

Hell

GET THE CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA ON CD-ROM



This entire website is available on CD-ROM.
Includes the Catholic Encyclopedia,
Church Fathers, Summa, Bible and more...
SALE: 50% off if you buy now...
FREE Shipping Worldwide...

[Click here...](#)

This subject is treated under eight headings:

- Name and Place of Hell
- Existence of Hell
- Eternity of Hell
- Impenitence of the Damned
- Poena Damni
- Poena Sensus
- Accidental Pains of the Damned
- Characteristics of the Pains of Hell

The term *hell* is cognate to "hole" (cavern) and "hollow". It is a substantive formed from the Anglo-Saxon *helan* or *behelian*, "to hide". This verb has the same primitive as the Latin *occulere* and *celare* and the Greek *kalyptein*. Thus by derivation hell denotes a dark and hidden place. In ancient Norse mythology Hel is the ill-favoured goddess of the underworld. Only those who fall in battle can enter Valhalla; the rest go down to Hel in the underworld, not all, however, to the place of punishment of criminals.

Hell (*infernus*) in theological usage is a place of punishment after death. Theologians distinguish four meanings of the term *hell*:

- hell in the strict sense, or the place of punishment for the damned, be they demons or men;
- the limbo of infants (*limbus parvulorum*), where those who die in original sin alone, and without personal mortal sin, are confined and undergo some kind of punishment;
- the limbo of the Fathers (*limbus patrum*), in which the souls of the just who died before Christ awaited their admission to heaven; for in the meantime heaven was closed against them in punishment for the sin of Adam;

- purgatory, where the just, who die in venial sin or who still owe a debt of temporal punishment for sin, are cleansed by suffering before their admission to heaven.

The present article treats only of hell in the strict sense of the term.

The Latin *infernus* (*inferum, inferi*), the Greek *Hades*, and the Hebrew *sheol* correspond to the word *hell*. *Infernus* is derived from the root *in*; hence it designates hell as a place within and below the earth. *Haidēs*, formed from the root *fid*, to see, and *a* privative, denotes an invisible, hidden, and dark place; thus it is similar to the term *hell*. The derivation of *sheol* is doubtful. It is generally supposed to come from the Hebrew root meaning, "to be sunk in, to be hollow"; accordingly it denotes a cave or a place under the earth. In the Old Testament (Septuagint *hades*; Vulgate *infernus*) *sheol* is used quite in general to designate the kingdom of the dead, of the good (Genesis 37:35) as well as of the bad (Numbers 16:30); it means hell in the strict sense of the term, as well as the limbo of the Fathers. But, as the limbo of the Fathers ended at the time of Christ's Ascension, *hades* (Vulgate *infernus*) in the New Testament always designates the hell of the damned. Since Christ's Ascension the just no longer go down to the lower world, but they dwell in heaven (2 Corinthians 5:1). However, in the New Testament the term *Gehenna* is used more frequently in preference to *hades*, as a name for the place of punishment of the damned. *Gehenna* is the Hebrew *gê-hinnom* (Nehemiah 11:30), or the longer form *gê-ben-hinnom* (Joshua 15:8), and *gê-benê-hinnom* (2 Kings 23:10) "valley of the sons of Hinnom". Hinnom seems to be the name of a person not otherwise known. The Valley of Hinnom is south of Jerusalem and is now called Wadi er-rababi. It was notorious as the scene, in earlier days, of the horrible worship of Moloch. For this reason it was defiled by Josias (2 Kings 23:10), cursed by Jeremias (Jeremiah 7:31-33), and held in abomination by the Jews, who, accordingly, used the name of this valley to designate the abode of the damned (Targ. Jon., Gen., iii, 24; Henoch, c. xxvi). And Christ adopted this usage of the term. Besides *Hades* and *Gehenna*, we find in the New Testament many other names for the abode of the damned. It is called "lower hell" (Vulgate *tartarus*) (2 Peter 2:4), "abyss" (Luke 8:31 and elsewhere), "place of torments" (Luke 16:28), "pool of fire" (Revelation 19:20 and elsewhere), "furnace of fire" (Matthew 13:42, 50), "unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12, and elsewhere), "everlasting fire" (Matthew 18:8; 25:41; Jude 7), "exterior darkness" (Matthew 7:12; 22:13; 25:30), "mist" or "storm of darkness" (2 Peter 2:17; Jude 13). The state of the damned is called "destruction" (*apoleia*, Philippians 3:19 and elsewhere), "perdition" (*olethros*, 1 Timothy 6:9), "eternal destruction" (*olethros aionios*, 2 Thessalonians 1:9), "corruption" (*phthora*, Galatians 6:8), "death" (Romans 6:21), "second death" (Revelation 2:11 and elsewhere).

