

Is hell really there in the end?

By E. Brink

1 Injured love

Who still dares to defend the existence of hell? He who believes in a God who 'keeps' a hell can expect the following accusations: "Is not it too awful even to mention; if we assume that there are wiggling en gnawing worms, as well as eternal furnaces of fire and sulphur, waiting for the dead who have not followed the right system of faith? It is those who want to believe in such a sadistical god, who ought to look out. It is more these Christians, who have so much to say about their fellow Christians, who ought to count on the worms and flaming fires from which they never escape"¹. This is about other Christians with a different system of faith. But today you could easily replace: people with other faiths. He who dares to insist on the existence of hell, is easily suspected of wishing that hell on others.

Delusions

Inescapably hell summons up terrifying associations. Who can think of the place without shuddering? God's Word speaks very soberly about it. Probably because of this, our fantasy runs away with us and the danger of speculation is a big one. Many delusions exist about this terrible place, which do no justice to God's Word. The searing furnaces stoked up by fiery devils who torture and torment people is one example. Terrible worms who chew at people for eternity and the endless spreading of evil to which people will be delivered up... But more important than such misrepresentations is that they do crass injustice to the Lord God Himself. This happens when He is portrayed as a sadistical God, who creates the hell for his awful arbitrariness. The protest against a sadistical representation of God is correct, but so is a protest against a sentimental humane one. God is then represented as a meek God who has no rights to insist on. This comes in place of the loving God who has established His throne on eternal righteousness (Ps.97).

Escape routes

Throughout the centuries people have denied hell or alleviated its pain. I will represent three of these positions globally. These escape routes are usually offered to maintain that God really is love after all. An eternal hell could not tie up with His love and contradicts his righteousness. Above all this would mean a defeat for God and throw His victory over evil into question.

1. *The hell as penultimate reality.* That is to say: a temporary deprivation, a hellish shock, occurs, but after a shorter or longer stay in the hell, heavenly glory still follows. The word "eternal" in the Bible, and certainly when speaking about hell, does not mean time without end but something like 'century', a long time. Hell is something like an interim, or purgatory, where opportunities for a second chance or temporary penance exist.
2. *The hell exists but ultimately remains empty.* God is just threatening. The threat is very real and realistic, but is only meant to stimulate repentance and to cause change here and now. The judgement will not go through, just as Nineveh was spared after Jonah had preached threateningly to it. The danger is a real one, hell is a reality, but thanks to the great mercy of God, nobody will actually end up there.
3. *Hell will turn out to be nothing.* This non- existence theory is gaining popularity. The second death is presented as disintegration into nothing (annihilation) Just as Sodom and Gomorrah disappeared, there will be nothing left of the dead unbeliever. Their lives lead to nothing, people will not realise even this, because the hell means - dying a quiet death and never coming back to life .God will ultimately be all things to all people.

Pathetic attempts

1. If you take this alone, it is true that 'eternal' in the Bible can mean a long time, the longest imaginable time. But this is not true in those places where the hell is referred to. In Matthew 25:46 eternal life is mentioned simultaneously with eternal judgement. And in Revelation 14:11 "to all eternity" is further illustrated as - "they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name" (see also 20:10). The meaning of "eternal" in this context can hardly be anything else than unending, unlimited.
2. It cannot be denied that the threat can be very real without the prediction ever coming to pass, or the judgement being postponed, and this then with the intention of calling people to repentance. But even if there are illustrations of this, it does not necessarily mean that it will always happen in this way. There are many places in Scripture where the opposite happens, and the judgement does take place, if there is no repentance. And how can hell be so empty, if God has had a place to keep satan and his fallen angels for ages (Jude 6; Rev.20:10)? How can there be talk of "those who perish" (2Thess.2:10), if there is no such thing? Above all, the warnings are not only directed at unbelievers, but are also meant as comfort for those who are being persecuted (2Thess. 1; 1Pet.4; 2Pet.2)! Biblically speaking you cannot get around the fact that there are two categories of people at the resurrection and the judgement (Matth.25:31-34; John 5:29; Rom.2:7; Rev.20:15).
3. The contrast in the Bible is not between being and not being, but between life and death, as two ways of existence. Death is not non-existence. Death is being cut off from communication. It implies paralysis, powerlessness, ruined existence. From texts such as Eph. 2:1 "you were dead" - shows that there can be no talk of non-existence. These people were full of life but had no contact with God and were given over to themselves. Death is absolutely not a simple extinction of existence. Nor is it true that Sodom and Gomorrah have disappeared forever. The inhabitants will be called up on the day of judgement. (Math 11:23-24).

