faith he will accept and which he will not, is not authentically Catholic. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that “by faith, man completely submits his intellect and his will to God. With his **whole** being man gives his assent to God the revealer” (CCC #143, emphasis added). Because God has revealed the truths about hell to His Church, I am called to obey—completely—not to pick and choose which parts I want to believe. This act of obedience is neither contrary to my freedom nor to my use of reason. I respond in faith, trusting in God and cleaving to the truths that He has revealed because He is the one who revealed it. For me to accept some of what God has revealed about hell and to deny other parts would be completely illogical and incoherent. Either God is all good and the source of all truth, or He is not. Either I accept all that He has revealed or I accept none of it (although there are certainly consequences for choosing the latter).

As Saint Paul reminds us in chapter Ephesians four, there is only ONE faith, and as a Catholic, and especially as a priest, my beliefs about hell are synonymous with those of the Church. Woe to me if I don’t preach not only the Gospel, but the **fullness** of the Gospel that Christ instructs us to teach the baptized to observe (cf. Matthew 28:20 and 1 Corinthians 9:16) In the next article, I will highlight these belief that all Catholics are called to adhere to including (but not limited to):

- The existence of hell
- What the pains of hell consist in
- Why hell exists when God is all-good and all-loving
- God not predestining anyone to hell
- The benefits for our moral lives in considering the reality of hell

**What does your church teach about Hell? What scripture does your church use to support those beliefs? (published 10/5/2011)**

You would think I wouldn't have to start with defending the teaching of the existence of hell, but in today's society, there are many who deny the existence of hell or who live as if they don't really believe in its existence because acknowledging that reality requires living accordingly. As C.S. Lewis described in *The Screwtape Letters*, getting people to doubt the existence of hell is actually one of the most powerful weapons Satan and his fellow demons have in getting us to separate ourselves from God. Satan, the father of lies, tempts us as he did Eve in the Garden of Eden – Did God *really* say that hell exists and that those who choose against God through their sin are also choosing hell as the consequence of that sin? When confronted with these lies, we must turn to Him who is the Truth that sets us free, and hear what He had to say about hell. As the Catechism reminds us, “Jesus often speaks of ‘Gehenna,’ of ‘the unquenchable fire’ reserved for those who to the end of their lives refuse to believe and be converted, where both soul and body can be lost (cf. Mt 5:22, 29; 10:28; 13:42, 50; Mk 9:43-48).” He doesn't speak of it in a hypothetical way or just in parables; rather He is constantly warning His disciples to take the narrow path rather than the wide path that leads to perdition (cf. Matthew 7:13). In those warnings, Jesus also described the eternal nature of this suffering—that once the door is shut, it shall not be opened (cf. Luke 13:25) and that the accursed depart into an eternal punishment (cf. Matthew 25:41).

Once we acknowledge that hell exists, we must then see *why* it exists. In dealing with this issue many people struggle to see how an all-good and all-loving God could allow it to exist. It is a great paradox, but the existence of hell actually IS an expression of God's love for us. God loves us so much that He made us in His image, so that we might use our reason and will to choose to love Him in return. But what if we choose *not* to? If God were to ignore that choice and force a relationship with Him, not only would that remove the consequences of our bad choice, but it would also remove the possibility of choosing to love Him forever in heaven. If hell isn't a possibility, then heaven wouldn't be a possibility either because love is an act of the will—it is a choice. Love requires responsibility and responsibility requires free will.

At the same time, we must remember that God doesn't WANT any of us to choose hell; much less does He predestine anyone to hell. Thus, Saint Peter reminds us that God does not wish that any of us to perish; rather He desires that all should come to repentance (cf. 2 Peter 3:9). Even in the case of Judas (cf. John 6:71), Jesus did not predestine Judas for hell, even though as God, He knew ahead of time what Judas would choose. Jesus' very reason for becoming Man is to open the doors to eternal life and to destroy death, but it comes with the condition of belief in Him (cf. John 3:16) – a belief that is put in action by our moral choices.

Finally, regarding the pains of hell, we know that the principal suffering of hell is eternal separation from God. Jesus spoke frequently of the fires of hell and of the wailing and grinding of teeth, and in doing so, He referred to extreme pains we experience in this world to help us understand the seriousness of the indescribable pains of eternal damnation. We can't know with certainty what those pains will specifically entail, but we can be sure that they will be worse than anything we could ever imagine.