Where is hell? Some were of opinion that hell is everywhere, that the damned are at liberty to roam about in the entire universe, but that they carry their punishment with them. The adherents of this doctrine were called Ubiquists, or Ubiquitarians; among them were, e.g., Johann Brenz, a Swabian, a Protestant theologian of the sixteenth century. However, that opinion is universally and deservedly rejected; for it is more in keeping with their state of punishment that the damned be limited in their movements and confined to a definite place. Moreover, if hell is a real fire, it cannot be everywhere, especially after the consummation of the world, when heaven and earth shall have been made anew. As to its locality all kinds of conjectures have been made; it has been suggested that hell is situated on some far island of the sea, or at the two poles of the earth; Swinden, an Englishman of the eighteenth century, fancied it was in the sun; some assigned it to the moon, others to Mars; others placed it beyond the confines of the universe [Wiest, "Instit. theol.", VI (1789), 869]. The Bible seems to indicate that hell is within the earth, for it describes hell as an abyss to which the wicked descend. We even read of the earth opening and of the wicked sinking down into hell (Numbers 16:31 sqq.; Psalm 54:16; Isaiah 5:14; Ezekiel 26:20; Philippians 2:10, etc.). Is this merely a metaphor to illustrate the state of separation from God? Although God is omnipresent, He is said to dwell in heaven, because

the light and grandeur of the stars and the firmament are the brightest manifestations of His infinite splendour. But the damned are utterly estranged from God; hence their abode is said to be as remote as possible from his dwelling, far from heaven above and its light, and consequently hidden away in the dark abysses of the earth. However, no cogent reason has been advanced for accepting a metaphorical interpretation in preference to the most natural meaning of the words of Scripture. Hence theologians generally accept the opinion that hell is really within the earth. The Church has decided nothing on this subject; hence we may say hell is a definite place; but where it is, we do not know. St. Chrysostom reminds us: "We must not ask where hell is, but how we are to escape it" (In Rom., hom. xxxi, n. 5, in P.G., LX, 674). St. Augustine says: "It is my opinion that the nature of hell-fire and the location of hell are known to no man unless the Holy Ghost made it known to him by a special revelation", (*City of God* XX.16). Elsewhere he expresses the opinion that hell is under the earth (Retract., II, xxiv, n. 2 in P.L., XXXII, 640). St. Gregory the Great wrote: "I do not dare to decide this question. Some thought hell is somewhere on earth; others believe it is under the earth" (Dial., IV, xlii, in P.L., LXXVII, 400; cf. Patuzzi, "De sede inferni", 1763; Gretser, "De subterraneis animarum receptaculis", 1595).

Existence of hell

There is a hell, i.e. all those who die in personal mortal sin, as enemies of God, and unworthy of eternal life, will be severely punished by God after death. On the nature of mortal sin, see SIN; on the immediate beginning of punishment after death, see PARTICULAR JUDGMENT. As to the fate of those who die free from personal mortal sin, but in original sin, see LIMBO (*limbus parvulorum*).

The existence of hell is, of course, denied by all those who deny the existence of God or the immortality of the soul. Thus among the Jew the Sadducees, among the Gnostics, the Seleucians, and in our own time Materialists, Pantheists, etc., deny the existence of hell. But apart from these, if we abstract from the eternity of the pains of hell, the doctrine has never met any opposition worthy of mention.

