SPECULATIONS ON HELL

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We do not know fully what aspects of earthly humanity carry forward into the intermediate and eternal states, so we are left to speculate about what nature we will have then and what punitive experiences we can experience there. The following inferences combine what revelation does say about permanent features of human nature and about being "lost" after death—about what hell could be like.

A. God created us with the interpersonal capacity, a characteristic we infer from his making us in his image and likeness (Genesis **1**:26). So whatever else constitutes "destruction," it can take something away from operating interpersonally. Destruction would not take away the interpersonal capacity, only the free exercise of it. Destruction would not having take away our existence itself either by withdrawing sustaining our existence or by annihilation. Continued existence combines with "destruction," as scripture makes clear by speaking o (1) persons being (2) in hell. Hell takes place in regard to the overlap between the natural and supernatural realms, particularly in regard to the interpersonal capacity in that area.

B. We can appeal to poetic justice as a principle for understanding how hell operates. Hell derives from human sinfulness during physical life (Luke **16**:25, 26-31). Poetic justice calls for making the punishment commensurate with the crime (Luke **12**:46-49). It seems appropriate to put onto criminals what they put onto their victims. So any blame involved in the situation does not fall on God as judge, jury, and "executioner" but on those who disobey him. Our final condition derives from our human response to God's revealed will and warnings about not heeding it. Even aside from revelation, God can hold us responsible for what we should be able to figure out on our own, given human experience itself (Luke **12**:48a).

C. Justice seems to require the permanent overthrow of evil. Hell serves as the final triumph over sinners and past sin (Revelation **14**:11a). It is punitive, not remedial, so it is permanent with no transfer from hell to some other circumstance (Luke **16**:26).

From these three basics we infer the following possibilities for how hell may operate in the context of its revealed features.

1. Hell as eternal loneliness. In criminal incarceration, prisons may enhance punishment by using solitary confinement. That condition "destroys" social interaction; it takes away the exercise of the interpersonal capacity. It compares hell to separation from God (Isaiah **59**:2). Separation also from other people recognizes sin as self-centeredness, anti-social behavior; it behaves in ways that do not consider the impact of "my" actions on "you," human or divine. Sin as selfishness means receiving in hell what essentially we express in sinning against others. We can imagine how there will be degrees of punishment implicit in conscious loneliness. "Outer darkness" would intensify solitary confinement and perhaps depict "destruction" of perception during consciousness.

2. Hell as observing the effects of our unforgiven sin. What if our sentence is to witness the sorrow and suffering our actions have caused other people? We could hardly complain if we had to watch a replay of each sin as it affected each person. The degree of punishment could correspond to the number and intensity of our disobedience to known and knowable prohibitions (Luke **12**:47-48).

3. Hell as experiencing the effects of our unforgiven sins.[1] Insensitivity to others is an aspect of selfishness and self-centeredness, which breach the very nature of interpersonal behavior. Going through what we have caused others to endure provides something appropriate and commensurate. This speculation may even suggest duration of our sins' effects. We could be made to endure the length and degree of the kind of sorrow and pain we brought on other people by our mental, emotional, and physical abuse. God could measure out to us sequentially for each person in the group what our meanness exploited each time.

Such a scenario would not transfer guilt or its consequences (Ezekiel **18**:20); it would activate the consequences on us who did the sin, and it would incur punishment for it in kind, degree, and duration. It would not be a supposedly comparable substitute effect but the very effect itself. It would not, for instance, be a monetary fine for attacking a woman; it would be the actual fear and pain she felt in being attacked. It would be actually feeling a man's grief over the loss of the son we murdered, the other family members' grief for that same murder measured out to the murderer one at a time together with the sense of loss per individual for that same death.

Woe to those who foment war, suffering, grief, pain, and death against thousands, those who bring starvation on children and destroy the environment with selfishness or in pursuit of personal gain this side of their own grave. If that is what hell will be like, it will be a condition of their own making. Violent people would not "get off easy"; they would not "get off" at all, and God could not be criticized for their excruciating condition because they would be experiencing the very excruciating effects that their own actions brought on neighbors and friends.

Our sins bring disappointment to other people; having to experience such a thing could even introduce an element of duration because people's disappointment and discouragement can linger for life.

This speculation could include punishment as a constant experience, where we would have *"no rest day or night"* (Revelation **14**:11). Being outside the features of physical experience, not even sleep would offer periodic reprieve.

A question of consistency comes up before we leave these thoughts about the nature of resurrected body and the possibility of its corporeal suffering. If our resurrected condition means our "bodies" are not naturally susceptible to physical pain, then corporeally punishing those who corporeally made others suffer needs some attention. Such punitive treatment would not come onto everybody indiscriminately but onto those who harmed others physically. The punishment would be done positively, specialized to each person for each way they hurt their fellows, and calibrated for intensity and duration. The whole idea might seem suspect by "dying a death of thousand qualifications," but God can do all these thousands of things, and under these modifications would not incur blame. However he inflicts the punishment will involve all these

qualifiers with or without sensitivity to corporeal pain; that inheres in the very notion of commensurate justice itself.