**What role should Hell play in the message of salvation? Should fear be a motivator to salvation? (to be published 10/12/2011)**

In today's relativistic culture, it is not uncommon for Christians to proclaim a "Gospel Lite" because they are uncomfortable with the challenging parts of the Gospel such as hell. Therefore, it is not for us to determine the role of hell in the message of salvation; rather, it is for us to be obedient to the Lord's departing words to teach **ALL** that he has commanded – including the reality of hell and a proper fear of it. It was Christ Himself who told us to not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, but rather to fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell (cf. Matthew 10:28).

This fear is not meant to be an earthly, servile fear that paralyzes us, but rather it is to be the fear known as a gift of the Holy Spirit which strengthens us for virtue. This **gift** of fear nourishes in us the desire to never do anything that will offend our Heavenly Father, and therefore, it is good. Likewise, Saint John Chrysostom, an early Church father said, "For this cause does God threaten hell, that none may fall into hell, that we all may obtain the kingdom; for this cause we too make mention continually of hell, that we may thrust you onward towards the kingdom, that when we have softened your minds by fear, we may bring you to act worthily of the kingdom. Be not then displeased at the heaviness of our words, for the heaviness of these words lightens our souls from sin." Thus, we come to realize that God draws us to Himself even through the fear of hell; for in running *from* the devil in that fear, we learn to run *to* God in love and confidence. As Saint John says, "Perfect love casts out all fear" (1John 4:18).

At the same time, we must remember that fear of the Lord is the BEGINNING of wisdom and that the story of salvation isn't exclusively (or even primarily) the realities of hell and death. We need to include these elements, but we can't stop there—we must also speak of Jesus' triumph over these realities and the hope that triumph brings for us if we unite ourselves to His death and Resurrection (cf. Romans 6:5).

The goal of my proclamation of the Gospel is repentance and ultimately union with God for all eternity in heaven. Wherever my flock might be in their spiritual journey, preaching about the reality of hell and the even greater reality of God's love for us can aid them in their spiritual journey. Similarly, Thomas a Kempis said, "Nevertheless it is a good thing, if love as yet cannot restrain you from evil, that at least the fear of hell should hold you back. But he who puts aside the fear of God cannot long continue in good, but shall quickly fall into the snares of the devil (*The Imitation of Christ*, Book 1, Chapter 24). Therefore, I will continue to proclaim both parts of the Gospel—that we are to work our salvation in fear and trembling (cf. Philippians 2:12) and that God has triumphed over hell and constantly protects His Church from its powers (cf. Matthew 16:18).

**A lot of churches ignore Hell, does Hell still have a place in the teachings of the American church? How often is it a topic of teaching in your church? (to be published 10/19/2011)**

As I read this week's question two words stood out—"still" and "American". It's as if the period of time in which we live or the location of that existence determines the reality of truth. This sort of relativism, whether it is about the teachings on hell or any of the other Church teachings is at the core of the moral decline that's been taking place in our own lifetimes. Whether we are in first century Palestine or twenty-first century America the truth never changes because Jesus Christ, who IS the Truth, never changes. Thus, the writer of the Book of Hebrews says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8). Likewise, Christ, Himself, addressed the universality of His message when He commanded His apostles, "Go therefore and make disciples of **ALL NATIONS**" (Matthew 28:19, Emphasis added).

When Jesus established His Church, He didn't establish multiple nation-specific churches that would overcome the powers of hell and death; He established ONE Church-His Church. Thus, Jesus said, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). What a consolation! Jesus not only preached frequently about the dangers of hell and the evil one, but He also leaves us a message of hope—that through His Death and Resurrection He gives us (through the Church) the graces we need to not only engage in this spiritual battle, but to be triumphant with Him. When generals are preparing soldiers for an earthly battle, they don't neglect to warn their charges of the real dangers that they face. At the same time, they always prepare and encourage them so that they might triumph. It is imperative that soldiers hear both parts. In a similar way, every time that I preach about hell or gaze upon a crucifix and see the *apparent* victory of the powers of hell, I am reminded that it was through this very means that Christ saved us. Christ's unified action of saving us—the Paschal Mystery—isn't just the Resurrection; it's His Passion, Death, and Resurrection. Thus, to preach the fullness of the message of salvation requires that I also preach frequently on the reality and danger of hell. Therefore, I, like Saint Paul, preach Christ crucified, which means I must also preach about the powers of hell that brought about that crucifixion (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:2).

As a priest, I must preach the word in and out of season even when there are those who will not endure sound doctrine, including that of the truths of hell (cf. 2 Timothy 4:2-3). At my death, I will have to give an account to God for what I have done for the souls entrusted to me. If there are souls suffering in hell because I failed to warn them of the reality of that place, I will be held accountable. Thus, I will continue to preach the full message of salvation so that none of those given to me might be lost to the fires of hell (cf. John 18:9).