The existence of hell is proved first of all from the Bible. Wherever Christ and the Apostles speak of hell they presuppose the knowledge of its existence (Matthew 5:29; 8:12; 10:28; 13:42; 25:41, 46; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Revelation 21:8, etc.). A very complete development of the Scriptural argument, especially in regard to the Old Testament, may be found in Atzberger's "Die christliche Eschatologie in den Stadien ihrer Offenbarung im Alten und Neuen Testament", Freiburg, 1890. Also the Fathers, from the very earliest times, are unanimous in teaching that the wicked will be punished after death. And in proof of their doctrine they appeal both to Scripture and to reason (cf. Ignatius, "Ad Eph.", v, 16; "Martyrium s. Polycarpi", ii, n. 3; xi, n.2; Justin, "Apol.", II, n. 8 in P.G., VI, 458; Athenagoras, "De resurr. mort.", c. xix, in P.G., VI, 1011; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.27.2; Tertullian, "Adv. Marc.", I, c. xxvi, in P.L., IV, 277). For citations from this patristic teaching see Atzberger, "Gesh. der christl. Eschatologie innerhalb der vornicanischen Zeit" (Freiburg, 1896); Petavius, "De Angelis", III, iv sqq.

The Church professes her faith in the Athanasian Creed: "They that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire" (Denzinger, "Enchiridion", 10th ed., 1908, n.40). The Church has repeatedly defined this truth, e.g. in the profession of faith made in the Second Council of Lyons (Denx., n. 464) and in the Decree of Union in the Council of Florence (Denz., N. 693): "the souls of those who depart in mortal sin, or only in original sin, go down immediately into hell, to be visited, however, with unequal punishments" (*poenis disparibus*).

If we abstract from the eternity of its punishment, the existence of hell can be demonstrated even by the light of mere reason. In His sanctity and justice as well as in His wisdom, God must avenge the violation of the moral order in such wise as to preserve, at least in general, some proportion between the gravity of sin and the severity of punishment. But it is evident from experience that God does not always do this on earth; therefore He will inflict punishment after death. Moreover, if all men were fully convinced that the sinner need fear no kind of punishment after death, moral and social order would be seriously menaced. This, however, Divine wisdom cannot permit. Again, if there were no retribution beyond that which takes place before our eyes here on earth, we should have to consider God extremely indifferent to good and evil, and we could in no way account for His justice and holiness. Nor can it be said: the wicked will be punished, but not by any positive infliction: for either death will be the end of their existence, or, forfeiting the rich reward of the good, they will enjoy some lesser degree of happiness. These are arbitrary and vain subterfuges, unsupported by any sound reason; positive punishment is the natural recompense of evil. Besides, due proportion between demerit and punishment would be rendered impossible by an indiscriminate annihilation of all the wicked. And finally, if men knew that their sins would not be followed by sufferings, the mere threat of annihilation at the moment of death, and still less the prospect of a somewhat lower degree of beatitude, would not suffice to deter them from sin.

Furthermore, reason easily understands that in the next life the just will be made happy as a reward of their virtue (*see* HEAVEN). But the punishment of evil is the natural counterpart of the reward of virtue. Hence, there will also be punishment for sin in the next life. Accordingly, we find among all nations the belief that evil-doers will be punished after death. This universal conviction of mankind is an additional proof for the existence of hell. For it is impossible that, in regard to the fundamental questions of their being and their destiny, all men should fall into the same error; else the power of human reason would be essentially deficient, and the order of this world would be unduly wrapt in mystery; this however, is repugnant both to nature and to the wisdom of the Creator. On the belief of all nations in the existence of hell cf. Lüken, "Die Traditionen des Menschengeschlechts" (2nd ed., Münster, 1869); Knabenbauer, "Das Zeugnis des Menschengeschlechts für die Unsterblichkeit der Seele" (1878). The few men who, despite the morally universal conviction of the human race, deny the existence of hell, are mostly atheists and Epicureans. But if the view of such men in the fundamental question of our being could be the true one, apostasy would be the way to light, truth, and wisdom.

Eternity of hell

Many admit the existence of hell, but deny the eternity of its punishment. Conditionalists hold only a hypothetical immortality of the soul, and assert that after undergoing a certain amount of punishment, the souls of the wicked will be annihilated. Among the Gnostics the Valentinians held this doctrine, and later on also Arnobius, the Socinians, many Protestants both in the past and in our own times, especially of late (Edw. White, "Life in Christ", New York, 1877). The Universalists teach that in the end all the damned, at least all human souls, will attain beatitude (*apokatastasis ton panton, restitutio omnium*, according to Origen). This was a tenet of the Origenists and the Misericordes of whom St. Augustine speaks (*City of God* XXI.18). There were individual adherents of this opinion in every century, e.g. Scotus Eriugena; in particular, many rationalistic Protestants of the last centuries defended this belief, e.g. in England, Farrar, "Eternal Hope" (five sermons preached in Westminster Abbey, London and New York, 1878). Among Catholics, Hirscher and Schell have recently expressed the opinion that those who do not die in the state of grace can still be converted after death if they are not too wicked and impenitent.

