

Fire and Brimstone
A History of Hell
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Slide 1

1. This is the third presentation on the history of Christian beliefs about life and death.
2. Today we will look at the history of Christian teachings about hell.
3. As a respected evangelical minister from Grand Rapids recently wrote: **“A staggering number of people have been taught that a select few Christians will spend forever in a peaceful, joyous place called heaven, while the rest of humanity spends forever in torment and punishment in hell with no chance for anything better.”** Bell, *Love Wins* at viii.
4. But another evangelical minister writes that this common idea about hell **“reveals ignorance of both biblical forms as well as historical origins for the cartoonish description”** of hell. Klassen, *What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell* at 28.
5. As we will see, the traditional teachings about hell developed largely independently of what the Bible says and contradict many New Testament statements.

Slide 2

1. As we saw last week, the earliest parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians call the Old Testament, say nothing about any kind of afterlife and, as a result, say nothing about punishment after death.
2. That statement can be surprising to people who have read only the King James Version of the Old Testament, which includes 31 references to “hell,” all of which are translations of the Hebrew word *“sheol.”*
3. As we will discuss more in two weeks, *Sheol* was simply the place under the earth where **all** the Jewish dead resided, just as all living people resided on the earth and God and the angels resided in the heavens.
4. Consequently, when Jacob thought that his favorite son Joseph had been killed, he said that if he lost another son, **“you will bring my gray head down to *sheol* in sorrow.”** *Genesis* 42:38.
5. The New International Version translates *“sheol”* as either “death” or “the grave,” depending on the context, with no suggestion of punishment, so there is no reference to “hell” in the entirety of the Old Testament in the New International Version.
6. Most Jews reject Christian beliefs about hell.

Slide 3

1. As we have discussed before, during and after their exile to Babylon, the Jewish people became familiar with a Persian belief system known as Zoroastrianism.
2. Zoroastrians believe that the soul leaves the body three days after death and is then judged on the earthly activities of the deceased.
3. The souls of the wicked are sent to an underground House of Lies, where they are tormented by putrid food, intolerable smells and the like, all with the goal of purifying the souls so that they will be ready to rejoin their bodies on the day of resurrection.

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1. After the exile, likely influenced in some way by Zoroastrianism, Jewish writers began to describe a **“discrimination in death: two separate fates, one for the righteous and one for the wicked.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 162.
2. Many scholars regard Psalm 49, written soon after the exile, as marking a turning point in Jewish thought.
3. The Psalmist reports that **“God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.”** *Psalm* 49:15.
4. No longer would all Jewish dead be trapped forever in *sheol*.
5. Instead, the righteous would be with God forever; exactly where was not yet clear, which is something we will talk about in two weeks.
6. On the other hand, *Psalm* 49 reminds people not to **“be overawed when a man grows rich”** because **“he will join the generation of his fathers, who will never see the light of life.”** *Psalm* 49:16, 19.
7. Unlike the Zoroastrians, the Jewish wicked would stay forever dead in *sheol*.

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1. The same idea of different fates for the dead is reflected in *Isaiah* 26:19, which most scholars believe was also written soon after the exile.
2. Writing to the Jewish people who had been righteous, the writer of *Isaiah* promised: **“But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy. Your dew is like the dew of the morning.”** *Isaiah* 26:19.
3. This is the first explicit indication in the Hebrew Scriptures of a belief in the resurrection of the dead bodies of the righteous, a belief many scholars believe came from the exposure to Zoroastrianism.

4. However, as in *Psalm 49*, the **“departed spirits [of the wicked dead] do not rise”** and **“all memory of them”** is erased. *Isaiah 26:14*.

5. Such eternal **“[s]hame in death is the beginning of hell.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 167.

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1. In 332 B.C., Greek forces under Alexander the Great conquered the area that included Judah from the Persians and began promoting their own ideas of the afterlife.

