

IX 9Marks

**Is
Hell
Real?**



**Dane
Ortlund**

Church Questions

Endorsements for the Church Questions Series

“Christians are pressed by very real questions. How does Scripture structure a church, order worship, organize ministry, and define biblical leadership? Those are just examples of the questions that are answered clearly, carefully, and winsomely in this new series from 9Marks. I am so thankful for this ministry and for its incredibly healthy and hopeful influence in so many faithful churches. I eagerly commend this series.”

R. Albert Mohler Jr., President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Sincere questions deserve thoughtful answers. If you’re not sure where to start in answering these questions, let this series serve as a diving board into the pool. These minibooks are winsomely to-the-point and great to read together with one friend or one hundred friends.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *The Pastor’s Wife*

“As a pastor, I get asked lots of questions. I’m approached by unbelievers seeking to understand the gospel, new believers unsure about next steps, and maturing believers wanting help answering questions from their Christian family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers. It’s in these moments that I wish I had a book to give them that was brief, answered their questions, and pointed them in the right direction for further study. Church Questions is a series that provides just that. Each booklet tackles one question in a biblical, brief, and practical manner. The series may be called Church Questions, but it could be called ‘Church Answers.’ I intend to pick these up by the dozens and give them away regularly. You should too.”

Juan R. Sanchez, Senior Pastor, High Pointe Baptist Church, Austin, Texas

“Where can we Christians find reliable answers to our common questions about life together at church—without having to plow through long, expensive books? The Church Questions booklets meet our need with answers that are biblical, thoughtful, and practical. For pastors, this series will prove a trustworthy resource for guiding church members toward deeper wisdom and stronger unity.”

Ray Ortlund, President, Renewal Ministries

Is Hell Real?

Church Questions

Am I Called to Ministry?, Brad Wheeler

Can Women Be Pastors?, Greg Gilbert

Does God Love Everyone?, Matt McCullough

Does the Gospel Promise Health and Prosperity?, Sean DeMars

How Can I Be Sure I'm Saved?, Jeremy Pierre

How Can I Find Someone to Disciple Me?, Garret Kell

How Can I Get More Out of My Bible Reading?, Jeremy Kimble

How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?, Jonathan Leeman and Andy Naselli

How Can I Serve My Church?, Matthew Emadi

How Can I Support International Missions?, Mark Collins

How Can Our Church Find a Faithful Pastor?, Mark Dever

How Can Women Thrive in the Local Church?, Keri Folmar

Is Hell Real?, Dane Ortlund

Is It Loving to Practice Church Discipline?, Jonathan Leeman

What Do Deacons Do?, Juan Sanchez

What If I Don't Desire to Pray?, John Onwuchekwa

What If I Don't Feel Like Going to Church?, Gunner Gundersen

What If I'm Discouraged in My Evangelism?, Isaac Adams

What Is the Church's Mission?, Jonathan Leeman

What Should I Do Now That I'm a Christian?, Sam Emadi

What Should I Look For in a Church?, Alex Duke

What Should We Do about Members Who Won't Attend?,
Alex Duke

Who's in Charge of the Church?, Sam Emadi

Why Is the Lord's Supper So Important?, Aubrey Sequeira

Why Should I Be Baptized?, Bobby Jamieson

Why Should I Give to My Church?, Jamie Dunlop

Why Should I Join a Church?, Mark Dever

Is Hell Real?

Dane Ortlund

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Is Hell Real?

Copyright © 2022 by 9Marks

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2022

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7863-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7866-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7864-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-7865-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ortlund, Dane Calvin, author.

Title: *Is hell real?* / Dane Ortlund.

Description: Wheaton, Il : Crossway, 2022. | Series: Church questions | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022011784 (print) | LCCN 2022011785 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433578632 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433578649 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433578656 (mobipocket) | ISBN 9781433578663 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Hell--Biblical teaching. | Hell--Christianity.

Classification: LCC BS680.H43 O78 2022 (print) | LCC BS680.H43 (ebook) | DDC 236/.25--dc23/eng/20220401

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022011784>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2022011785>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BP	31	30	29	28	27	26	25	24	23	22				
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to
obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Thessalonians 5:9



The Christian teaching on hell offends unbelievers and is quietly avoided by many believers. That is unfortunate because the doctrine of hell is a vital part of living well amid the miseries of this world. It may be painful for a patient to be told he has a rapidly spreading cancer, but this news is crucial for him to hear if he is to receive treatment, get his affairs in order, and live his remaining days meaningfully. Hell is not a fun topic, but we need to learn of it, reflect on it regularly, and warn others of it.

In this booklet, we'll look at what the Bible says about hell. To summarize: hell is needed,

awful, close, and deserved by every one of us—but there is a way to avoid going there.