The Holy Bible is quite explicit in teaching the eternity of the pains of hell. The torments of the damned shall last forever and ever (Revelation 14:11; 19:3; 20:10). They are everlasting just as are the joys of heaven (Matthew 25:46). Of Judas Christ says: "it were better for him, if that man had not been born" (Matthew 26:24). But this would not have been true if Judas was ever to be released from hell and admitted to eternal happiness. Again, God says of the damned: "Their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched" (Isaiah 66:24; Mark 9:43, 45, 47). The fire of hell is repeatedly called eternal and unquenchable. The wrath of God abideth on the damned (John 3:36); they are vessels of Divine wrath (Romans 9:22); they shall not possess the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:10; Galatians 5:21), etc. The objections adduced from Scripture against this doctrine are so meaningless that they are not worth while discussing in detail. The teaching of the fathers is not less clear and decisive (cf. Patavius, "De Angelis", III, viii). We merely call to mind the testimony of the martyrs who often declared that they were glad to suffer pain of brief duration in order to escape eternal torments; e.g. "Martyrium Polycarpi", c. ii (cf. Atzberger, "Geschichte", II, 612 sqq.). It is true that Origen fell into error on this point; but precisely for this error he was condemned by the Church (Canones adv. Origenem ex Justiniani libro adv. Origen., can. ix; Hardouin, III, 279 E; Denz., n. 211). In vain attempts were made to undermine the authority of these canons (cf. Dickamp, "Die origenistischen Streitigkeiten", Münster, 1899, 137). Besides even in Origen we find the orthodox teaching on the eternity of the pains of hell; for in his words the faithful Christian was again and again victorious over the doubting philosopher. Gregory of Nyssa seems to have favoured the errors of Origen; many, however, believe that his statements can be shown to be in harmony with Catholic doctrine. But the suspicions that have been cast on some passages of Gregory of Nazianzus and Jerome are decidedly without justification (cf. Pesch, "Theologische Zeitfragen", 2nd series, 190 sqq.). The Church professes her faith in the eternity of the pains of hell in clear terms in the Athanasian Creed (Denz., nn. 40), in authentic doctrinal decisions (Denz., nn. 211, 410, 429, 807, 835, 915), and in countless passages of her liturgy; she never prays for the damned. Hence, beyond the possibility of doubt, the Church expressly teaches the eternity of the pains of hell as a truth of faith which no one can deny or call in question without manifest heresy.

But what is the attitude of mere reason towards this doctrine? Just as God must appoint some fixed term for the time of trial, after which the just will enter into the secure possession of a happiness that can never again be lost in all eternity, so it is likewise appropriate that after the expiration of that term the wicked will be cut off from all hope of conversion and happiness. For the malice of men cannot compel God to prolong the appointed time of probation and to grant them again and again, without end, the power of deciding their lot for eternity. Any obligation to act in this manner would be unworthy of God, because it would make Him dependent on the caprice of human malice, would rob His threats in great part of their efficacy, and would offer the amplest scope and the strongest incentive to human presumption. God has actually appointed the end of this present life, or the moment of death, as the term of man's probation. For in that moment there takes place in our life an essential and momentous change; from the state of union with the body the soul passes into a life apart. No other sharply defined instant of our life is of like importance. Hence we must conclude that death is the end of our probation; for it is meet that our trial should terminate at a moment of our existence so prominent and significant as to be easily perceived by every man. Accordingly, it is the belief of all people that eternal retribution is dealt out immediately after death. This conviction of mankind is an additional proof of our thesis.

Finally, the preservation of moral and social order would not be sufficiently provided for, if men knew that the time of trial were to be continued after death.

Many believe that reason cannot give any conclusive proof for the eternity of the pains of hell, but that it can merely show that this doctrine does not involve any contradiction. Since the Church has made no decision on this point, each one is entirely free to embrace this opinion. As is apparent, the author of this article does not hold it. We admit that God might have extended the time of trial beyond death; however, had He done so, He would have permitted man to know about it, and would have made corresponding provision for the maintenance of moral order in this life. We may further admit that it is not intrinsically impossible for God to annihilate the sinner after some definite amount of punishment; but this would be less in conformity with the nature of man's immortal soul; and, secondly, we know of no fact that might give us any right to suppose God will act in such a manner.