Christ speaks

Who spoke the most about hell in the Bible? Christ! He underlines his message in flames, not to scare the living daylights out of people but to reassure us! Christ has come to save us from hell after all, and not only what the people of today call hell, but also the future one! Modern preachers cry out - hell is visible here on this earth in many places (war, aids, and in famine areas) But do they bring a word of redemption? No! They sow panic first and foremost, because who can redeem this world from hell? Christ speaks about Himself as the One who redeems. The Son of God knows as no other, what the hell is. He speaks out of experience because he went through hell while here on earth (*Heidelberg Catechism* q.44). And He speaks reassuring words contrary to the greatest anxiety, the anxiety for hell, from which all anxieties come. He is the only Person who can save us from hell.

Injured love

The foremost argument which is offered against hell, is that it would contradict God's love. It is true, it does create a tension. Who would dare to say that he absolutely understands and can satisfactorily explain it? And even so, a hell that contradicts God's love cannot exist. Saying "no" to God's love is saying "yes" to hell. If somebody rejects God's love he cannot say that the hell contradicts God's love. *Hell is there because he rejected that love.* Hell is a rejected heaven. The same love through which God gave His Son, the same love by which Christ gave Himself, this love is the love which judges. He who despises and rejects God's love, summons God's wrath over himself (Heb.12:25-29). This is the holy indignation not only from God the Father but also from the Son: the wrath of the Lamb (Rev.6:16). God maintains His right to love in the hell. The hell is the place for God's injured love. God is and remains forever aggrieved about people who have so completely rejected Him and his Son. It is noticeable how emphatically Jesus speaks about hell to people who have rejected Him. This is why he is so emphatic in his reaction to the Pharisees and Sadducees who have no regard for Him. They refuse to recognise Him. They follow what He does. They see all from close quarters, they see

and hear what happens. If you still reject God's Son, given by God in love to set everything right... If you reject God's Son then you provoke God to the limit. You reject the apple of His eye and injure His love!

Sealed unwillingness

God does not bring misery on anybody but he seals the unwillingness of people. He takes our responsibility so seriously that the hell is the consequence of His respect for us as mankind. Ultimately there are but two sorts of people. The one says: Your will be done, and God says to the other sort - your will be done (C.S.Lewis). The doors of hell are locked but the lock is on the inside. Man shuts himself off from God, God leaves him to his own hardness of heart (*cp. Canons of Dort I,6*). God gives His own Son and lets Him suffer to death, and people react by saying - "thanks but no thanks, I didn't ask Him to take the misery of the world upon Himself, I'll manage it myself, I'll go my own way". These can be pleasant, friendly people who, as they say themselves, wouldn't harm a fly. They can also be criminals. The Nazi Eichmann was visited by a minister thirteen times before his execution. Eichmann thought "I don't need anyone to die in my place, I need no forgiveness, and I don't want it either". If people reject God's Son, then they must bear their own unrighteousness, with the consequence of being endlessly thrown back on yourself. The rejection of Christ seems to be that which weighs the heaviest - knowing or having known of Him and still rejecting Him (Heb.10:26-31).

