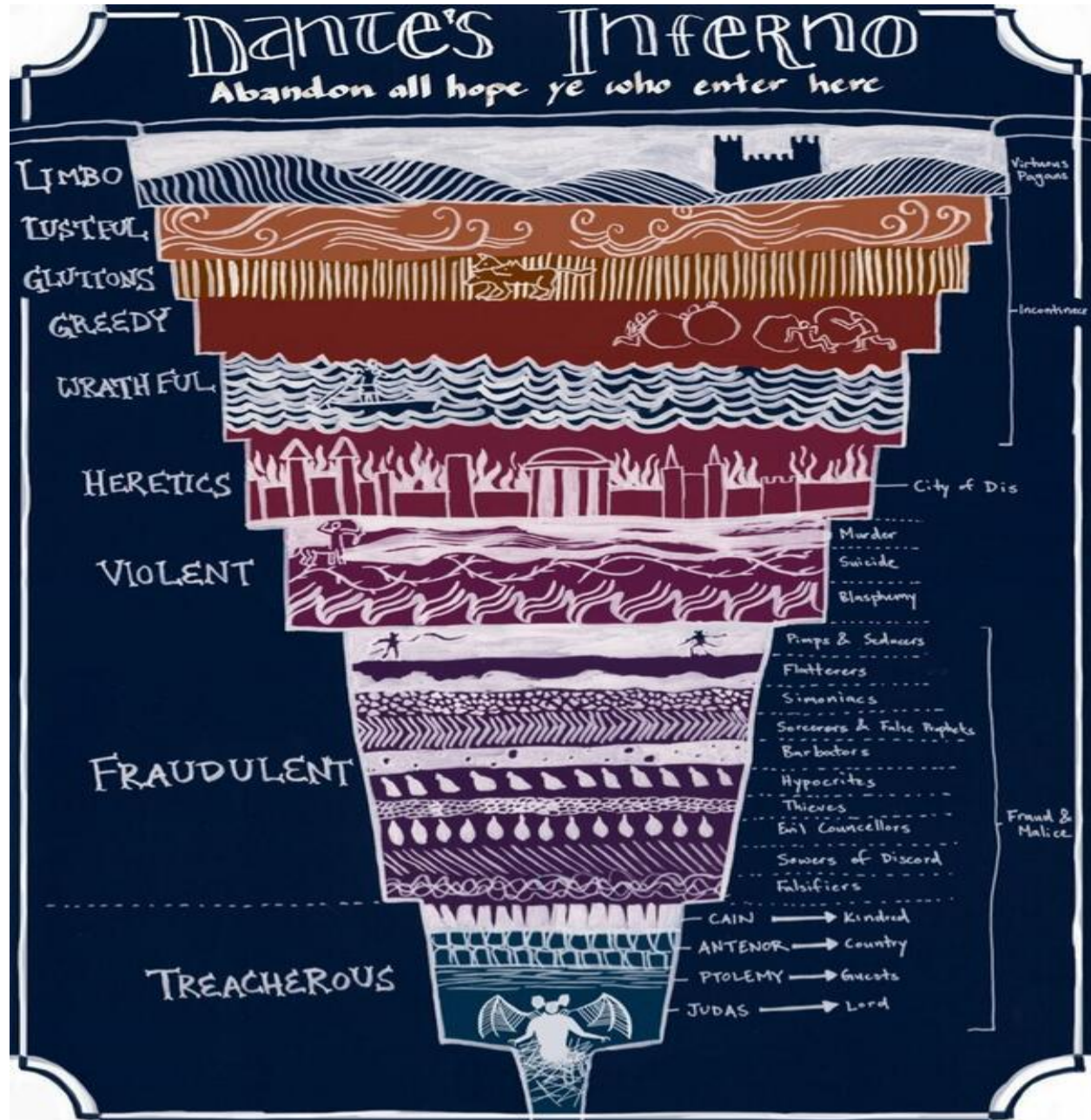


DANTE FOR TODAY!

By David Lee Burris



From Scriptural Support for Perdition's "Punishment By Degree" Derives This Nightmarish Fantasy - D. L. B.



Leading Captivity Captive: Bible Case Study: The Modern Man

IOWA POLL FINDINGS:

