

# **DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT IN HELL?**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. We are asking the question: Does the Bible teach there are degrees of punishment in hell?
  - a. That is, does it teach that some will suffer a more extreme form of punishment, or a greater degree of punishment, in hell than others?
2. Some answer the question with an emphatic “Yes!” Others are just as emphatic with a negative answer!
3. This is a question which has given me no little concern in time past because of two different groups of passages which on the surface seem to be in opposition the one to the other.
  - a. The one group seems to teach degrees of punishment in hell.
  - b. The other group evidently denies there are degrees of punishment in hell.
  - c. If the one group actually teaches degrees of punishment in hell, and the other group denies it, we have a contradiction.
  - d. This, of course, can’t be the case; for God’s word is true – it does not contradict itself. If it did, or if it does, it’s claim of inspiration would be destroyed.
  - e. Therefore, there must be a true and acceptable interpretation of all passages pertaining to the subject that harmonizes one with the other, with no hint of opposition or contradiction.

## **II. DISCUSSION**

### **A. FIRST, WE LIST AND READ THE PASSAGES WHICH SEEMINGLY TEACH DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT IN HELL.**

1. Jas.3:1.
2. 2Pet.2:20,21.
3. Lk.12:41-48, emphasize Vv.47,48.
4. Heb.10:28,29.
5. Mt.10:15 (Cf. Mt.11:22,24; Mk.6:11; Lk.10:12,14).

6. On the basis of what these passages seem to affirm, many emphatically claim the Bible teaches degrees of punishment in hell.
  - a. I know what these passages say. How they read.
  - b. I know that they, on the surface, seem to teach degrees of punishment.
  - c. But, in spite of this, do they really mean there are degrees of punishment in hell? Is that what they are really teaching?
7. I ask that you reserve your thinking on these passages until we look at the second group of passages

**B. NEXT, WE LIST THE SECOND GROUP OF PASSAGES WHICH EVIDENTLY AND PLAINLY DENY THERE ARE DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT IN HELL BY TEACHING PUNISHMENT COMMON TO ALL SENT THERE.**

1. Mt.10:28.
2. Mt.25:41.
3. Mt.25:46.
4. Mk.9:43-48.
5. Jno.5:28,29.
6. 2Th.1:6-10.
7. Rev.21:8.

**C. IN VIEW THE TWO GROUPS OF PASSAGES, HERE ARE SOME OBVIOUS THOUGHTS WITH WHICH WE ARE FACED.**

1. In this second group of passages, is there any possibility of the least suggestion in any of them that there are degrees of punishment in hell; i.e., greater, more severe, punishment for some there than for others?
  - a. If so, which one of these verses teach it? Necessarily imply it? Or even imply it?
2. Do these verses indicate a distinction between the degree of punishment the *devil* himself will receive in hell and of others cast there with him, Mt.25:41?
  - a. It's common punishment for both the devil and his angels in hell.

- b. If there is such a thing as degrees of punishment in hell, one would think the devil's punishment would be the most severe! Punishment over and above all others! But is that so indicated anywhere?
  - c. Cf. Other passages indicating common punishment – the same for all, Mt.8:12; 10:28; Rom.2:7-9; 6:23; 1Cor.3:17; 2Cor.5:10; Heb.10:26-29; Rev.21:8.
3. In view of this, what about those passages which on the surface seemingly teach there are degrees of punishment in hell? Or contain language which men often think is teaching degrees of punishment in hell?
  4. If the one group of passages teach degrees of punishment in hell; and then the other group of passages deny degrees of punishment in hell; are we not forced with a contradiction in God's word?!
  5. Since this obviously can't be the case, there must be an interpretation of the one group of passages which harmonizes with the passages that plainly indicate there are no degrees of punishment in hell, but a punishment common to all who are sent there.

**D. THE FOLLOWING I BELIEVE TO BE THE PROPER INTERPRETATION SHOWING THE EXISTING HARMONY BETWEEN THE TWO GROUPS OF PASSAGES.**

1. Jas.3:1, "My brethren, be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation."
  - a. The Greek for "condemnation" here is the noun form *krima* of the verb *krino*, elsewhere translated as "judgment," rather than "condemnation."
  - b. One of Thayer's definitions for *krima* is "the decision which one passes on the faults of others," Mt.7:2, p.360.
  - c. Strong: "Krima – kree'ma—a decision, from krino – kree'no – to distinguish, i.e. to decide."
  - d. Vine, I, 222: "*krima* ...the process of judgment leading to a decision, 1Pet.4:17 ("judgment"), where "*krisis*" denotes the process of distinguishing and separating (as distinct from *krima*) hence a judging...For the rendering "judgment," see e.g. Rom.11:33...Gal.5:10; Jas.3:1. In these the process leading to a decision and the

pronouncement of the decision, the verdict, are to be distinguished.”