The objection is made that there is no proportion between the brief moment of sin and an eternal punishment. But why not? We certainly admit a proportion between a momentary good deed and its eternal reward, not, it is true, a proportion of duration, but a proportion between the law and its appropriate sanction. Again, sin is an offence against the infinite authority of God, and the sinner is in some way aware of this, though but imperfectly. Accordingly there is in sin an approximation to infinite malice which deserves an eternal punishment. Finally, it must be remembered that, although the act of sinning is brief, the guilt of sin remains forever; for in the next life the sinner never turns away from his sin by a sincere conversion. It is further objected that the sole object of punishment must be to reform the evil-doer. This is not true. Besides punishments inflicted for correction, there are also punishments for the satisfaction of justice. But justice demands that whoever departs from the right way in his search for happiness shall not find his happiness, but lose it. The eternity of the pains of hell responds to this demand for justice. And, besides, the fear of hell does really deter many from sin; and thus, in as far as it is threatened by God, eternal punishment also serves for the reform of morals. But if God threatens man with the pains of hell, He must also carry out His threat if man does not heed it by avoiding sin.

For solving other objections it should be noted:

- God is not only infinitely good, He is infinitely wise, just, and holy.
- No one is cast into hell unless he has fully and entirely deserved it.
- The sinner perseveres forever in his evil disposition.
- We must not consider the eternal punishment of hell as a series of separate or distinct terms of punishment, as if God were forever again and again pronouncing a new sentence and inflicting new penalties, and as if He could never satisfy His desire of vengeance. Hell is, especially in the eyes of God, one and indivisible in its entirety; it is but one sentence and one penalty. We may represent to ourselves a punishment of indescribable intensity as in a certain sense the equivalent of an eternal punishment; this may help us to see better how God permits the sinner to fall into hell — how a man who sets at naught all Divine warnings, who fails to profit by all the patient forbearance God has shown him, and who in wanton disobedience is absolutely bent on rushing into eternal punishment, can be finally permitted by God's just indignation to fall into hell.

In itself, it is no rejection of Catholic dogma to suppose that God might at times, by way of exception, liberate a soul from hell. Thus some argued from a false interpretation of 1 Peter 3:19 sq., that Christ freed several damned souls on the occasion of His descent into hell. Others were misled by untrustworthy stories into the belief that the prayers of Gregory the Great rescued the Emperor Trajan from hell. But now theologians are unanimous in teaching that such exceptions never take place and never have taken place, a teaching which should be accepted. If this be true, how can the Church pray in the Offertory of the Mass for the dead: "Libera animas omnium fidelium defunctorum de poenis inferni et de profundo lacu" etc.? Many think the Church uses these words to designate purgatory.

They can be explained more readily, however, if we take into consideration the peculiar spirit of the Church's liturgy; sometimes she refers her prayers not to the time at which they are said, but to the time for which they are said. Thus the offertory in question is referred to the moment when the soul is about to leave the body, although it is actually said some time after that moment; and as if he were actually at the death-beds of the faithful, the priest implores God to preserve their souls from hell. But whichever explanation be preferred, this much remains certain, that in saying that offertory the Church intends to implore only those graces which the soul is still capable of receiving, namely, the grace of a happy death or the release from purgatory.

Impenitence of the damned

The damned are confirmed in evil; every act of their will is evil and inspired by hatred of God. This is the common teaching of theology; St. Thomas sets it forth in many passages. Nevertheless, some have held the opinion that, although the damned cannot perform any supernatural action, they are still able to perform, now and then, some naturally good deed; thus far the Church has not condemned this opinion. The author of this article maintains that the common teaching is the true one; for in hell the separation from the sanctifying power of Divine love is complete. Many assert that this inability to do good works is physical, and assign the withholding of all grace as its proximate cause; in doing so, they take the term grace in its widest meaning, i.e. every Divine co-operation both in natural and in supernatural good actions. The damned, then, can never choose between acting out of love of God and virtue, and acting out of hatred of God. Hatred is the only motive in their power; and they have no other choice than that of showing their hatred of God by one evil action in preference to another. The last and the real cause of their impenitence is the state of sin which they freely chose as their portion on earth and in which they passed, unconverted, into the next life and into that state of permanence (*status termini*) by nature due to rational creatures, and to an unchangeable attitude of mind. Quite in consonance with their final state, God grants them only such cooperation as corresponds to the attitude which they freely chose as their own in this life. Hence the damned can but hate God and work evil, whilst the just in heaven or in purgatory, being inspired solely by love of God, can but do good. Therefore, too, the works of the reprobate, in as far as they are inspired by hatred of God, are not formal, but only material sins, because they are performed without the liberty requisite for moral imputability. Formal sin the reprobate commits then only, when, from among several actions in his power, he deliberately chooses that which contains the greater malice. By such formal sins the damned do not incur any essential increase of punishment, because in that final state the very possibility and Divine permission of sin are in themselves a punishment; and, moreover, a sanction of the moral law would be quite meaningless.