Going To End Up In Heaven: 65%

Going To End Up In Hell: 5% 5%

Not Sure Or No Opinion: 30% 30%

Know Other Going To Hell: 31% 1%

goodsalt.com



* 21st Century Harris Poll ~1% Believe Hell Their Destination

**R. H. Savage In 1907 – In his book
“Life After Death” On Page 1035:**

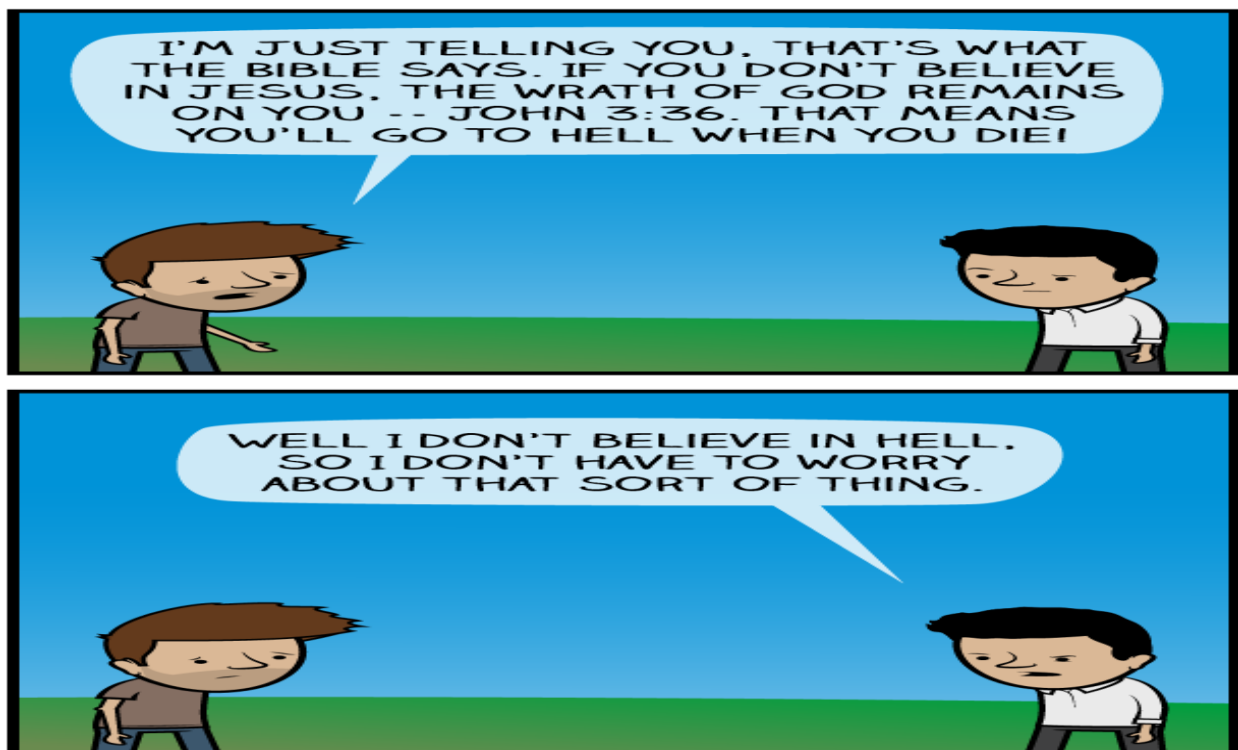
“If the doctrine of eternal punishment was clearly and unmistakably taught in every leaf of the Bible, and on every leaf of all the Bibles of all the world, I could not believe a word of it. I should appeal from these type misconceptions of even the seers and the great men to the infinite and eternal Good, who only is God, and who only on such terms could be worshiped.”

Local Evangelist Max Dawson Recently Reported Of Two Odd But Not Necessarily Unusual Conversations

“He wanted me to know that he was ‘right with the man upstairs.’ However, he went on to say, **‘But if I am not, and I wind up rotting in hell, that is OK with me.’**”

Really? It's OK with you if you rot in hell? How do I respond to that? Nobody in hell will say they are OK with that. I remember, from many years ago, a coworker in the factory said to me, **"I don't want to go to heaven. I would rather be in hell with all my friends. . ."**

Along With Believer Decrease In Hell As Place Is It's Reality As Place of Eternal Punishment!



Hell As Temporary Place of Remedial Punishment **A Concept Borrowed From The Greek Philosophers**

Socrates - Teacher & Mentor - Plato & Aristotle - Said Of Hell:

“But those who appear to be incurable by reason of their crimes – who have committed many and terrible deeds of sacrilege, murders foul & violent, or the like – such are hurried into Tartarus which is their suitable destiny, and they never come out. Those again who have committed crimes, which, although great, are not irremediable ...these are plunged into Hades, the pains of which they are compelled to undergo for a year – but at the end of the year the wave casts them forth – the mere homicides are borne to the Acherusian Lake, and there they lift up their voices and call upon their victims that they have slain or wronged, to have pity on them, and to be kind to them, and let them come out into the lake. And if they prevail – then they come forth and cease from their troubles; but if not, they are carried back again into Tartarus & thence into the rivers unceasingly until they obtain mercy from those they have wronged: for that is the sentence inflicted upon them by their judges.”

Hell As Temporary Place of Remedial Punishment **Greek Concept Adopted By The Alexandrian School**

Jerome's Reporting Of Origen's Teachings:

“Origen’s teaching states that all rational, invisible, non-corporeal creatures [here the angels], if they are careless, little by little slide toward the depths. From the matter toward which they then descend, they take on airy, ethereal bodies with human flesh. Meanwhile, if the demons, who by their own decision under the Devil’s leadership had fell away from the Lord’s service, had just barely come to their senses, they would be dressed in human flesh, so that, each one having done his penance, they would begin to rise in the same circular movement by which they first entered the flesh and would be returned to nearness to God, whereupon they would shed their airy ethereal bodies. And then all things would kneel to the God of the heavens, earth and underworld, and God with us, would be everything.”