Speaking in images

When Christ speaks about hell, it is obvious that He uses imagery. He uses symbols which more or less exclude each other: utter darkness and fire. A colourful use of imagery which keep the options open. Symbolism gives a characterization but is not a photograph (K. Schilder). But the limited representation that Jesus offers, is enough to tell us that it is a terrible place, where demons live. It is ultimate darkness because you are unobtainable for God and do not share in heavenly glory. How can it be anything else - the work of Christ shines there, in heaven, while that same glittering work in hell blinds those who harden their hearts. If, in this place, the fire glows, is that then not the fire of God's indignant love? An as that intense thirst is described, is it not that earnest desire for love and security, which cannot be fulfilled (Luke 16:24) so that you are thrown back on yourself? And is that searing pain not created by the terrible sense of missing something, because you must continually do without that love?

Great grace

The Scriptures preserve us from minimalism. Sometimes it looks as though only a small group will be saved (Matth.22:14), but it is possible that this refers to the Jewish followers during Jesus' presence on earth. Other scriptures emphasise the growth and increase (Matth.8:11-12; 13), and not forgetting the multitudes which are countless (Rev.7:9). How many have gone before us? How many of the last will be the first? How many of the least will be the greatest? God's mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13). It is not up to us to decide the measure of God's grace, let alone that we should try to give God lessons in mercy. We must never make a closed system of it, which we then proceed to force upon God, as though we decide the minimum of knowledge necessary for salvation. What is man? You never reach the place from which God judges. It is not up to us to speculate: will he be there, will she be there ... Adding and weighing up, so busy judging and measuring you forget to look at your own heart (K. Schilder). God is greater than our hearts (1John 3:20). Nothing more is required of us than to trust in God, the Almighty. He is completely merciful and just! Who ever loved us more?

In Christ

And what about those who have never heard of Him, but who have at the most some awareness of a god? And what about the very many followers of other religions? What will become of them? And what about all those children who have never been brought up with the Gospel? Will chanceless children end up in a chanceless hell? There is little to be found in the Bible on the subject of ignorance, but never underestimate God's mercy. God's heart is always greater than you think.

Augustine, Luther, Zwingli, Melancthon, all kept the option open, that at the last judgement God will grant certain heathens a pardon. They did so on the grounds of texts such as: the first will be the last, and they will come from east and west (Matth.8:11; 19:30; 20:12). It is not impossible for God to declare people righteous apart from preaching and baptism. As sovereign God He can do this. But whoever it is, nobody can ever be saved apart from the work of Christ! Only it is not up to us to speculate about this or presume upon it. We have to be satisfied with: he who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son, does not have life (1 John 5:12). However you look at it - apart from Jesus Christ, life is hell.

2 Holy Justice²

How can God's love tolerate hell? Can we rhyme His love with eternal fire, eternal woe, eternal remorse? Worse, is it not a defeat for God's love if hell exists? How can He tolerate there always being a place where He has no influence? Is it fair and righteous to judge people on the grounds of this one life? Can this short life between cradle and grave really be decisive for a never ending eternity? You cannot have another go at, there is no second chance. Does this not clash with God's love? Is this not against His justice?

Love and justice

The word 'righteousness' makes us think of a harsh front - a deal is a deal. Abide by the rules. Stick to the laws. The word 'merciful' makes us think of a friendly face, loving, warm, moved by compassion. The human heart is inclined to create opposites out of these two. But God does not have two sides. He is not double. There is no contradiction in God. In the Bible we do not find a conflict between God's love and justice. Goodness and faithfulness meet each other, righteousness and peace kiss each other (Ps.85:11). His justice can seek retaliation, if He takes revenge to restore justice (Jer.51:56; Rom.2:8; Matth.22:13). His justice is full of love and his love is saturated with justice. We cannot understand this, and it can clash with our feelings, but that does not make it less true. In this, God is holy, unique and incomparable. If God would not insist on His justice, His love would pale! God's love would be that He ignored evil and his love would cut across his righteousness. This would be unworthy of God. That would make love cheap. God has shown his love in a way that is worthy of Him. He gave His Son in complete love, but He did not lose sight of His justice for one second. *God demands righteousness. He is bound to his love.*

Maintaining justice

Hell is not a place of awful chance, but the result of carrying out his godly justice! There is no trace of unrighteousness in Him. He is completely righteous. He speaks justice, makes justice, takes revenge as no person could. He never makes a mistake. It will be performed in a most holy way (Rev.15:1-4) God shall weigh everything as a completely righteous judge. He does no one injustice. He brings everything into the light. He will judge everyone according to their deeds, their background, their circumstances. God maintains his justice in hell. God is and remains eternally injured by people who have rejected his Son so utterly.