2. From the time of Homer, the Greeks had believed in an underground realm of the dead they called Hades.

3. In front of this cave, thought to be an entrance to that realm, Jesus said that the **“gates of Hades”** would not be able to overcome his church. *Matthew 16:18*.

4. As they did with *sheol*, the translators of the King James Bible translated “Hades” as “hell” even though, like *sheol*, Hades was the home of all the dead.

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1. However, unlike in *sheol*, the dead in Hades were **“assigned to different regions at the judgment after their deaths.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 55.

2. **“The selfish are divided from the innocent and their fates are different.”** *Id.* at 240.

3. Gulfs prevented members of one group from advancing to another region.

4. The dead could be escorted across the gulfs by a ferryman named Charon.

5. Reflecting the influence of Greek ideas about Hades on Christian beliefs, Michelangelo included a picture of Charon in his famous Sistine Chapel painting of the Last Judgment.

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1. Last week we talked about *Phaedo*, a book written by Plato that was very popular by the time of Alexander and greatly influenced later views of life after death.

2. In *Phaedo*, Plato wrote that the worst of the Greek sinners were sent to a region in Hades called Tartarus, where they remained for at least a year. Cope, *Plato's Phaedo* at 102.

3. Those dead deemed irredeemable because of the enormity of their earthly crimes were sent **“into Tartarus, whence they never come forth.”** *Id.* at 101.

4. As one author writes: **“It seems, then, that Plato is the earliest author to state categorically that the fate of the extremely wicked is eternal punishment.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 61.
5. Plato’s teachings were influential among Jewish writers and provided an example of eternal punishment that would eventually emerge as the Christian idea of hell.
6. All that was needed was an eternal fire, missing from both the Persian and Greek views of afterlife punishment.

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1. Ge-Himmon or the Valley of Himmon is a ravine outside the city walls of Jerusalem, described in the New Testament as Gehenna, its Greek name. *E.g., Mark 9:43* (Young’s Literal Translation).
2. Early in Jewish history, followers of the Canaanite god Ba’al sacrificed children in fires burning in Gehenna, which was also called Topheth. *Jeremiah 19:1-16*.
3. Later, residents of Jerusalem burned their garbage in the fires of Gehenna.
4. **“[I]n addition to refuse, the bodies of criminals and animals were thrown into fires, which burned perpetually for sanitary reasons.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 41.
5. Consequently, **“the punishment imagined most often for the wicked was that of a long-lasting fire.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 169.
6. Jewish writers combined Plato’s idea of eternal punishment of the dead in Tartarus with the eternal fire of Gehenna.

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1. Most scholars believe *1 Enoch* was written by a series of Jewish authors between the third century B.C. and first century A.D., a period between the events of the Old and New Testaments.
2. According to *1 Enoch*, the **“Son of man”** will judge humanity at the end of time **“sit[ting] upon a throne of glory.”** *1 Enoch 45:2–6*.
3. In describing the consequences of that judgment for the wicked, *1 Enoch* states: **“I will cast them like hay into the fire, and like lead into the water. Thus shall they burn in the presence of the righteous, and sink in the presence of the holy; nor shall a tenth part of them be found.”** *1 Enoch 48:9*.

4. Referring to Gehenna, *1 Enoch* says the “**rivers of fire**” in the “**burning valley**” into which the condemned will be thrown “**shall blaze forever.**” *1 Enoch* 66:4, 7, 15.

5. As one author writes, “***1 Enoch* is probably the first text in the Jewish tradition to juxtapose and yet distinguish Sheol and Gehenna. The first is a holding place for all the dead until the judgment; the second is a place of eternal punishment for the wicked.**” Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 187.

6. The idea of punishing the wicked dead in an eternal fire was born, as was the idea that one reward of the righteous is to watch the wicked burn.

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1. Copies of *1 Enoch* were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran, which included a document called the *Community Rule*.