Hell As Temporary Place of Remedial Punishment **Augustine's Purgatory From Uninspired Apocrypha**

Purgatory: Doctrinal grounding of Dante's mysterious mountain.

Dante was the first writer to draw an elaborate map of Mount Purgatory, but he did not invent it. The idea of a place between death and heaven, as well as the practice of praying for the dead, dates back to the earliest days of the church.

Though not directly mentioned in the Hebrew canon that became the basis for the Protestant Old Testament, prayers for the departed are encouraged in the Greek Septuagint, on which the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testaments are based. For example, 2 Maccabees states: "It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins." Other verses cited as proof of purification after death include 2 Samuel 12, 1 Corinthians 3:11-15, and Matthew 12:32.

The latter verse, in which Jesus declares that "anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come," struck Augustine. He argued in *City of God*, "That some sinners are not forgiven either in this world or in the next would not be truly said unless there were other [sinners] who, though not forgiven in this world, are forgiven in the world to come."

Words of hope and comfort (precursors to the modern "Rest in Peace") appear on many early Christian monuments, especially in the catacombs. Believers gathered there on death anniversaries to ask mercy for the departed souls. Expansions of this practice, such as granting indulgences for the dead, developed later.

Another aspect of the doctrine of purgatory is that some sins will be punished more severely than others—a concept vividly illustrated in the *Divine Comedy*. The distinction between major and minor sins and the belief in cleansing after death are found in early Christian texts, notably in the visions of Perpetua, a third-century North African martyr. Greek and Latin church fathers of the second and third centuries (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen) refer to these as established doctrines.

Belief in purgatory was widespread throughout the early Latin Middle Ages, but it was not unchallenged. In the fourth century, Arius taught that prayers for the dead were fruitless—an assertion Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, rebutted in his “Refutation of All the Heresies.” Some early Greek (Eastern) theologians also dissented from the emerging consensus on purgatory, while others supported it.

Later in the Middle Ages, the Albigensians, Waldensians, and Hussites all rejected purgatory, though for different reasons. So did John Calvin and to a slightly lesser extent Martin Luther. At the same time, though, Latin theologians were systematically developing the doctrine. It was affirmed after discussions between Latin and Greek theologians at the Second Council of Lyons in 1274.

Purgatory was defined at the Council of Trent in 1545-1563: “Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has from the Sacred Scriptures and the ancient tradition of the Fathers taught in Councils and very recently in this Ecumenical synod that there is a purgatory, and that the souls therein are helped by the suffrages of the faithful, but principally by the acceptable Sacrifice of the Altar.”

Though intricately described by Dante and others, the Catholic doctrine of purgatory boils down to a short list of essentials. Sin estranges us from God. By virtue of Christ’s paying our eternal penalty on the cross, God forgives us. At that moment the guilt and eternal punishment owed for having betrayed him is removed as far from us as east is from west. But the wound remains—not in God, but in us.

God is pure holiness. No imperfection can enter his sight (Hab. 1:13). The temporal traces left behind by sin must be removed before we can enter God’s presence. In purgatory the fire of God’s love burns away the impurities not already removed by devotion to God before death, readying us for God’s presence.

Purgatory is not a second chance to accept or reject God’s ever-proffered grace. Only those who will eventually reach heaven spend time there. Thus, it is not a question of *if* a soul in purgatory will see God, but *when*.¹

¹ Martin, D. (2001). [What about Purgatory?](#) *Christian History Magazine-Issue 70: Dante’s Guide to Heaven and Hell*.

Dante's Inferno & Non-existence of Evil

In the *Confessions*, we find that one of the chief questions that pestered the young Augustine was the presence of good and evil in the world. Being, he comes to see, is good and all that is good is being. Sin and evil must therefore “not exist,” that is, they have a purely negative reality. Like a hole torn through a cloth or the absence of sight in the eye that we call blindness, evil can only be understood as an ontological subtraction discerned in the goodness of being.

Dante captures sin as the negation of being most vividly in his depiction of Satan, in Canto 34. At the furthest depth of hell, buried in its icy center, Satan appears as a beast with three faces, a hideous negation of the glory of the Holy Trinity that is God. Despite his disfigured and massive material form, he who was once the most beautiful of angels has been as stripped of spiritual attributes, and minimized in being, as it is possible for something to be and still retain some degree of existence.

Dante's achievement is to reveal that the surprising and exciting features of his hell—the anguished, well-imagined characters, the violent punishments—lead finally to ontological impoverishment, boredom in terror, and a mere absence of being.

But then, in Satan we see that negation almost totally unveiled; we come as close as we can to naked nonexistence.

The idea of evil as a negation of the goodness informs the whole architectonic of Dante's *Inferno* - the form of the poem and the form of Catholic theology seem to be one? - *James Wilson*

A Cathedral of Ideas

From elements of many traditions, Dante fashioned a towering new theology.

Dante wrote his major works in the vernacular in about 1300 and, in so doing, was conscious of taking a momentous step in the history of mankind. He was, of course, the inheritor of Latin scholasticism, but that tradition lay behind him. Apart from Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, ... no theologian writing subsequently in Latin made a really significant contribution to the history of the human spirit...

