

What The Pope Said About Hell

The week before Easter, Pope Francis was quoted in an Italian newspaper as saying there was no hell — there was only a disappearance of souls. In the article titled “It Is An Honor To Be Called A Revolutionary,” the pope is quoted as saying: “They are not punished, those who repent obtain the forgiveness of God and enter the rank of souls who contemplate him, but those who do not repent and cannot therefore be forgiven disappear.”

The same author, Eugenio Scalfari, an avowed atheist, wrote in October 2017, “Francis has abolished the places where souls were supposed to go after death: hell, purgatory, heaven. The idea he holds is that souls dominated by evil and unrepentant cease to exist, while those that have been redeemed from evil will be taken up into beatitude, contemplating God.”

In response to the interview, the Vatican scrambled to explain the statement was “not a faithful transcript” of the exchange between Francis and Scalfari, who is known to recreate his interviews from memory rather than notes or an audio recording. The Pope’s position on hell prompted Peter Kreeft, a renowned Boston College theologian, to question the interview’s veracity. “I doubt he said that, because it’s heresy outright,” Kreeft said, explaining hell’s existence had been doctrine since the 7th century. The importance of hell, Kreeft added, is more than the eternal fire. “If there’s no hell, then heaven is no big deal. If there’s no valley, the mountain isn’t very high.” Kreeft said. “If it doesn’t exist, then ultimately we don’t have free will ... Scratch the doctrine of hell and you find the possibility of free will underneath it. The details are not important: You don’t need to believe in fiery demons inserting hot pitchforks into unrepentant posteriors.”

But the Pope is not alone in questioning hell. In 1999, Pope John Paul II similarly rattled Catholics when he emphasized the eternal punishment was less about geography than separation from God. “Rather than a place,” the Polish pope said, “Hell indicates the state of those who freely and definitively separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”

No matter what Catholic catechism or tradition says, the Bible declares that there is such a place as hell; it has reality — it is not just a state of the mind. The Bible describes it vividly: (1) outer darkness with weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12); (2) furnace of fire with wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13:42, 50); (3) everlasting fire and everlasting punishment (Matthew 25:41, 46); (4) worm does not die and the fire is not quenched (Mark 9:44, 48); (5) place of torment (Luke 16:28; Revelation 14:11); (6) everlasting destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9); (7) chains of darkness (2 Peter 2:4); (8) blackness of darkness (Jude 13); and, (9) lake which burns with fire and brimstone and second death (Revelation 21:8). Hell is a place that no one should ever want to go.

Hell is a place of intense suffering. In Luke 16:23-24, the word for “torment” means torture which was used in examination of criminals. “Agony” means intense anguish or

distress. I avoid suffering as much as I can. In fact, I do not know of anyone who does not seek to avoid pain. When in severe pain, it becomes an obsession. Time seems to stand still when you are in pain. We seek relief from the blazing heat of summer by seeking shade or by longing for the cool of the evening. But in hell, there is no relief. There is only the torment and anguish pictured by pain and intense heat (Revelation 20:10; 21:8).

“Outer darkness” is the farthest darkness from the lighted palace (Matthew 22:13). The Lord uses this phrase three times in Matthew (8:12; 25:30) to emphasize the separation, suffering, and despair found in hell. The idea of hopelessly suffering in darkness surrounded by wailing, howling, screaming, moaning, groaning, and the gnashing of teeth of others who are hopelessly lost and seeking death frightens me beyond belief. Life’s most severe trials are punctuated by anticipation for some relief, for something better. In fact, anticipation of some pleasure is one of Satan’s most potent tools to lure men into sin (Hebrews 3:12; James 1:14-15). But there is no anticipation in hell. There is nothing to look forward to except more suffering, hopelessness, haunting memories, and endless despair. It is adequately pictured in Revelation as those who suffer for worshiping the beast and his image: “And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:11).

While God is not willing that any should perish, if you do, it will have been completely within your power. It is terrifying to fall into God’s hands (Hebrews 10:26-31). It would not be terrifying if it were not possible for God to send someone to hell. If you reject Jesus Christ, His sacrifice, and His words, you will never have to wonder while in hell, “Jesus will not send me to hell, will He?” The answer will be reality.

Or, you can come, believing in Him, confessing His name before men, repenting of sins, and washing them away in His blood in baptism, gaining the hope of eternal life. No more suffering and fighting sin, but rather praising God for all eternity. Choose you this day whom you will serve (Joshua 24:15).

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