2. Like *1 Enoch*, the *Community Rule*, likely written by Jewish authors just before the time of Jesus, expressly accepts punishment in fire as the ultimate fate of the wicked: “[At the final judgment there will be] a multitude of plagues by the hand of all the destroying angels, everlasting damnation by the avenging wrath of the fury of God, eternal torment and endless disgrace together with shameful extinction in the fire of the dark regions.” *1QS* 4:13.

3. Notice that for the writer of the *Community Rule*, the fire did not result in eternal suffering but in “**shameful extinction.**” *1QS* 4:13.

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1. *2 Enoch* was written before the earliest of any writings in the New Testament and describes the visit of Enoch to the realms of the dead in the presence of two angels: “**And those two men led me up on to the Northern side, and showed me there a very terrible place, and all manner of tortures in that place: cruel darkness and unilluminated gloom, and there is no light there, but murky fire constantly flaming aloft, and a fiery river coming forth, and that whole place is everywhere fire, and everywhere frost and ice, thirst and shivering, while the bonds are very cruel, and the angels fearful and merciless, bearing angry weapons, merciless torture, and I said: Woe, woe, how very terrible is this place.**” *2 Enoch* 10:1–2.

2. With its combination of “**merciless torture**” and no reference to death, *2 Enoch* perhaps suggested that the punishment in the eternal fire would be endless, but that suggestion was certainly not expressed.

3. Although most Christian conceptions of hell probably don’t include ice, *Dante’s Inferno* describes Satan as frozen in ice at the center of hell, an idea that originally came from *2 Enoch*.

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1. There is no doubt that New Testament writers were familiar with at least some of the Jewish writings describing the punishment of the wicked dead in an eternal fire.
2. For example, the *Epistle of Jude* in the New Testament claims: **“Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way, and of all the harsh things which ungodly sinners have spoken against Him.’”** *Jude* 14–15 (NKJV).
3. The prophesy *Jude* is quoting comes from *1 Enoch* 1:9.
4. *1 Enoch* says that on the day of judgment, the rebellious angels following Satan will be taken to **“the lowest depths of the fire,”** where they will **“burn and perish.”** *1 Enoch* 10:16–17.
5. *2 Peter* repeats that story, noting that God **“cast [the rebellious angels] down to Tartarus.”** *2 Peter* 2:4 (Young’s Literal Translation).
6. The Greek Tartarus, a place of eternal punishment originally without fire, had come to be a place of fire though its association with the Jewish Gehenna.
7. Even the New International Version of the Bible continues to translate both “Tartarus” and “Gehenna” as “hell” despite their far different original meanings.

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1. In light of the importance that punishment after death eventually gained among Christians, New Testament writers were surprisingly ambiguous about that punishment, with many suggesting that the fate of sinners was eternal death, as it was in the Hebrew Scriptures and the *Community Rule* of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
2. Paul was the earliest of the New Testament writers, who first articulated the doctrine of original sin—everyone begins life as a sinner.
3. In his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote: **“For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”** *Romans* 5:18-19.
4. Because the doctrine of original sin is so important to the conclusion of some Christians that people are doomed to spend eternity in hell unless saved by accepting Jesus as their Savior, many Christians assume that Paul had a lot to say about hell.

5. However, “[t]he Christian doctrine of Hell certainly did not originate with [Paul,] Christianity’s first theologian.” Turner, *The History of Hell* at 52.

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1. In what is probably his most famous statement on the subject, Paul said: **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** *Romans* 6:23.

2. In other words, Paul taught **“that resurrection to life will be denied those who do not belong to Jesus.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 212.

3. A recent author concludes that Paul’s **“actual teaching is exactly the opposite of that widely accepted tradition,”** in which **“God intends to immortalize the wicked in order to torment them forever.”** Fudge, *Two Views of Hell* at 53.

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1. The *Gospel of John* quotes Jesus as saying: **“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”** *John* 14:6.

2. This statement is often quoted to support the idea that people who do not accept Jesus as their Savior will spend eternity being tortured in hell.