Dante studied the Schoolmen, just as he studied Aristotle, [Aristotelian philosophers] Averroes and Siger, but when he meets scholasticism in the heights of Paradise, in the sun, in the lowest of the "higher spheres," the impression left on him by the round dance of the "twice twelve teachers of wisdom" (the two groups led by Thomas and Bonaventure) is of the subtle interlocking mechanism of a clock with its chimes, or of a holy mill. And so the Dominican sings the praises of Francis, and the Franciscan praises Dominic.

Finally, Dante, entranced, sees a third round dance detach itself from the other two—"just as on the approach of evening new lights begin to appear in the sky so that the sight seems and seems not real." ... His eyes, overcome, cannot bear the sight, and Beatrice, laughing, draws him on to another sphere. It is not inconceivable that Dante considered himself to be the originator of this new, third theology....

[*The Divine Comedy*], inseparable both from its unique divine mission and from its historical existence, carved out like a statue or monument, Dante regarded as a venture into the new, the unknown. "I want to demonstrate truths that no one else has dared to attempt. For what kind of contribution would it be if a man were merely to prove once again a theorem of Euclid, or to demonstrate for the second time the nature of happiness, which Aristotle has already done?" And he says this at the beginning of *De Monarchia*.²

² [A Cathedral of Ideas](#). (2001). *Christian History Magazine-Issue 70: Dante's Guide to Heaven and Hell*.

Goodness, Gracious(ness), Great Balls of Fire

Visions of eternity just aren't what they used to be.

The modern image of heaven—clouds, harps, and a perpetual Sunday service—is hardly inspiring. Even hell sounds like an improvement. It may be fiery and dark, but interesting people live there, and at least the demons have some fun.

Such views would have seemed ludicrous to Christians in Dante's day. Dante and his contemporaries had inherited rich images of heaven and hell from the Bible, early Christian writings, and the great imaginations of the Middle Ages. These shifting images reflect both the enormous range of human creativity and our ultimate inability to grasp what only God understands.

Biblical descriptions

The Bible mentions heaven frequently and hell rarely. Both are depicted as places with physical characteristics but also as conditions: heaven is a state of being eternally with God in unending love for him and for our neighbors, while hell is a state of being eternally separated from God and neighbor, owing to a person's refusal to accept love.

The Old Testament focuses on the covenant (contract) between the Lord and the community: the people of Israel. For the Hebrews, salvation involved the whole community, not just the individual. As an extension of this community experience, the Hebrews identified heaven with the City of Jerusalem.

The New Testament epistles and gospels say little about the celestial realm. The Book of Revelation contains the most descriptive treatment of heaven: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband" (Rev. 21:1-2).

Revelation continues with more lavish imagery:

“The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. [The angel] measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long. He measured its wall and it was 144 cubits thick, by man’s measurement, which the angel was using. The wall was made of jasper, and the city of pure gold, as pure as glass. The foundations of the city walls were decorated with every kind of precious stone. The first foundation was jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, the fifth sardonyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysophase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each gate made of a single pearl. The great street of the city was of pure gold, like transparent glass” (Revelation 21:16-21).

The New Testament gives no such detailed description of hell, though Jesus says that at the final judgment his father will tell the unrighteous, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41). Jesus also describes hell as “the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30) and, quoting Isaiah, as the place where “their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48).

Revelation adds a few more vivid descriptions of unrepentant sinners’ agony. An angel says of those who receive the beast’s mark, “the smoke of their torment rises for ever and ever,” and they have no rest day or night (Revelation 14:11). Later in the book, death and Hades are “thrown into the lake of fire,” which is “the second death” (Revelation 20:14).

Early church speculations

Of all the early Christian writers and philosophers who expanded the concept of heaven, the most important was Irenaeus (c. 130–200), a bishop, theologian, and opponent of heresies. He summed up the tradition of heaven as it was in his time: Paradise is the beginning, heaven the end. Humanity was created in paradise without flaw but fell through its own deliberate sin; humanity redeemed by Christ is in heaven without flaw.

All the blessed in heaven will see Christ, the glory of the communion of saints. They will dwell in their true home, where with Christ they enjoy eternal peace and comfort.

Hell plays only a minor part in the writing of the orthodox Christian writers. Early apocalyptic [Gnostic] literature, however, which was often unorthodox, greatly amplified and popularized the more vivid aspects of Matthew and Revelation.

For example, the “Apocalypse of Paul,” a widely circulated (and roundly denounced) early fourth-century manuscript, describes the horrors reserved for the damned: “And I saw there a river of fire burning with heat, and in it was a multitude of men and women sunk up to the knees, and other men up to the navel; others also up to the lips and others up to the hair.”

In this account, different types of sinners receive different punishments. “Pits exceeding deep” hold those who refused to trust God, while worms crawl out of the mouth and nostrils of an immoral deacon. The merciless are “clad in rags full of pitch and brimstone of fire, and there were dragons twined about their necks and shoulders and feet, and angels having horns of fire constrained them and smote them and closed up their nostrils.”

Dante was almost certainly familiar with this work.