From what has been said it follows that the hatred which the lost soul bears to God is voluntary in its cause only; and the cause is the deliberate sin which it committed on earth and by which it merited reprobation. It is also obvious that God is not responsible for the reprobate's material sins of hate, because by granting His co-operation in their sinful acts as well as by refusing them every incitement to good, He acts quite in accordance with the nature of their state. Therefore their sins are no more imputable to God than are the blasphemies of a man in the state of total intoxication, although they are not uttered without Divine assistance. The reprobate carries in himself the primary cause of impenitence; it is the guilt of sin which he committed on earth and with which he passed into eternity. The proximate cause of impenitence in hell is God's refusal of every grace and every impulse for good. It would not be intrinsically impossible for God to move the damned to repentance; yet such a course would be out of keeping with the state of final reprobation. The opinion that the Divine refusal of all grace and of every incitement to good is the proximate cause of impenitence, is upheld by many theologians, and in particular by Molina. Francisco Suárez considers it probable. Scotus and Vasquez

hold similar views. Even the Fathers and St. Thomas may be understood in this sense. Thus St. Thomas teaches (De verit., Q. xxiv, a.10) that the chief cause of impenitence is Divine justice which refuses the damned every grace. Nevertheless many theologians, e.g. Francisco Suárez, defend the opinion that the damned are only morally incapable of good; they have the physical power, but the difficulties in their way are so great that they can never be surmounted. The damned can never divert their attention from their frightful torments, and at the same time they know that all hope is lost to them. Hence despair and hatred of God, their just Judge, is almost inevitable, and even the slightest good impulse becomes morally impossible. The Church has not decided this question. The present author prefers Molina's opinion.

But if the damned are impenitent, how can Scripture (Wisdom 5) say they repent of their sin? They deplore with the utmost intensity the punishment, but not the malice of sin; to this they cling more tenaciously than ever. Had they an opportunity, they would commit the sin again, not indeed for the sake of its gratification, which they found illusive, but out of sheer hatred of God. They are ashamed of their folly which led them to seek happiness in sin, but not of the malice of sin itself (St. Thomas, Theol. comp., c. cxxv).

Poena damni

The *poena damni*, or pain of loss, consists in the loss of the beatific vision and in so complete a separation of all the powers of the soul from God that it cannot find in Him even the least peace and rest. It is accompanied by the loss of all supernatural gifts, e.g. the loss of faith. The characters impressed by the sacraments alone remain to the greater confusion of the bearer. The pain of loss is not the mere absence of superior bliss, but it is also a most intense positive pain. The utter void of the soul made for the enjoyment of infinite truth and infinite goodness causes the reprobate immeasurable anguish. Their consciousness that God, on Whom they entirely depend, is their enemy forever is overwhelming. Their consciousness of having by their own deliberate folly forfeited the highest blessings for transitory and delusive pleasures humiliates and depresses them beyond measure. The desire for happiness inherent in their very nature, wholly unsatisfied and no longer able to find any compensation for the loss of God in delusive pleasure, renders them utterly miserable. Moreover, they are well aware that God is infinitely happy, and hence their hatred and their impotent desire to injure Him fills them with extreme bitterness. And the same is true with regard to their hatred of all the friends of God who enjoy the bliss of heaven. The pain of loss is the very core of eternal punishment. If the damned beheld God face to face, hell itself, notwithstanding its fire, would be a kind of heaven. Had they but some union with God even if not precisely the union of the beatific vision, hell would no longer be hell, but a kind of purgatory. And yet the pain of loss is but the natural consequence of that aversion from God which lies in the nature of every mortal sin.