3. But the *Gospel of John*, like the letters of Paul, teaches that those who disbelieve **“die, are destroyed or annihilated.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 227.

4. This is clear from *John* 3:16, probably the most famous of all Gospel verses, translated this way in the *Complete Jewish Bible*: **“For God so loved the world that he gave his only and unique Son, so that everyone who trusts in him may have eternal life, instead of being utterly destroyed.”** *John* 3:16 (CJT).

5. As one recent author states: **“This is not a theory of eternal punishment. The wrath of God is expressed as a denial of eternal life.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 225.

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1. The *Book of Revelation* is well-known for its graphic description of the final judgment at the end of time.

2. According to *Revelation*, when Jesus returns, the earthly graves and the sea will **“g[i]ve up their dead”** and those whose names are not **“found written in the book of life”** will be **“thrown into the lake of fire”** where they will experience their **“second death.”** *Revelation* 20:13-15.

3. In other words, upon the return of Jesus, everyone will be resurrected, but only the worthy will have eternal life—sinners will experience a permanent **“second death.”**

4. As one author writes: **“Freedom from the second death is eternal life, but it implies a contrary fate, which is a denial of the resurrection to life: a resurrection to death, the second death.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 254.

5. For the *Gospel of John* and *Revelation*, the opposite of eternal life is not eternal life in torment, but eternal death, which is also what the letters of Paul promised.

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1. The *Gospel of Luke* has very little to say about the fate of sinners, but does suggest that they will be destroyed.

2. Jesus tells a crowd: **“[U]nless you repent, you too will all perish.”** *Luke* 13:5.

3. He also says that sinners will be **“destroyed”** at the final judgment by fire and brimstone as they were at the time of Lot. *Luke* 17:29-30.

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1. Consequently, **“it is on the Gospel of Matthew that much of the Christian proof of Hell’s existence and purpose depends.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 53.

2. Using language evoking *1 Enoch*, *Matthew* includes these famous words of Jesus: **“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. *** 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.”** *Matthew* 25:31-33, 41, 46.

3. There it is—the basis of countless sermons about hell—accept Jesus as your Savior or be sent to **“eternal punishment”** in an **“eternal fire”** when Jesus returns.

4. But there are potential difficulties reading these frightening words to support the idea of eternal torture in fire.

5. To begin with, as one recent author has noted, the traditional doctrine of hell requires that **“God will keep hell’s inhabitants alive forever so they can suffer everlasting torment.”** Fudge, *Two Views of Hell* at 19.

6. But Jesus says that sinners will be denied eternal life, an obvious requirement of eternal suffering.

7. And Jesus refers to the **“eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”**

8. The is almost certainly a reference to *1 Enoch*, which says that at the day of judgment, the rebellious angels following Satan will be taken to **“the lowest depths of the fire,”** where they will **“burn and perish.”** *1 Enoch* 10:16–17.

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1. *Matthew* 10:28 quotes Jesus as saying: **“And be not afraid of those killing the body, and are not able to kill the soul, but fear rather Him who is able both soul and body to destroy in gehenna.”** (Young’s Literal Translation).
2. So, at least according to this passage, being thrown into the eternal fire meant that that both the soul and the body were destroyed, making any further existence impossible.
3. This passage certainly does not suggest eternal torture in the fire of Gehenna.

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1. Other images in *Matthew* also seem to describe eternal fires that quickly destroy whatever is thrown into them, bringing an end to their existence.
2. For example, *Matthew* quotes Jesus as saying: **“As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”** *Matthew* 13:40–42.
3. This image evokes *1 Enoch*, which says that after sinners are thrown **“like hay into the fire”** that **“shall blaze forever,”** not even **a tenth part of them be found.** *1 Enoch* 66:15, 48.
4. Again, this passage, perhaps less clear, suggests that what is thrown into the eternal fire is, like hay, destroyed and not maintained forever.
5. The destruction of sinners in fire can properly be considered **“eternal”** punishment because it is irreversible. *Klassen, What Does the Bible Really Say About Hell?* at 83.
6. Reading *Matthew* this way would make its teachings consistent with those of the letters of Paul, the *Gospels of Luke* and *John* and *Revelation*.
7. It would also keep Christianity from being the only religion in history that teaches eternal punishment for all sins, no matter how trivial the sin.
8. But teachings about hell took a different direction in the early church.