It was more common for early writers, more spiritual and poetic than theoretical, to describe heaven vividly. Ephraim (306-373), a monk in Syria, wrote:

“If you wish to climb to the top of a tree, its branches range themselves under your feet and invite you to rest in the midst of its bosom, in the green room of its branches, whose floor is strewn with flowers. Who has ever seen the joy at the heart of a tree, with fruits of every taste within reach of your hand? You can wash yourself with its dew and dry yourself with its leaves. A cloud of fruits is over your head and a carpet of flowers beneath your feet. You are anointed with the sap of the tree and inhale its perfume.”

An anonymous “Vision of Paul” from the third or fourth century describes “the third heaven”: “I looked at [the door] and saw that it was a golden gate and that there were two golden pillars before it and two golden tables above the pillars full of letters.”

The “Passion of Perpetua” (203) records the visions of a young mother taken from her family and condemned to die because of her faith in Christ. She saw “a golden ladder of great size stretching up to heaven.... I saw a garden of immense extent, in the midst of which was sitting a white-haired man dressed as a shepherd; he was tall, and he was milking sheep. And he raised his head and looked at me and said, Welcome, child. And he called me and gave me a mouthful of cheese from the sheep he was milking; and I took it with my hands and ate of it, and all those who were standing about said, Amen.”

The most influential theologian of all time, Augustine of Hippo (354-430), expressed his ideas of heaven most fully in his greatest work, *City of God*. He develops the ideas of Paul and John the Evangelist, contrasting the Kingdom of God with the Kingdom of This World.

Augustine is careful about describing heaven, because it is ineffable (unable to be expressed in speech), but he is sure in describing the human need for heaven. At the outset of his other famous book, *Confessions*, he observes that “our heart does not rest until it rests in God,” and in *City* he declares that “God is the font of our beatitude and the goal of our desires.” At the end of *City*, he affirms that there we shall “rest and see, see and love, love and praise.”

Augustine’s heaven is a free and unshakable embrace. Ever here, ever open to those who long for it, heaven is the enjoyment of God and of our fellow lovers of Christ by the whole human person, body and soul. Each of the blessed retains his or her own personality, distinct from God and from others. More important, though, salvation incorporates the whole community of those who love God.

Medieval dreams and nightmares

Augustine’s thought dominated medieval Catholicism as it would Reformation Protestantism. Still, his experiential vision of heaven was hardly the last word on the subject. Bede (673-735), the great English monk, historian, and natural scientist, reports the vision of a man named Drythelm who had returned from the dead:

“When we came to the wall, we were presently, I know not by what means, on the top of it, and within it was a vast and delightful field, so full of fragrant flowers that the odor of its delightful sweetness immediately dispelled the stench of the dark furnace [of hell]. So great was the light in this place that it seemed to exceed the brightness of the day, or the sun in its meridian height. In this field were innumerable assemblies of men in white, and many companies seated together rejoicing.”

In tenth-century Ireland, a Saint Adamnan experienced a remarkable vision of how the blessed in heaven all face God without facing away from one another:

“A gentle folk, most mild, most kindly, lacking in no goodly quality, are they that dwell within that city; for none come there, and none abide there ever, save holy youths, and pilgrims zealous for God. But as for their array and ordinance, hard it is to understand how it is contrived, for none turns back nor side to other, but the ineffable power of God has set, and keeps, them face to face, in ranks and lofty coronets all around the throne, circling it in brightness and bliss, their faces all towards God.”

In 1150, an Irish monk named Tondal had a vivid experience of heaven:

“Looking in, he sees holy men and women like angels, hears their voices more exquisite than any instruments, smells their delightful scent. The firmament above is shining intensely. From it hang golden chains through which are woven silver boughs, and from these hang chalices and cruets, cymbals and bells, lilies and golden orbs. A throng of golden-winged angels flying among these ornaments make sweet music. Now Tondal turns and sees a great tree in a green meadow flocked with lilies and herbs; the tree bears sweet fruit, and birds sing in its branches.”

An angel explains that the tree is the church and that the men and women under its branches are builders and defenders of churches. As with Drythelm before and Dante afterward, the vision ends before Tondal can see God himself.

Hell always played a more vivid role in folk religion than it did in theology. With lurid descriptions of darkness, fire, worms, and torture, hell, the Devil, and death often took on striking, malevolent personalities. For Tondal, as for many other medieval writers, hell became at least as vivid as heaven:

“This horrible being [the Devil] lay prone on an iron grate over burning coals fanned by a great throng of demons. Whenever he breathed, he blew out and scattered the souls of the damned throughout all the regions of hell. And when he breathed back in, he sucked all the souls back and, when they had fallen into the sulphurous smoke of his maw, he chewed them up.”

This sort of dire medieval vision set the tone for Dante’s *Inferno*, whereas medieval theology set the tone for *Paradiso*.

Scholastic insights

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, scholastic theologians, usually university professors, applied rational philosophy to traditional doctrine. Scholasticism culminated at the University of Paris in the brilliant, detailed philosophy of Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

According to the scholastics, our salvation or blessedness—our complete fulfillment, where each person realizes his or her complete potential—cannot consist of any created good, but only of the universal good, which is God. Yet Aquinas and **most scholastics argued against the idea that in heaven we are dissolved in or merged with God.** Rather, we enjoy the beatific vision, which means seeing, understanding, and loving God and his creatures in peace and harmony and with dynamic and growing intensity.