I wrote this so that you will see that hell is a horrifying reality. But if we are *only* horrified at the reality of hell, then we've still got work to do. A deep awareness of hell should also help us to live better lives than we otherwise would. And ultimately, it should swell our affections for the gospel—the good news that Jesus endured the horror of hell in the place of all who collapse into his open arms in trusting faith.

This book will not propose anything new. The teaching of this book, drawn from the Bible, is simply what faithful Christians have taught for two thousand years. I mention that because in our own time, the doctrine of hell has come under fresh scrutiny. That is, at one level, understandable. The thought of never-ending torment for the impenitent goes against our immediate natural instincts—instincts reinforced in broader culture by notions of the basic goodness of humanity and misunderstandings of the nature of God. But the widespread rejection of hell we see all around us, historically speaking,

is relatively new. The generations before us have known the teaching of the Bible and of this little book: hell exists, and everyone deserves it.

Is hell real? Yes. But the hell that is there may not be exactly as you have envisioned it. And the real scandal of this universe is not that there is a hell, deserved by all, but that there is a heaven, offered to all.

Hell Is Needed

What's the first thing that pops into your head when you hear the word *hell*? Cartoon-like flames? Perhaps an image of people being gleefully and unendingly tortured, far beyond what they deserve? Maybe hell strikes you as one big overreaction on God's part. Or perhaps the teachings of Christianity are all plausible to you except this one doctrine about hell.

The first thing to get straight as we think about the Christian teaching on hell, though, is that the doctrine of hell is needed. It is healthy. It's even a surprising comfort to know that hell exists.

When I say “the doctrine of hell,” I mean the teaching that those who do not repent of their sin and trust in Christ spend an eternity in conscious torment under the displeasure of God. We’ll say more about what exactly this entails in the next section. But here at the outset I want to get clear in our minds that hell is not a problem. The *absence* of hell would be a problem. Hell is the affirmation that God is a God of justice, of fairness, of dealing with humans in a way that is right.

This is why down through human history and the many atrocities that have been committed by humans against other humans, it has been those who believed in hell who were most able to endure with nobility. If we do not believe in hell—if we think the only justice and retribution to be had is in this life—then we *must* take revenge into our own hands. Without hell, justice must be forcibly executed by us, or it will not be executed at all. If we wish to believe that God exists and loves humanity but that there is no such thing as this awful place called hell, life becomes far less stable. Any one of us might be

deeply wronged at any time, and there's a good chance that we will be unable to execute justice, however savage our attempts might be. When a retiree is robbed of his pension by the corporate powers that be, and has no legal recourse, what is he to do? When a young person is abused and has no resources for legal action and no ability to secure any kind of equity, what is to be done?

Forgiveness itself, that beautiful Christian action that the world reveres, becomes elusive without hell. When the world torments and assaults believers, how are they to endure? How can I forgive the one who has hurt me without the knowledge that God will right all wrongs in the next life? The very act of forgiveness is founded on the notion that I am overlooking now what God will not overlook. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom. 12:19).

So if we find the doctrine of hell hard to swallow, let's consider what we lose by abandoning it and what we are actually giving up. What if we all knew for certain that there was no place after

this life where the impenitent wicked would receive judgment and justice? What if all wrongs were never righted but simply hung in the air of injustice eternally, never vindicated, never addressed, never brought out into the light? What if all wrongs against you were yours to sort out, before you die—not God’s to sort out, after you die? That would be hellish indeed. And that is precisely how the world tends to operate and how many Christians wrongly operate—thinking justice must be exacted by them, in the present, not by God, in the future.

But calm and peace begin to break out in this world when we do believe in hell—when we settle into our hearts the comforting reality that God himself will right all wrongs one day far more precisely and justly than we could ever hope to do. This is a repeated refrain throughout the Bible—that God will not let the wicked ultimately flourish. Passages such as Psalm 73 and Jeremiah 12 show a man of God perplexed at the apparent flourishing of the wicked, yet in both texts the man of God comes around to believe afresh that God will “make them fall

to ruin” as they are utterly “destroyed in a moment” (Ps. 73:18–19). Passages like this may not have in mind a full-blown doctrine of hell, but we are seeing who God is. He is the kind of God who, in his own time, brings judgment and justice.

We can be at peace. We who know God can hold our heads high and walk through this miserable world calmly, come what may. No matter how we are mistreated by the world, God will bring perfect retribution and vindication in his own way and time. God “has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31).

God never looks the other way. He sees every evil deed done in the dark, great or small. Nothing will slip by his omniscient gaze. We can live in patience and in peace.

Hell Is Awful

But what exactly are we talking about when we say “hell”? We hear the word used all the time in a street-level way—“What the hell . . . ?” “Hell