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1. When the promised resurrection of the dead did not happen as expected, promoting Christianity exclusively on the basis of eternal life became a harder sell.
2. As a result, unknown Christian authors began creating writings intended to give people **“a reason to convert to Christianity . . . to avoid more and more horrendous punishments for sinning.”** Segal, *Life after Death* at 489.
3. The *Apocalypse of Peter*, written in about 150 A.D., **“is the first Christian writing to describe a journey through hell.”** Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 280.
4. Because it was claimed at the time to have been written by Peter, it was considered an authoritative work by some Christians as late as the early fourth century.
5. The *Apocalypse of Peter* is set on the Mount of Olives, when the Disciples ask Jesus for signs of the end of the age. *Matthew* 24:3.
6. In response, Jesus describes the judgment at the end of time, when he sends away the resurrected bodies of sinners, whose **“chastisement is the fire, . . . wherein they shall be punished for ever, every one according to his transgression.”** *Apocalypse of Peter* 6, in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 283.
7. Instead of describing all sinners suffering in the same fire, **“[t]he *Apocalypse of Peter* interprets the generic fire of the Bible and applies it to individual uses, making it more concrete.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 288.
8. For example, sorcerers and sorceresses are hung on spinning wheels of fire.
9. Flames are forced through the mouths of liars and hot chains made of idols sear the flesh of idol worshippers.
10. Because the *Apocalypse of Peter* describes punishment after the bodily resurrection at the end of time, the **“bodies have flesh.”** *Id.* at 284.
11. As a result, many of the sinners are suspended above the fire so **“the punishments depicted will endure eternally.”** *Id.*

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1. Many of the sins described in the *Apocalypse of Peter* are sexual in nature and the descriptions of the penalties are particularly graphic.
2. For example, male fornicators are described as being hung by their genitals, girls who gave up their virginity before marriage are clothed only by darkness and women who obtained abortions are up to their necks in a pit of excrement.

3. As one author writes: **“The lurid descriptions of punishments drew an audience; it is not going too far to say that the hell scenes . . . are a form of self-righteous pornography.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 85.
4. Looking at the popularity of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, Bart Ehrman writes: **“There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that, far more than the glories of heaven, it was the tortures of hell that convinced potential converts.”** Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* at 154.
5. As a result of the *Apocalypse of Peter* and similar writings, the idea of hell as a place of eternal punishment in fire became part of the public imagination.
6. The actual teachings of the Bible became more and more irrelevant.

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1. The *Apocalypse of Peter* also began a debate that would not be settled for a long time—can the occupants of hell receive forgiveness and shorten their sentences?
2. For the unknown author of the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the answer is “no.”
3. It describes the occupants of hell as crying out in agony: **“Have mercy on us, for now we know the judgment of God, which he declared to us before-time and we did not believe.”** *Apocalypse of Peter* 13 in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 286.
4. Tatirokos, an angel whose name comes from Tartarus, the darkest region of Hades, replies: **“Now do you repent, when it is no longer the time for repentance, and nothing of life remains.”** *Id.*
5. In other words, “[d]eath is the deadline” to avoid eternal punishment in hell. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 287.
6. As we will see, that was not the only early view on that subject.

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1. As we saw last week, as time went by without the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead, more and more Christians began to accept the Greek idea that an immortal soul went to its reward or punishment immediately upon death.
2. Consequently, it became important for Christians to find Biblical evidence that the souls of sinners were in hell before the bodily resurrection at the end of time.
3. They looked primarily to a parable in *Luke*, expressly based on Greek ideas of the afterlife, in which Jesus describes a rich man who had lived a life of luxury and a beggar named Lazarus who lived at his gate. *Luke* 16:22.