The beatific vision is based in the New Testament: “We shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2), and “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?” (John 14:9–10).

The scholastics attempted a complete, coherent view of the cosmos through philosophy, as Dante did through poetry. But unlike Dante, the scholastics showed little interest in concrete imagery.

For Aquinas, heaven consisted of perfect vision and the satisfaction of all desires, especially desires for delight, honors, knowledge, and security. He writes in the twelfth article of his catechism, “In heaven there will be the happy society of all the blessed, and this society will be especially delightful.” He makes no further attempt to describe it.

Aquinas gives only a slightly more vivid picture of hell, that place where the wicked, separated from God, suffer remorse and despair: “It is the fire of hell which tortures the soul and the body; and this, as the Saints tell us, is the sharpest of all punishments. They shall be ever dying, and yet never die; hence it is called eternal death, for as dying is the bitterest of pains, such will be the lot of those in hell: ‘They are laid in hell like sheep; death shall feed upon them’ [Ps. 49:14].”

The scholastics gave scant attention to imagery because they were primarily interested in the moral, not the physical, cosmos. For them, knowledge of the material world yielded only inferior truth that pointed to the greater truth—theological, moral, and even divine.

By contrast, **the modern worldview assumes that material things are more real than spiritual things.** Perhaps this is why so many people have impoverished ideas about heaven and hell—places they cannot see or touch and therefore fail to imagine. **Visualizing the striking images of Dante and others restores a sense of wonder to the ancient creedal affirmation: “I believe in the resurrection and the life of the world to come.”**³

³ Russell, J. B. (2001). [Goodness, Gracious\(ness\), Great Balls of Fire](#). *Christian History Magazine-Issue 70: Dante’s Guide to Heaven and Hell*.

THE CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL PRESENTS DANTE AS TEACHING TOOL USEFUL IN EVANGELIZING SEEKERS

SYNOPSIS

What can modern and postmodern seekers learn from an epic journey to hell written seven hundred years ago by an Italian poet who was as influenced by Homer, Plato, Aristotle, and Virgil as he was by the Bible? A great deal! In the *Inferno*, Dante lays out four principles about hell and the sinners who dwell there that have the power to speak to and challenge seekers who might not otherwise read a Bible or go to church. **First**, Dante helps us to understand that evil isn't a positive or actual thing in and of itself, but a privation or lack of good. That is why everything that Dante encounters in hell represents a perversion of something on the Earth or in heaven. **Second**, the sinners in hell lack the ability to confess or repent because they have become fixed in their sins; drug addicts or people caught in a life of serial promiscuity find themselves trapped in a self-destructive cage from which they lack the power and desire to escape. **Third**, the sinners are actually eager to enter the inferno, for hell promises to give them exactly what they want: their sin and themselves forever. [Indicated in one of Max Dawson's conversations.] Finally, hell is a sad place that houses for eternity humans who have wasted away their God-given gifts, often by refusing to take part in the historical process through which God works. **Modern seekers cannot understand how a loving God could send someone to hell; Dante can help them to see that hell is, ultimately, something that we choose.**

Of all the traditional doctrines of Christianity, the one that is perhaps most difficult to explain and defend is the doctrine of hell. How, the skeptic asks, can a loving God send someone to hell? Do our sins really merit eternal punishment? Why doesn't God just save everyone? Though answers to these questions can be sought in the great philosophers and theologians – such answers often do not resonate with modern seekers.

Indeed, I have found that Dante's epic poem *Inferno* (c. 1320) can provide a more effective vehicle for helping moderns (and post-moderns) understand and wrestle with the nature of sin, hell, and damnation. Rather than propound a systematic doctrine of the afterlife, Dante takes us deep into the human and divine drama, helping us to see and know sin for what it is and for what it does to us on a spiritual, emotional, and psychological level.

Let us consider four general principles that Dante incarnates for his readers through his fictional but highly imaginative and insightful journey through hell.

HELL IS A PERVERSION

Like Augustine before him, Dante treats evil not as a positive or actual entity but as a privation or lack of good. Too many moderns think of goodness in passive, negative terms. They imagine a good person as someone who sits quietly at home and makes sure not to drink, smoke or sleep around. The truth of the matter is exactly the opposite.

Goodness is the primary and active force; evil is a falling away from good. Goodness is not the absence of evil; evil is an absence of good. Satan is incapable of creating anything; he can only take what God has created and twist or corrupt or destroy it.

In works such as *The City of God*, Augustine explains this theological doctrine in abstract, philosophical terms. In his *Inferno*, Dante lets us experience it dramatically and viscerally.

In Dante's vision of hell, everything is a perversion of something in heaven or on Earth. Thus Satan, whom Dante imagines trapped in ice at the center of the Earth, is depicted as having three heads. Dante depicts him like this because Satan represents, in part, a perversion of the Triune God. Likewise, many of the beasts that guard the levels of hell – the half-man/half-bull Minotaur, the half-man/half-horse Centaurs, and the half-man/half-reptilian Geryon – are composite creatures. As such, they stand as perversions of the Incarnate Christ, who was not half-man and half-God but one person with two complete natures – truly God and truly man.

