

Hell

Hell is what we refer to when we speak of “eternal death”. This is where we do not want to go. It is not a physical place but a state. If we die in a state of mortal sin – that is, in a state that is not in God’s grace and friendship – we cannot be united to God if we don’t freely choose to love Him (CCC #1033, 1057). If the consequences of our sins are not temporal but eternal, we will go to a place that is eternally separated from God.

“The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs.” (CCC #1035)

The Church does not teach that “God banishes people to Hell”, rather that people willfully choose Hell. Which is why some (including myself) can wonder how, when presented with the glory and magnificent mercy and love of God, anyone would choose against it. Still, we have to believe that this is an option. But this is why we also believe that we can't say for certain that anyone is in Hell, nor, in the same way, can we say for certain that no one is in Hell.

The Unquenchable Fire

Of course, if a person does not die in righteous standing before God, in His grace, his or her soul cannot experience eternal friendship and blessedness with God. Scripture is clear that a person who dies with mortal sin on his or her soul will go to hell (cf. 1 Cor 6:9–10; Gal 5:19–21; Eph 5:5; Rev 21:8). Hell is also the abode of Satan and his demons, who were cast out of heaven after their revolt against God (cf. Job 4:18; Lk 10:18; 2 Pet 2:4; Rev 12:7–9). This place or state of existence is given many names. It is called “a burning place” (Is 30:33), “the devouring fire” with “everlasting burnings” (Is 33:14), “the unquenchable fire” (Mk 9:43; cf. 9:48; Mt 3:12), “the furnace of fire” (Mt 13:42, 50), “the eternal fire” (Mt 18:8; 25:41; cf. Jude 1:7), “the hell of fire” (Mt 18:9), and the lake of fire and brimstone (cf. Rev 19:20; 20:10, 15; 21:8). It is also described as “the outer darkness” (Mt 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and the “nether gloom” (cf. 2 Pet 2:4, 17; Jude 1:6, 13).

It is a “bottomless pit” (Rev 9:1–2; 11:7) of “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46), destruction (cf. Mt 7:13; 10:28; 2 Thess 1:9; Jude 1:10), and torment and anguish (cf. Lk 16:23–25, 28), where the worm does not die (cf. Mk 9:48), and where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 25:30). Since hell cannot be a place of both fire (which produces light) *and* darkness (the absence of light) these descriptions are probably metaphorical. But they do communicate unquestionably that hell is a place of tremendous pain.

Of course, the greatest pain will come not from the fire or the darkness or the gnashing of teeth, but from the reality that the soul will be eternally devoid of the Lord. In hell, God’s presence is lost forever. As Paul writes, “They shall suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess 1:9). How hopeless is life without God!