Distinction

But what about all those who never came into contact with Christ? How could they ever have offended his love? God cannot blame them for this? Nor will He! He is completely righteous. The Lord Jesus says as much in so many words. It will be better for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgement (Matth.11:21), yes, even better for Sodom and Gomorrah than for you who could have known (11:24)! Nowhere is there talk of a grey mass in the grey darkness of hell. There is certainly a distinction in punishment. From the one who has been entrusted with much, much will be asked (Luke 12:48-49). God will punish every one according to his or her works (Matth.12:36-37; 2Cor.5:10). Every person who ever lived will be tried justly. You reap as you sow. Everybody must bear his own guilt and accept the consequences of his deeds.

Judgement made to measure

It is noticeable that the Lord uses different standards for the heathen peoples than for His own people. The Ammonites, for instance, will not be judged according to the laws given to Israel, but according to their malicious pleasures when Judah was conquered (Ez.25:6-70). They are not judged on the basis of things they could not have known. The judgement is made to measure! The same is true of the charge against the king of Tyre (Ez.28:1-10). Success and riches had gone to his head, he let himself be worshipped like a god. God does not accept it when people ridiculously overestimate their own achievements. God addresses people who should have known better. It is again, specifically relevant to them, so as fits an honest judgement. God is and remains righteous. He asks us to trust Him in this. The ultimate adaptation is that Tyre is addressed on the fact that she practises dishonest trade and finances the temple service with this money (Ez.28:18). God goes far in this, by addressing her on the grounds of her own idol worship. Even then, her temple riches have been dishonestly obtained. Even according to her own judgements it is wrong! Everything points to how righteous God is. His judgement is based upon a charge that is even convincing to those involved.

Evidences of goodness

God insists on His justice and abides by His love. He is and remains righteous. This is not a cold righteousness, but much more of a reasonable righteousness. In all that he does He remains righteous! The existence of distinctions within judgement, brings the notion of grades of hell with it. God does not throw everybody and everything overboard in one fell swoop. God's justice is saturated with love! He who is convinced of this can better place the following K.Schilder statements. That even in hell there will be a distant reflection of God's kind countenance, and there too will be glimpses of God's immense goodness. Even in hell, it will be said that the Lord is righteous in all his ways and work, God is unmeasurably good!

Recognition and remorse

Every judged one will find it impossible to be anything but in agreement with the Judge. Recognition and nothing else but desire for the application of God's justice. You can do nothing but submit to God's judgement, because His judgements are as clear as crystal. There is no question of disputing their correctness because nothing could possibly oppose them. Everybody will agree with His Godly judgements because every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, be it with a good grace or a bad grace (Phil.2:9-11). The weeping and gnashing of teeth testify in this light, not to rebellion, but much more to remorse and sorrow. The pain of the remorse is the unavoidable judgement. You are brought in line with God's will but it happens at the last possible moment. You cannot avoid it. Revenge is without future because there are no more ensuing episodes. You can only look back, watch the repeats. You cannot exist in the past, so the only thing left to do is judge yourself in confrontation with God's righteous decision. You can only see that which has taken place. No change is possible. Dante's "abandon hope all ye who enter here" is painfully accurate. It paints the picture of the worm that never dies - remaining focused on the past and knowing that nothing can be changed, knowing no renewal and change but only paralysing helplessness.