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1. After their deaths, both men were in **“Hades”** when the rich man called out across the **“chasm”** to Abraham: **“Father Abraham, deal kindly with me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and may cool my tongue, because I am distressed in this flame.”** *Luke 16:22-26* (Young’s Literal Translation).
2. Abraham refused the rich man’s request for mercy. *Luke 16:25-26*.
3. For many early Christians, this parable of Jesus supported three separate ideas.
4. First, because the resurrection of bodies had clearly not happened when Jesus told the story, the rich man’s soul, and not his body, must be suffering in the fire in Hades.
5. Second, souls of sinners have no hope of escaping the eternal punishment in fire.
6. Finally, one of the benefits of a virtuous life is the chance to see sinners suffer.

Slide 27

1. From the conclusion that souls of the dead were in hell came the description of an event unknown to most Protestants—The Harrowing of Hell.
2. Before his death, Jesus said: **“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”** *Matthew 12:40*.
3. The author of the letter to the Ephesians, attributed to Paul, said that Jesus had **“descended into the lower, earthy regions”** after his death on the cross. *Ephesians 4:9*.
4. It was certainly consistent with Jewish belief at the time that Jesus’ body had spent the time between his death and resurrection in *sheol*, the realm of all Jewish dead.

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1. But by the second century, Christians associated the underground realm of the dead with the Greek Hades, where the souls of the dead were judged and punished.
2. A verse in *1 Peter* says that Jesus, at some unspecified time, **“went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built.”** *1 Peter 3:19-20*.
3. So, some early Christians concluded that Jesus must have gone to Hades during the time before his resurrection and that the souls of the dead were all there.
4. From the story about the rich man and Lazarus, they concluded that the soul of Abraham was in Hades before the death of Jesus.

5. And, if Jesus was in Hades before his resurrection, he surely must have liberated the souls of Abraham and the other righteous dead that were trapped there.

6. So, Christians began teaching that **“while his body lay in the grave, Christ descended in spirit into Hades, overcame the forces of death . . . and resurrected the major figures of the Hebrew Bible, including Adam and Eve, Noah and Moses, the patriarchs, David, Solomon, the prophets, and other righteous persons who died before his coming.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 252.

7. Exactly what then became of these resurrected dead was never made clear.

Slide 29

1. From the story of the Harrowing of Hell came the statement in the Apostles’ Creed that Jesus “descended into hell” after his death.

2. Because of the scant Biblical support for this idea, many Protestants leave that statement out when they recite the Creed.

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1. Bart Ehrman describes Origen as **“the most learned, prolific, and famous theologian of the first three Christian centuries.”** Ehrman, *Lost Christianities* at 154.

2. As a young man, he traveled to Rome, eventually writing more than one thousand books trying to explain Christian beliefs and reject what he thought were false doctrines.

3. For Origen, hell’s fire was not in a place, but within each individual sinner.

4. As he wrote in about 220 A.D.: **“[E]very sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire and is not plunged into some fire which was kindled beforehand by someone else or which already existed before him. The food and fuel of this fire are our sins”** Origen, *The Fundamental Doctrines* 2, 10, 3, in 1 Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers* at 196.

5. One author summarizes Origen’s views this way: **“The fire is fueled by the accumulated sins of a lifetime, which, as in the case of indigestion, boil up inside and provoke a fever whose intensity and duration depend on the frequency and seriousness of overindulgence.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 312.

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1. Because Origen believed that the fires of hell burn within each soul and that the soul is eternal, he concluded that hell could not be eternal because all souls would eventually decide to eliminate the fires within and be freed from further torment.