That hell is a perversion is a truth that greets the reader at the same time it greets Dante and his guide (Virgil). As they pass under the gateway of hell, they read these words inscribed above it: "I am the way into the city of woe. / I am the way to a forsaken people. / I am the way into eternal sorrow" (Canto 3, lines 1-3; John Ciardi translation). Unlike the various "I am" claims that Jesus makes in the Gospel of John – I am the Bread of Life; the Good Shepherd; Light of the World; the Resurrection and the Life; the Way, the Truth, and the Life – the threefold "I am" on the sign leads to death, despair, and damnation. Indeed, the famous last verse of the sign sums up perfectly the consequences of a life given over to sin: "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" (3.9).

Punishment to Fit the Crime

If moderns are to understand hell, then they must first understand what sin does to us. Sin twists and mangles everything that it touches. It does not increase our hope or joy or individuality but rather transforms us into a parody of what we were created to be. In one way or the other, all the punishments in Dante's inferno are themselves perversions, outward embodiments of what sin does to our soul. The Old Testament seems to suggest that leprosy eats away the skin (external) in a way that is analogous to how sin eats away the soul (internal). What is implicit in the Bible is made explicit in Dante's punishments.

That is why the sinners guilty of fortune-telling must march in an endless circle with their heads turned around on their necks "so that the tears that burst from their eyes/ran down the cleft of their buttocks" (20.23-4). Modern readers may be shocked by how explicit and "crude" Dante is in this passage, but he must be so if he is to make plain how sin distorts our God-created humanity. *We were not meant to look forward by means of sorcery but to place our trust and faith in God today and rest our hope on His promises.* When we violate that trust, we put an unnatural twist in our soul that is analogous to unnatural twist in the necks of Dante's fortune-tellers.

Just before meeting the fortunetellers, Dante and Virgil come upon the simoniacs, men who bought and sold church offices for their own profit. Since one of the major roles of the clergy was to perform baptism and chrismation (anointing), Dante fashions for the simoniacs a punishment that perverts both. Thus, the sinners are thrust headfirst ("baptized"), not into water, but into stone. Then, if that were not torment enough, their feet are anointed with burning oil that causes them to kick their legs in ceaseless pain.

Yes, the torments endured by the fortunetellers and simoniacs represent a kind of punishment to fit the crime – getting their just deserts, we might say – but the truth goes deeper than that. The sin does more than bring about the punishment; the sin actually *creates* the punishment. Or, better, since sin cannot create anything, it takes the joy for which we were meant and perverts it into a mockery of that joy.

SINNERS YEARN FOR HELL

Only once we understand the perverse and perverting nature of sin can we move on to understand something shocking upon which Dante insists: that the sinners are *eager* to cross over into hell. According to Greek mythology, dead souls must cross over the river Acheron to get into the underworld, but they cannot cross unless they are ferried over by Charon, the dreadful ferryman of the dead. The reason the ancient Greeks put coins on the eyes of dead bodies was to provide them with payment for Charon, lest they be doomed to wander on the far shore of hades and never find eternal rest.

Since Dante's hell, unlike the Greek hades, is a place of active suffering, one would expect Dante's sinners to stay as far away as possible from Charon. In fact, in Dante's telling, the sinners, though they blame everyone but themselves for their predicament, nevertheless crowd around the ferry. How can this be? What would make the sinners yearn to be taken across the river into a place of punishment and pain?

Dante helps us to understand this seemingly contradictory behavior by describing all the sinners as people who have lost the fear of God. Most people who have some familiarity with the Bible will know that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, but they may not realize that the fear of the Lord is also something that, quite literally, keeps us on track. When we lose a proper reverence and regard for our Creator, we stray off course and fall prey to our own evil lusts and desires.

Borrowing a simile from Virgil's *Aeneid* VI, Dante compares his sinners to migrating birds. Birds do not migrate because they have arrived at a rational decision or because they have chosen a good option over a bad one; they migrate because their instinct drives them to do so. Similarly, when we lose the fear of God, we become slaves to our own base instincts and are driven in directions that cause us grief and pain.

Self-Destructive Behavior

Here is how Dante describes the insidious process in three memorable, if disturbing lines: “And all pass over eagerly, for here / Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so / their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear” (3.121-3). **Is it possible – and not only possible theologically but psychologically as well – that someone could yearn for the very thing he fears? It is, and not just in hell; the insidious process begins on Earth.**

Today we would describe such people as being imprisoned in self-destructive patterns of behavior. Seven hundred years ago, Dante fully understood such patterns and extended them into the afterlife. It is no coincidence that in about half of the punishments in the inferno, the sinners move in a circular motion. Although in heaven the circle does represent perfection, in its perverse, hellish form, it represents futility.