No accident

There can be no question of God failing in his victory over evil. He expresses his judgement and restrains evil forever! He sorts out evil for ever. Gehenna or hell, is no longer the place where satan and his henchmen hang out, where they do what they like and where God is denied access. Once the judgement has taken place it is not satan's territory but his prison (Jude 6; 2Pet.2:4; Rev.18:8; 19:2; 20:7-10). Hell is not a kingdom in which God has no influence and can do nothing. Sin cannot spread out unbridled. Everything has been brought to light, judged and mightily condemned (2Thess.1:8-9; 2Cor.5:10; Rev.11:18; 20:12-13). Without this judgement and condemnation the victory would be incomplete. Creatures would still be able to scoff and revile. No, this is over forever. From the last judgement onwards, this scandal of rebellion will be over. Nowhere does the Bible suggest a godly failure or eternal continuation of sin. All and everybody will be brought under the kingdom of God by the Judge, Christ (1Cor.15:27-28). The atonement of all earthly and heavenly beings in this instance means: return to the harmony which He intended (Col.1:20)³³. All shall recognise His might and

sovereignty. Sooner or later, everybody will recognise that Christ really is God's answer to all that has caused difficulty and pain on earth. All will see it - every knee will bow! Ultimately God will receive honour from sending His Son. His right will triumph be it with a good grace or bad grace. This is true of all creatures (Rev.15:4), also in the judgement of the unrepentant, God glorifies His name (Ez.38:23). The glorification of God remains the aim of every creature (Prov.16:4).

God is not absent

Hell is often seen as the place of God's absence, as though it is a place where evil can do whatever it wants without interruption. God puts a stop to evil and has judged it. But if God is not absent, in what sense is He present? He is present as the God who presents Himself as holy Creator and Judge. It is not that God is righteous but ultimately merciful, as though these two are opposites. He is both completely merciful and completely righteous. I see no way of systemising this. It is a living reality in Christ. He unites love and justice in His own person. Even in hell it is evident how righteous and good He is. The same presence that fills the people in heaven with love, feels like anger in hell, because of the rejection of His love. The same love which fills the people in heaven with happiness, feels like a repression and remorse in hell. The burning fire of God's love and His glorious radiation mean the opposite in hell: blinding, shrivelling. It is the utmost darkness. God is unmentionably far away, because from a human point of view, the chasm is unbridgeable (2Thess.1:8-9).

Question of Conscience

How can you long for the future, if your own husband or wife, brother or sister, friend or acquaintance has turned their back upon God or when the great division happens, cutting through families? A miracle must happen. As long as that person lives, there is a way back. It is possible that he or she repents, when you yourself are gone. We do not know God's plan. And what if there is no repentance?! Will we not approach the last day with fear and trembling? Will we not miss that person? On the basis of fear of missing somebody, the conclusion is often scrupulously drawn that we will not recognise anyone, all will be forgotten. But that is an escape. Would Christ miss them? Christ who gave Himself out of great love, would He turn His back on them? Would He not miss them? If the Lord Jesus won't miss them, while He is in glory, it must be good. We cannot appreciate that now, simply because we cannot see into the future... We cannot stand where He stands. But we do not have a complete faith. We do not trust Him as completely righteous, holy and good.

Glorious justice

The glass sea described in Revelation 15 is clear as crystal, transparent up to God's throne. There is a red glow in it, the glow of His wrath, His rejected love and His holy justice. One day everybody will recognise that: Lord, you are righteous. Today I cannot understand God's intentions. His judgements are absolutely not transparent but in the distant future I hope to understand all completely, in the light of Christ. Nobody has loved the world as He has. If people turn their backs on Him it cannot be because of Him. And would He, who wipes away every tear from our eyes, not know how to deal with the sorrow which the great division will create?

¹ A.J.R. Brussaard, Als een mus op het dak. Wrede trekken in het christelijk belijden, Baarn 1978.

² The range of thought of K. Schilder, Wat is de hel?, Kampen 1920 (second edition) and of Henri Blocher, Irons-nous tous au paradis? Aix-en-Provence, Kerugma: 1999 has been inspiring for me writing this part of my article.

³ Compare the note at this verse in La Bible de Jérusalem, Paris, CERF: 1974: this reconciliation 'ne signifie pas le salut individuel de tous, mais bien le salut collectif du monde par son retour à l'ordre et à la paix dans la soumission parfaite à Dieu. Les individus qui ne seront pas entrés par la grâce, dans cet ordre y entreront par force'.