2. As one author writes: **“If we are free to choose how we live our lives it would follow that we should continue to be free to choose after death as well.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 77.
3. **“Following Origen’s logic, Hell could not persist after the end of time, for it to do so would signal a victory for sin and the Devil.”** *Id.*

Slide 32

1. Origen supported his argument that souls in hell could repent from a passage in *1 Peter*: **“For this is the reason the gospel was preached even to those who are now dead, so that they might be judged according to men in regard to the body, but live according to God in regard to the spirit.”** *1 Peter* 4:6.
2. As one author notes, this passage **“surely gives witness to the notion that Christ can preach to the dead, evidently in the hope of saving them.”** Segal, *Life after Death* at 591.

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1. Although Origen rejected the idea of tangible punishments in hell, **“like so many after him, he felt that ordinary folk should believe in them as a deterrent to sin and crime.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 78.
2. The *Apocalypse of Paul*, originally written by an unknown author in the third or fourth century, was purportedly written by Paul after he obtained a guided tour of hell.
3. **“[U]ntil Dante, it was the most widely known of all narrative tours of hell.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 293.
4. Unlike the earlier *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Paul* reflects the by then dominant idea that the souls of the dead are in hell before the resurrection of their bodies.
5. As a result, it depicts souls leaving the body and being judged by God in heaven before they are sent to their rewards and punishments.
6. As one author writes: **“The more clear [became] the depiction of the immortal soul, the more terrible hell had to be.”** Segal, *Life after Death* at 489.
7. As a result, the *Apocalypse of Paul* has **“even more worms, beasts, and avenging angels with instruments of torture than *Peter*.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 86.
8. Some of the most gruesome punishments are reserved for church leaders who did a poor job while alive.

9. For example, **“an iron instrument with three hooks pierced the bowel”** of an old man who **“was a presbyter who did not perform his ministry well.”** *Apocalypse of Paul* 34 in Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 294.

10. Like the *Apocalypse of Peter*, the *Apocalypse of Paul* **“was responsible for propagating many of the wide-spread notions of . . . hell that have come down even till today.”** Ehrman, *Lost Scriptures* at 288.

Slide 34

1. Later versions of the *Apocalypse of Paul* tempered the idea of eternal punishment.
2. In these versions, Jesus responded to pleas for mercy and allowed the souls in hell to be released for 24 hours every Sunday. Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 303.
3. These versions also accepted the statement in *1 Peter* that prayers for damned souls could affect their fates in hell. *Id.* at 302.

Slide 35

1. Arguments of Origen and others that hell was temporary and redemptive were vigorously countered by Augustine, a converted Christian who argued for **“the existence of an eternal and essentially static Hell.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 79.
2. Augustine rejected the idea that souls could be redeemed after death, concluding that the **“sinner must repent before death.”** Bernstein, *The Formation of Hell* at 316.
3. He rejected the express teaching of *1 Peter* that Jesus had preached to the souls in the prison of hell, interpreting it **“figuratively”** to mean that Jesus preached to the **“souls imprisoned in bodies alive in this life.”** *Id.* at 321.
4. Augustine rejected the proposition, supported by many New Testament passages, that sinners simply fail to achieve eternal life.
5. If accepting Jesus is the key to eternal life, simple fairness for Augustine required that those not accepting Jesus suffer eternal torture and not simply the cessation of existence, which was their lot without regard to Jesus.
6. As one author states: **“To some degree, his argument was based on the theory that ‘It is not enough to succeed; others must fail.’ How would we appreciate grace without the perspective of its opposite—and so much of the opposite.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 80.
7. As between the views of Augustine and Origen, **“Augustine’s triumph was complete.”** *Id.* at 82.

8. In 543, the Synod of Constantinople ordered the excommunication of anyone who argued that punishment in hell is temporary and excommunicated the long-dead Origen.

Slide 36

1. Medieval authors, artists and playwrights spent a lot of time portraying hell.
2. Dante famously divided hell, like Hades, into regions of varying degrees of punishment.

Slide 37

1. But Augustine's view of hell as a place of a material fire, forever torturing the bodies and souls of those who did not accept Jesus as their Savior, stayed remarkably constant throughout the Middle Ages.
2. **“Thomas Aquinas followed Augustine in insisting on a real fiery Hell with physical torments added to those of the mind and spirit.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 89.