Poena sensus

The *poena sensus*, or pain of sense, consists in the torment of fire so frequently mentioned in the Holy Bible. According to the greater number of theologians the term *fire* denotes a material fire, and so a real fire. We hold to this teaching as absolutely true and correct. However, we must not forget two things: from Catharinus (d. 1553) to our times there have never been wanting theologians who interpret the Scriptural term fire metaphorically, as denoting an incorporeal fire; and secondly, thus far the Church has not censured their opinion. Some few of the Fathers also thought of a metaphorical explanation. Nevertheless, Scripture and tradition speak again and again of the fire of hell, and there is no sufficient reason for taking the term as a mere metaphor. It is urged: How can a material fire torment demons, or human souls before the resurrection of the body? But, if our soul is so joined to

the body as to be keenly sensitive to the pain of fire, why should the omnipotent God be unable to bind even pure spirits to some material substance in such a manner that they suffer a torment more or less similar to the pain of fire which the soul can feel on earth? The reply indicates, as far as possible, how we may form an idea of the pain of fire which the demons suffer. Theologians have elaborated various theories on this subject, which, however, we do not wish to detail here (cf. the very minute study by Franz Schmid, "Quaestiones selectae ex theol. dogm.", Paderborn, 1891, q. iii; also Guthberlet, "Die poena sensus" in "Katholik", II, 1901, 305 sqq., 385 sqq.).

It is quite superfluous to add that the nature of hell-fire is different from that of our ordinary fire; for instance, it continues to burn without the need of a continually renewed supply of fuel. How are we to form a conception of that fire in detail remains quite undetermined; we merely know that it is corporeal. The demons suffer the torment of fire, even when, by Divine permission, they leave the confines of hell and roam about on earth. In what manner this happens is uncertain. We may assume that they remain fettered inseparably to a portion of that fire.

The pain of sense is the natural consequence of that inordinate turning to creatures which is involved in every mortal sin. It is meet that whoever seeks forbidden pleasure should find pain in return. (Cf. Heuse, "Das Feuer der Hölle" in "Katholik", II, 1878, 225 sqq., 337 sqq., 486 sqq., 581 sqq.; "Etudes religieuses", L, 1890, II, 309, report of an answer of the Poenitentiaria, 30 April, 1890; Knabenbauer, "In Matth., xxv, 41".)

Accidental pains of the damned

According to theologians the pain of loss and the pain of sense constitute the very essence of hell, the former being by far the most dreadful part of eternal punishment. But the damned also suffer various "accidental" punishments.

- Just as the blessed in heaven are free from all pain, so, on the other hand, the damned never experience even the least real pleasure. In hell separation from the blissful influence of Divine love has reached its consummation.
- The reprobate must live in the midst of the damned; and their outbursts of hatred or of reproach as they gloat over his sufferings, and their hideous presence, are an ever fresh source of torment.
- The reunion of soul and body after the Resurrection will be a special punishment for the reprobate, although there will be no essential change in the pain of sense which they are already suffering.

As to the punishments visited upon the damned for their venial sins, cf. Francisco Suárez, "De peccatis", disp. vii, s. 4.

Characteristics of the pains of hell

(1) The pains of hell differ in degree according to demerit. This holds true not only of the pain of sense, but also of the pain of loss. A more intense hatred of God, a more vivid consciousness of utter abandonment by Divine goodness, a more restless craving to satisfy the natural desire for beatitude with things external to God, a more acute sense of shame and confusion at the folly of having sought happiness in earthly enjoyment — all this implies as its correlation a more complete and more painful separation from God.

(2) The pains of hell are essentially immutable; there are no temporary intermissions or passing alleviations. A few Fathers and theologians, in particular the poet Prudentius, expressed the opinion that on stated days God grants the damned a certain respite, and that besides this the prayers of the faithful obtain for them other occasional intervals of rest. The Church has never condemned this opinion in express terms. But now theologians are justly unanimous in rejecting it. St. Thomas condemns it severely (In IV Sent., dist. xlv, Q. xxix, cl. 1). [Cf. Merkle, "Die Sabbatruhe in der Hölle" in "Romische Quartalschrift" (1895), 489 sqq.; see also Prudentius.]