HELL AS NARCISSISM

But that is not surprising, since Dante's hell offers sinners exactly what they want; or, to put it more accurately, it offers them the logical outcome of their choices. Rather than engage in the perennial theological debate between [determinism] and free will, Dante takes us into the twisted souls and desires of his sinners. **The fact of the matter is that none of the sinners want to be in heaven, because heaven means spending eternity with God, and none of the sinners want to be in the presence of God.**

If there is a single defining trait that all of Dante's sinners possess, it is narcissism. **The sinners neither love God nor their fellow man. They love only themselves and their sin.** Romantic-minded readers who first encounter the adulterous lovers Paolo and Francesca in the second circle of hell often are tempted to envy their fate. Rather than be separated from each other, Paolo and Francesca are locked together in an eternal embrace as they are blown round and round by a mighty wind. How can this be a punishment?

Well, if Paolo and Francesca really loved each other, their punishment *might* seem a blessing in disguise. But the sad reality is that neither loves the other. Indeed, neither is capable of loving the other. Francesca is really in love with the idea of love. Which is to say, she is ultimately in love with herself.

The hard, intractable narcissism of Dante's sinners is perhaps best conveyed through the character of Farinata, who dwells in level six, the circle of heresy. As Farinata and many of his fellow heretics denied the afterlife, believing that the soul died and was buried with the body, their punishment is to lie crammed together in burning coffins.

“Dante provides a picture, literally, of sinners in the afterlife getting what they wanted back on Earth. They wanted to be out of control & that is what they get.” – Will Cook

The Death of Fellowship

I've often heard people jokingly say that they want to go to hell because all of their friends will be there. Dante gives the lie to that joke. There is no friendship in hell, for everyone is utterly obsessed with themselves and their sin. Fellowship and community are nowhere to be found: only an endless musing on the self, a turning inward that builds an impenetrable wall against all love, mercy, and grace.

Hell marks the logical outcome of a soul that builds its identity around the belief that "it is all about me." Many who level this charge against others will, in the next breath, reject the Christian doctrine of hell, either dismissing it as a fairy tale or arguing that it is inconsistent with the loving nature of the Christian God. Such a soul will necessarily reject heaven, even if it were offered to him freely, for such a soul hates nothing more than a God who sees and knows all.

Jean-Paul Sartre was only half right when he quipped that hell is other people. For the narcissist, hell is indeed other people, for he desires communion only with himself and his sin. But for the Christian who surrenders to God and who moves out of himself in love toward others, heaven will consist, in great part, of other people.

Dante's paradise radiates with heavenly fellowship & communal praise. His hell too is filled with large groups of people, but no feelings of warmth or gratitude exist among them: each lives in a universe of one, untouched by empathy, camaraderie, or joy.

People who object to hell often will point out that though God hates sin, He nevertheless loves sinners. That is true, but it misses a point about hell that Dante dramatizes so powerfully. In hell, there is no longer a distinction between sinner and sin, for the sinner has *become* his sin.

HELL AS A PLACE OF WASTE

Hell is indeed a place of sadness, loneliness, and dehumanization. It is also a place of waste. In addition to committing active sins, the sinners in Dante's inferno have squandered the gifts that God bestowed upon them. Though this aspect of hell may seem less spiritual and psychological than the previous three, it has the virtue of speaking to all readers of Dante's epic: even those who are atheists and do not believe in an afterlife.

For the fact remains that all people are born with at least one talent. Many of those people may not recognize God as the source of their talent, but they usually possess an intuitive sense that they are duty bound to make use of it. Dante speaks to that sense when he depicts hell as a place of waste.

At one point in their journey, Dante asks Virgil what the source is of the rivers of hell. Virgil replies that on this island there stands a giant with a golden head, a silver chest, a bronze waist, and iron legs. Dante patterns his description of the giant on Nebuchadnezzar's Daniel 2 dream, but he adds to it one telling detail: the giant weeps tears that flow into the ground and become the rivers of hell.

As the giant in Daniel represents the kingdoms of humanity, Dante can only mean that the rivers of hell are formed from the tears of humanity. Hell, for Dante, is a sad place of wasted opportunities and frustrated dreams.

Ultimately, all the sinners in hell have wasted, or corrupted, their gifts. Still, the nature of that particular sin is most clearly embodied in the fifth circle of hell. There Dante encounters souls fixed in mud, who chant over again the same futile litany: “Sullen were we begun; / sullen we lie forever in this ditch” (7.121-124).

The Need to Take Sides

Dante’s *Inferno* provides a much-needed wake-up call for our slothful society that lacks gratitude and accountability. His depiction of sinners as people who have wasted their God-given gifts speaks powerfully to our culture of entitlement. It not only points to Jesus’ Parable of the Talents, but to all those other parables in which a master returns suddenly from a long journey and demands a reckoning from his servants.

After he and Virgil pass through the gate of hell, they find themselves in a hazy vestibule, where they meet the souls of the opportunists, those who refused to take sides in life. Around they run through a thick haze, ever pursuing a flag that ever eludes them. As they run, they are bitten, causing them to break out in welts from which pus flows down to their feet, there to be devoured by maggots. Dante considers opportunists to be the moral refuse of the universe. They are given no place, either in heaven or hell.

Too many moderns think that virtue is a passive thing, that it means a boring, sheltered life where one avoids lust, gluttony, wrath, and avarice. Dante gives the lie to that misperception. Virtue is active and passionate; it involves itself in the world, using the gifts that it has been given to help move history in the direction that God desires. - Louis Markos