Slide 38

1. As a result, the view of hell as a place of eternal torment in fire led to hundreds, if not thousands, of people being burned alive in real fires in the name of God's mercy.
2. The idea was that burning heretics to death in earthly fires was the best way to prevent many others from burning forever in the fires of hell.
3. Amazingly, this idea still has supporters—in 2002, Dr. Warren H. Carroll, a noted Catholic theologian, expressly agreed with this post on a Catholic web site: **“To figure, wouldn't it be a lot better for the general population if a few mainstream heretics were killed, so that the whole population was not ‘infected’ by the heresies of the few? What I am trying to say is that it wasn't a terrible idea. Kill a few heretics to save the eternal souls of the population.”** <http://biblelight.net/burn-heretics.htm>.
4. Most Christians today are not willing to condone burning at the stake, but at least come nonetheless seem willing to allow people to suffer in order to prevent souls from burning in hell.
5. Phil Gulley, a Quaker minister in Camby, tells of sincere Christians who told him it is a mistake to send mosquito netting to Africa to protect children from contracting malaria because the money should instead be spent teaching them how to avoid the eternal fires of hell when they die. Gulley, *If the Church Were Christian* at 183.

Slide 39

1. The idea of hell as a place of eternal punishment in fire based entirely on a person's beliefs has long been criticized as inconsistent with God's love and compassion.
2. A contemporary critic of Augustine claimed that **“you think your Lord God is capable of committing a crime against justice such as is hardly conceivable even among the barbarians.”** Turner, *The History of Hell* at 80.
3. The late Christopher Hitchens, a New Atheist, makes a similar claim: **“Nothing proves the man-made character of religion as obviously as the sick mind that designed hell. * * * It was left to Christians to find a hell from which there was no possible appeal.”** Hitchens, *God is Not One* at 176, 219.

Slide 40

1. But the criticism of hell as a place of eternal torture is not confined to atheists.
2. A Christian minister recently wrote: **“False theories of eternal punishment of the wicked have done unfathomable damage in the religious realm. Untold millions of people have obeyed God purely out of fear of a false concept of hell.”** Dawson, *Essays of Eschatology* at 258.

Slide 41

1. Some Protestant denominations reject the traditional interpretation of hell.
2. For example, Presbyterians evoke Origen, teaching that **“[a]n utterly selfish, godless man . . . carries hell in his heart.”** Rosen, *Religions of America* at 202.
3. They expressly **“reject as immoral and un-Christian the teaching once proclaimed that the bliss of the redeemed will be heightened by watching the suffering of the damned.”** *Id.*
4. For Methodists, **“[h]ell is a state where fellowship [with God] is absent.”** *Id.* at 174.
5. For many Christians, hell is no longer at the center of their reasons for believing.

Slide 42

1. But as Rob Bell, the evangelical minister from Grand Rapids learned, millions and millions of Christians still stick to the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal punishment in fire for those who do not accept Jesus as their Savior.
2. In his book, he writes: **“God loves us. God offers us everlasting life by grace, freely, through no merit on our part. Unless you do not respond the right way. Then God will torture you forever. In hell.’ Huh?”** Bell, *Love Wins* – Back Cover.

3. For this view, he was ruthlessly lambasted as a heretic controlled by Satan and left his megachurch when his congregation rejected his criticism of the traditional view of hell as a place of eternal torture in fire.

Slide 43

1. In two weeks, in the final presentation in this series, we will look at the history of heaven, which some Christians reject as a pagan idea contrary to what the Bible teaches.

2. We will see that this claim ignores both Jewish and Christian writings, which contain clear teachings about heaven alongside teachings about bodily resurrection.

3. We will see that Paul himself talked about a visit to the third heaven and a soul that leaves the body at death to be with Christ.

Resources:

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Turner, *The History of Hell* (Harcourt 1993)