4. Hell as observing heaven from afar. This speculation does a take-off on one element of scenery in the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke **16**:23). Our "punishment" would come from being continually confronted with the loss of what we thrust away by our sin. By refusing to reach out in love, we lost the echo effect that love triggers in friends.

5. Hell as confined inactivity. Such a circumstance would "destroy" exercising the will in behavior, volition being a primary factor in personhood. This possibility draws on limitation and boredom as forms of punishment. The spirits in prison from the days of Noah had no prospect of parole (1 Peter **3**:18-20).

A follow-up note suggests that such hypotheticals as we have envisioned here could combine in various ways or occur in sequence. Taking away the questionable idea of a burning hell does not make it a wonderful place. At the same time, we remove a source of doubt among believers and irrelevant criticism of the Christian worldview among disbelievers.

The speculations above attempt to sidestep the discontinuous images that describe hell in the Bible: (a) darkness in the cold outside a comfortable house filled with celebration (Matthew **9**:42, *etc*.), (b) burning fire and magots in a city dump—Gehenna being a representation of the abode of the godless dead (Mark **9**:48), and (c) a flaming lava lake fuming with sulfur (Revelation **20**:10). We understand these as pictures that make a sobering point metaphorically.

These speculations are indeed speculations, but we offer them to enhance a sense of reality about hell. They draw attention to the effects of our negative behaviors and admonish us to stop doing them. They offer alternatives to (a) the seeming impropriety of a personal God torturing persons indiscriminately, eternally, and perhaps equally—the predominant image of hell that people seem to draw from scripture.[2] That image, taken physically, (b) does not seem appropriate in kind, degree, or length for justice or punishment of differing flesh-and-blood sinners who sin temporarily. (c) A burning hell seems dissociated from spirit as something naturally susceptible to fire (Judges **13**:20).[3] (d) The mixture of discontinuous images suggests not taking them all literally. Again, we say that outer darkness does not mix with flaming fire, and flaming fire does not mix with living magots; but that admission does not make hell unreal or something we need not worry about because it wouldn't be "all that bad" if we end up there. There are still those interpersonal capacities that can experience penalty.

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[1]That is essentially the way the Mosaic law directed judges to handle violent crimes. In a case where men fighting cause a woman to miscarry, Exodus **21**:22-25 says,

> **22** *"If men are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she miscarries without further injury, fine him as her husband requires and the judges determine.* **23** *But if there's further harm, punish*[f] *life for life,* **24** ***eye for eye, tooth for tooth*** **[Mt 5:38]**, *hand for hand, foot for foot,* **25** *burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise."* [Conversational Version]

Speaking of citizens and aliens alike, Leviticus **24**:20 says,

> [19] *"If one person injures another, do the same thing to that person:* [20] *fracture for fracture,* ***eye for eye, tooth for tooth*** **[Mt 5:38]**." [CV]

Deuteronomy **19**:21 broadens the point in the case of a false witness,

> [16] *"If a malicious witness accuses someone,* [17] *both people will stand in the presence of the* LORD, that is, *in front of the priests and judges in office.* [18] *The judges will investigate thoroughly. If the witness has accused falsely,* [19] *do to him what he'd intended to do to the fellow citizen. That's how you're to purge sin from you.* [20] *The rest* of the people *will show respect and not do such a sinful thing.* [21] *Don't show mercy: life for life,* ***eye for eye, tooth for tooth*** **[Mt 5:38],** *hand for hand, foot for foot."* [CV]

[2]People get that picture especially from the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke **16**:19-31); it offers the most detailed presentation in the gospels and epistles. They sometimes even take it as an account rather than a parable since the names of primary actors appear in the text. Revelation also uses the burning imagery for the eternal state of the wicked (**14**:9-12, *etc*.).

[3]This essay supposes that resurrection gives us something markedly different from our present physical body. It seems to be more than the resuscitation of a dead corpse; translation or transfiguration apparently will accompany it (Matthew **17**:2-3; Mark **9**:2-4; Luke **9**:29-30). The Apostle Paul addresses the question in 1 Corinthians **15**:35-54. He describes the resurrected body as a heavenly, immortal, celestial, incorruptible, spiritual body that differs from our present body like a grain of wheat differs from the plant that grows from it—continuity of identity with change of constitution. That variance involves not marrying or possessing sexuality as Jesus told the Sadducees (Matthew **22**:30-32). As a group, the apostle's descriptors seem to indicate a non-corporeal entity that would not feel physical torture as by fire. Those features make resurrection more than the immortality of the soul, a belief among the Greeks that left them rejecting resurrection (Acts **17**:32). At the same time, our speculations admittedly would involve corporeal experience if we were to feel the physical suffering that we have caused other people; those punishments would have to come by positive action on God's part. At least such suffering would seem justified!

This picture leaves unaddressed the incidents in Jesus' resurrection appearances where he appeared in a locked room, ate fish, showed the "healed" scars from his crucifixion and the final spear thrust, could be touched, and could ascend into the sky. The apologetic element in those appearances complicates comparing his and our resurrected conditions and what punishments they might make natural.

If non-corporeality in the resurrection proves to be a false inference, that fact neutralizes some comments in #3 above and in the final paragraph of main text. The other observations still stand, however, in speculations about punishment in hell that is not endless torture for everyone alike.