However, accidental changes in the pains of hell are not excluded. Thus it may be that the reprobate is sometimes more and sometimes less tormented by his surroundings. Especially after the last judgment there will be an accidental increase in punishment; for then the demons will never again be permitted to leave the confines of hell, but will be finally imprisoned for all eternity; and the reprobate souls of men will be tormented by union with their hideous bodies.

(3) Hell is a state of the greatest and most complete misfortune, as is evident from all that has been said. The damned have no joy whatever, and it were better for them if they had not been born (Matthew 26:24). Not long ago Mivart (The Nineteenth Century, Dec., 1892, Febr. and Apr., 1893) advocated the opinion that the pains of the damned would decrease with time and that in the end their lot would not be so extremely sad; that they would finally reach a certain kind of happiness and would prefer existence to annihilation; and although they would still continue to suffer a punishment symbolically described as a fire by the Bible, yet they would hate God no longer, and the most unfortunate among them be happier than many a pauper in this life. It is quite obvious that all this is opposed to Scripture and the teaching of the Church. The articles cited were condemned by the Congregation of the Index and the Holy Office on 14 and 19 July, 1893 (cf. "Civiltà Cattolica", I, 1893, 672).



Sources

PETER LOMBARD, *IV sent.*, dist. xlv, xlvi, and his commentators; ST. THOMAS, I:64 and Supplement 9:97, and his commentators; SUAREZ, *De Angelis*, VIII; PATUZZI, *De futuro impiorum statu* (Verona, 1748-49; Venice, 1764); PASSAGLIA, *De aeternitate poenarum deque igne inferno* (Rome, 1854); CLARKE, *Eternal Punishment and Infinite Love in The Month*, XLIV (1882), 1 sqq., 195 sqq., 305 sqq.; RIETH, *Der moderne Unglaube und die ewigen Strafen in Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, XXXI (1886), 25 sqq., 136 sqq.; SCHEEBEN-KÜPPER, *Die Mysterien des Christenthums* (2nd ed., Freiburg, 1898), sect. 97; TOURNEBIZE, *Opinions du jour sur les peines d'Outre-tombe*

(Paris, 1899); JOS. SACHS, *Die ewige Dauer der Höllenstrafen* (Paderborn, 1900); BILLOT, *De n̄vissimis* (Rome, 1902); PESCH, *Praelect. d̄gm.*, IX (2nd. ed., Freiburg, 1902), 303 sqq.; HURTER, *Compendium thēl. d̄gm.*, III (11th ed., Innsbruck, 1903), 603 sqq.; STUFLER, *Die Heiligkeit Ḡttes und der ewige T̄d* (Innsbruck, 1903); SCHEEBEN-ATZBERGER, *Handbuch der kath. D̄gmatik*, IV (Freiburg, 1903), sect. 409 sqq.; HEINRICH-GUTBERLET, *D̄gmatische Thēlogie*, X (Münster, 1904), sect. 613 sqq.; BAUTZ, *Die Hölle* (2nd. ed., Mainz, 1905); STUFLER, *Die Thērie der freiwilligen Verst̄cktheit und ihr Verhältnis zur Lehre des hl. Th̄mas v̄n Aquin* (Innsbruck, 1905); various recent manuals of dogmatic theology (POHLE, SPECHT, etc.); HEWIT, *Ignis Aeternus* in *The Cath. World*, LXVII (1893), 1426; BRIDGETT in *Dub. Review*, CXX (1897), 56-69; PORTER, *Eternal Punishment* in *The Month*, July, 1878, p. 338.

About this page

APA citation. Hontheim, J. (1910). Hell. In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Company. Retrieved April 23, 2013 from New Advent:
<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07207a.htm>

MLA citation. Hontheim, Joseph. "Hell." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910. 23 Apr. 2013 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07207a.htm>>.

Transcription. This article was transcribed for New Advent by Michael T. Barrett. Dedicated to the Poor Souls in Purgatory.

Ecclesiastical approbation. *Nihil Obstat*. June 1, 1910. Remy Lafort, S.T.D., Censor. *Imprimatur*.
+John Cardinal Farley, Archbishop of New York.

Contact information. The editor of New Advent is Kevin Knight. My email address is feedback732@newadvent.org. (To help fight spam, this address might change occasionally.) Regrettably, I can't reply to every letter, but I greatly appreciate your feedback — especially notifications about typographical errors and inappropriate ads.