



*The Reality of*

# Heaven & HELL

WHAT THE  
ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN CHURCH  
BELIEVES REGARDING  
THESE TWO REALITIES

By Fr. Augustinos Hanna

IN EVERY CENTURY PEOPLE ARGUE; IS HELL fact or fiction? Is it real or symbolic? Is it literal or a state of mind? What is it like?

The cover story of the January 31, 2000, issue of *U.S. News & World Report* was entitled “*Hell Has No Fury*.” Unfortunately, the title was misleading. It did not reflect the content of the article. The article quoted comments concerning hell by early church fathers, church councils, theologians and university professors. However, the overwhelming consensus of the sources quoted was that “*Hell Has Great Fury*.” But there was a view, which suggested that hell is not eternal – that ungodly men may be punished for a while, but that eventually they would be annihilated. Another view suggested that when punished, enough sinners will be pardoned and, in the end, make it to heaven. At least one voice suggested that the concept of hell contradicted the grace of God. This view totally ignored the fact that hell is reserved for those who reject God’s grace.

The real issue in the article was not, “Does hell have fury” but “What is the fury like?” There was disagreement as to whether hell is a literal place or a state of mind; whether it is an actual eternal fire or an anguished state of existence and eternal separation from God. One liberal scholar suggested, “It should come as little surprise that modern educated Americans would reject notions of a blazing underworld where anguished souls writhe in endless torment.” He seems not to understand that “modern educated Americans,” as he put it, are no more moral than men were two thousand years ago. They simply sin with more sophistication, aided by advances in technology. And advances in education and science do not equate to greater insight into biblical truth (1 Cor. 2:14).

But more to the point, in the survey commissioned by *U.S. News & World Report*, to the question, “Do you think there is a hell?” a huge 64% said “Yes,”



25% said “No”, and 9% said they “don’t know.” And to the question, “What comes closest to your idea of hell?” 34% said, “Hell is a real place where people suffer eternal fiery torments,” and 53% said, “Hell is an anguished state of existence eternally separated from God.” Eleven said they “don’t know.” The liberal scholars’ observation although, the fact is that a large majority of Americans believe in the reality of hell as a place of eternal anguish.

What may come as a surprise is that the *U.S. News* poll indicates that “more Americans believe in hell today than did in the 1950s or even 10 years ago.”

*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He said, “Wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leads to destruction, and many there be which go in by it” (Matt. 7:13). Also it is written, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death” (Proverbs. 16:25).*

## **The Orthodox Christian View of Hell**

The Bible is filled with such statements, which are not subject to change based on changing values and cultures.

Among the attributes of God is immutability: God does not change. God is immutable in His essence and in His attributes. If hell is not as severe or eternal in duration as God’s Word says it is, then the value of Christ’s saving work is proportionally diminished. If hell is not so bad, then Christ’s death for sinners is not so important.

The Bible says that hell is a place, and a place of unquenchable fire and torment.

The Bible says that hell is a place of unquenchable fire and torment, eternal in duration.

**Let God be true and every man a liar.** If hell is not real or not as bad as the Bible says it is, then perhaps heaven is not real or not as good as the Bible says it is. If men can change the biblical concept of hell to make it better fit the culture of the day, then they can change the doctrine of heaven or

any other doctrine they don't like on the same basis. And the concept of an inerrant, infallible, Word of God as a plumb line for life is meaningless.

**The concept of hell may not be popular, but it is true.** In life we have opposites. There is up and down, fast and slow, hot and cold, light and dark, yeas and no, righteousness and unrighteousness, truth and error, and heaven and hell.

**The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of hell more than He spoke of heaven.** He mentioned that hell is the terrible place, which was "prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt. 25:41). So, it was not created for man but for the devil and his angels. He said that those who rejected God's love and His salvation and chose to follow the devil, they will have his same curse and last destination. And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46).

In the parable of the wheat and tares, Jesus said, "The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire."

**The Lord Jesus assured three times in the gospel of St. Mark, the reality of hell and some of its dreadful descriptions** saying, "It is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:43 – 47). **He referred to it as real, eternal, unquenchable fire that has worms.** In other occasions, **He described hell as the "outer darkness, there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"** (Matt. 25:30). In this verse He described it as a place and a state of mind, in sorrow and severe regret.

In the story of Lazarus the beggar and the rich man, Jesus again talked about hell as **a place of eternal torment in flames, severe thirst, active memory, perpetual nightmare, NO EXIT, a state of hopeless relent and rejected requests** (Luke 16: 19).



## ***So, does the Orthodox Church also believe that Heaven Really Exists?***

**Like hell, heaven is a place; it is a place of bliss, light, and God's blessing and presence.** But where is heaven? And what is it like? Can we take a peek beyond the clouds of life? One of the commonly used words for heaven in the Hebrew Old Testament is the word "*Shamayim*," literally meaning "high." There are three heavens: The first is the atmospheric heaven. This is the sphere immediately surrounding the crust of the earth. Here the fowl of the air spread their wings and soar.

The second is the stellar heaven. This is the sphere of the heavenly bodies – the sun, moon, and stars. To this sphere science has propelled astronauts.

Finally, the **Bible refers to the "third heaven"** (2 Cor. 12:2, 4). **This is the domain of God. Here the redeemed of all ages will know peace and joy unspeakable with the One who is the source of all life.** While God has not seen fit to reveal all the details concerning what the "third heaven" will be like, some facts can be gleaned from the Bible.

**First, heaven is permanent:** The apostle Paul says, "If our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (2 Cor. 5:1).

**Second, heaven is preferred:** How strange that sounds to the ear. Men cling stubbornly to life; they try desperately not to let go – to somehow find the fountain of youth. Little do most men understand that "death [for the believer] is swallowed up in victory." It has lost its sting (1 Cor. 15:54-55). Why then retreat with fear from cancer, or a heart attack, or an accident, or any of a myriad of other causes of death? Ah, some say, it is not a fear of death but of dying. If you are an heir of the King, do you suppose that the God who has loved you with an everlasting love – who has redeemed you by His blood, who is building a mansion for you far

beyond anything this world has ever known – will not provide the comfort of His abiding presence and grace sufficient for that hour?

Listen carefully to the example of the great Apostle Paul to the Philippians: “having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ [through death]; which is far better” (Phil. 1:23-24). Listen to the apostle once again: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul tells of a man who was caught up to the “third heaven”; whether in the body or out of the body he did not know. What was known was that while in the third heaven, that man heard unspeakable words that were so glorious they were not permitted to be uttered on earth (2 Cor. 12:4). He was one of the few men in history to be given a glimpse of heaven and permitted to remain here on earth.

### **Finally, heaven is perfect:**

The description of the eternal state given in Revelation 21, is striking. In the description there is an absolute absence of negatives in heaven. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:4) And there will be NO need for light because “the Lord God gives them light” (Rev. 22:5). In heaven there will be no such tragedies. Heaven is perfect.

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