- e. The ASV says, the “heavier judgment.” The NASV: “shall incur a stricter judgment.”
  - f. Thus the passage is discussing the decision or bases for the pronouncement which God reaches in the judgment process. It’s referring to the judgment process rather than degrees of punishment!
  - g. The judgment process is concerned; the basis of judgment; the terms of judgment; rather than the mere pronouncement of sentence.
  - h. Thus those who are masters or teachers as opposed to those who are learners will have a more exacting judgment: that is, judged by stricter standard; judged more closely according to their talents and the responsibility of the position of teachers, rather than a more hellish torment in hell.
  - i. The reason being that God expects more from those who have more – more ability, more talent, more responsibility, etc. Cf. Parable of the Talents, Mt.25:14-26.
2. 2Pet.2:20,21, “...the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. For it had been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after they have known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered unto them.”
- a. According to some the expression “the latter end is worse with them than the beginning” is supposed to prove this passage teaches degrees of punishment in hell.
  - b. If so, then it forces a contradiction in God’s word. This is untenable. Therefore, we must look for an interpretation that harmonizes with the other plain passages which teach a common punishment for all.
  - c. The truth is that 2Pet.2:20,21 is comparing man’s situation before and after hearing the gospel and being converted from the standpoint of the difficulty of reaching them before being converted and reaching them after being converted and then falling away.
  - d. Once a person has heard, believed and obeyed the gospel, then turned from the holy commandments, rejected the truth of God’s holy word after once knowing it, it is

infinitely more difficult to persuade that person to return to it than to convert him in the first place.

- e. Heb.6:4-6; 10:26-31.
  - f. Thus the Christian who falls away, who apostatizes, is in a “worse” condition than if he had never known the way of righteousness. (I have seen such persons.)
  - g. In all three of these passages the difficulty of calling the man with knowledge to repentance who has apostatized is discussed. They have thus become more difficult to reach than they were formerly. Their heart is harder. Their ears are duller. This “latter end is worse with them than in the beginning.”
  - h. 2Pet.2:20,21 is not talking about degrees of punishment in hell, but degrees of hardness of heart and its consequences. Cf. Eph.4:17-19; 1Tim.4:1,2.
3. The Parable of Lk.12:41-48, emphasize Vv.47,48, read it all.
- a. This passage is held by some to be the absolute proof text for degrees of punishment in hell.
  - b. But it can't be. Otherwise, we have a contradiction between this and those plain passages denying degrees of punishment. So, there must be a correct interpretation of this parable that harmonizes with them.
  - c. Remember this: Lk.12:41-48 is a Parable, and parables are designed to teach one simple truth, not multiple truths.
  - d. We must look for the key to its meaning – the lesson or the principle truth taught, which, in this case, the Lord states in V.48b: “For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.”
  - e. The parable is simply teaching what it taught so often in other passages:
    - (1) That, in the judgment process, the decision making process, some incur a stricter judgment; a heavier judgment.
    - (2) That persons of greater knowledge and ability will be judged by a more stringent standard than those with limited abilities, responsibilities, opportunities and talents. Cf. Jas.3:1; Parable of the Talents, etc.

- (3) That the Lord expects more of some than of others.
- (4) This is the point being made by the Lord in this parable in Lk.12 and specified in V.48b.
- f. It is a mistake to go beyond the point of the Lord's interpretation of the parable in V.48b. And that is what we do if we interpret it to teach degrees of punishment in hell.
- 4. Heb.10:28,29, "...of how much sorer punishment suppose ye"
  - a. Again, the "sorer punishment" clause of this passage has been used by some as a proof text for degrees of punishment in hell.
  - b. This is a dual mistake. One, it would force a contradiction in God's word which condemns it. Two, it is a glaring example of failure to observe context.
  - c. The comparison in this context is obviously between the physical punishment decreed for violators of the law of Moses, and the eternal punishment recompensed for failure to faithfully serve Jesus Christ under the N.T.
  - d. For instance, the punishment of stoning after the testimony of two or three witnesses compared with the punishment of eternal destruction recompensed by the Lord himself.
  - e. This passage is perhaps also a vivid illustration of Mt.10:28.
- 5. Mt.10:15 (Cf. Mt.11:22,24; Mk.6:11; Lk.10:12,14): "Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in that day of judgment, than for that city." ("It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you," Mt.11:22)
  - a. Another so-called proof text for degrees of punishment posing the same problem.
  - b. The passage does not specifically say anything about receiving greater punishment for one over the other.
  - c. Other translations help understand the meaning:
    - (1) Goodspeed: "...will fare better on the Day of Judgment than that town"
    - (2) Contemporary Eng. Version: "will be easier for"
    - (3) NIV: "it will be more bearable for"
    - (4) TEV: "on the Judgment day God will show more mercy"

- d. The difference is in the “stricter standard” incurred, not in the degree of punishment exacted for sin committed.
- e. Read the context and see the harmony with other text teaching the same truth.

### **III. CONCLUSION**

1. When you weigh the one group of passages that evidently and plainly deny there are degrees of punishment in hell by teaching a punishment common to all sent there against the other group that on the surface seems to teach degrees of punishment of hell, and thus force a contradiction, you know you must of necessity look for an interpretation that reveals the existing harmony between the two groups of passages.
2. We think we have presented that in this study and ask your serious study of the matter if you have any doubts.

(Credit to John A. Welch, “The Unquenchable Fire and The Never-Sorrowing City,” Faith and Facts Press, 1981)