

## Degrees of Eternal Damnation

Here is a question for you: does the Bible teach that there are different degrees of suffering in Hell, or is Hell the same for everyone? Do very wicked people get punished more, while only slightly wicked people get punished less? How does it work?

Well, let's take a look and see what the Bible says. There are several different Scripture passages that speak to this. The first one I'd like to look at can be found in the book of Matthew. Jesus was talking about some cities where He had performed amazing miracles, but despite the fact that they saw Him *in person* doing great wonders, they did not repent. So Jesus had this to say about that:

**Matthew 11:23:** "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell: for if the mighty works, which have been done in thee, had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

24 But I say unto you, That it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for thee."

Jesus made the point that if His miracles had been done in the wicked city of Sodom, those people would actually have repented. In fact, they would have repented so strongly that Sodom would never have been destroyed at all and would still exist as a city. The people of Capernaum, however, did not repent. Even though they saw the mighty works of Jesus – works that would have led the people of Sodom to repentance – they refused to believe. They were actually *more* wicked and hard-hearted than the people of Sodom.

Because of this, Jesus said that when the day of judgment comes, their judgment will be more severe than the judgment of the city of Sodom. This tells us two things. First of all, Jesus considers the judgment of Sodom to still be in the future. Even though that city was completely annihilated by fire and brimstone from Heaven, that was *not* the city's final judgment. There is still a day of judgment to come, when the people of that city will be judged for their wickedness. That will be the true judgment – not just for Sodom, but for all cities and all people.

Second, we can see that the day of judgment will not be the same for everyone. Jesus said that the city of Capernaum will be judged more harshly in the great day of judgment than the city of Sodom, because Capernaum saw the miracles of the Lord in person and still refused to repent.

The reason for this has to do with this principle:

**Luke 12:47:** "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes.

48 But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. 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."

This teaching is simple: those who knew better and still did what was wrong will be punished more harshly than those who didn't know better. Now, those who did wrong without knowing it was wrong will still be punished; they just won't be punished as harshly.

In the case of Capernaum and Sodom, the people of Sodom never saw the Lord Jesus Christ. They never saw any of His miracles. If they had seen His miracles they would have repented – but they never got that chance. The people of Capernaum, however, *did* see the Lord in person and *did* see His

miracles. They were given a much greater opportunity – and they rejected it. Since they were given more they will be punished more. That was what Jesus was saying.

Now, some people teach that if a remote tribe never hears the gospel, God will not hold it against them and will let them into Heaven because they never had a chance to believe. That is actually *not* what the Bible teaches. Instead it says this:

**Romans 2:12:** “For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law,”

Those who never heard the law of God will perish without it. Those who have heard it will be judged by it. The people of Sodom never had the gospel preached to them, and yet God still annihilated their cities and promised them even worse judgment to come. Ignorance is not an excuse; in order to be saved you must repent and believe.

This is why it is so important to send missionaries. If people are never told the gospel then they will perish without it. It is *vital* that everyone be told. As we can see, even Sodom would have repented if they had seen the works that Christ did. They would all have gone to Heaven – but instead they were damned. That is the difference the gospel makes, and that is why we need to go and tell all the world what Christ has done.

But back to the question at hand. Matthew 11 is not the only place where Christ taught this principle. He had something similar to say in the previous chapter:

**Matthew 10:14:** “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet.

15 Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city.”

Why would it be more tolerable for Sodom than for these other cities? Because those cities saw the disciples come and perform miracles and share the gospel, and they refused to believe. Since they rejected a greater witness than Sodom ever had, their judgment will be more harsh.

We find this same teaching taught in Mark 6:11, Luke 10:12, and Luke 10:14 as well. It is always the same thing: those who were given a greater witness and rejected it will be judged more harshly than those who received a lesser witness.

Up to this point we have been talking about cities. But what about individual people? Well, the book of Revelation tells us that on the Day of Judgment people will be judged for all the deeds they have done:

**Revelation 20:12:** “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.”

Each person will be held accountable for all the things that they have done in their life. But there is more. Jesus once gave this warning:

**Matthew 12:36:** “But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.”

Jesus said that not only would people be held accountable for their *deeds*, but they would also be held accountable for *every idle word* that they spoke. When people stand before God on Judgment Day they will be held accountable for everything that they did *and* everything that they said.

Now, there are two possibilities. Those whose sins are not covered by the blood of Christ will have no defense. Revelation 20:15 tells us that these people will be cast into the Lake of Fire. We have already seen that those who were more wicked will be punished more harshly than those who were less wicked. All who are in the Lake of Fire will be tormented, but some will be tormented much more than others, based on the deeds that they did in life. It will be more tolerable for some than for others – but when you are being burned alive for all of eternity, “more tolerable” is not the same thing as “actually tolerable” or “comfortable”. It will be unbearable for everyone who is there. But it will be even worse for some than others.

The other possibility is that a person's sins *have* been covered by the blood of Christ. Those who repented and believed in Christ will not be cast into the Lake of Fire. However, they will still be judged. They will still have to give an account of their words and their deeds. This judgment, though, is not about punishment; instead it is about rewards. We find it discussed in the first letter to the Corinthians:

**I Corinthians 3:14:** “If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward.

15 If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.”

You see, just as there are degrees of punishment in Hell, there are also degrees of reward in Heaven. Those who faithfully served Christ will be rewarded for their efforts and will receive a reward. However, those who wasted their lives and only served themselves will not be rewarded. They will suffer loss, as the verse says. They will still be saved, and they will not be cast into the Lake of Fire, but they will fail to gain things that were given to others.

We can find this same idea taught other places as well. For example, Jesus once said this:

**Matthew 5:19:** “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Those who teach men to sin – even if it is just a little sin – will be called the least, while those who keep God's commands and teach others to do the same will be called great. Now, this is not talking about this life, but the life to come. Jesus warned us that some who were great in this life will be held in very low esteem in the next:

**Matthew 19:30:** “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.”

God cares about our faithfulness – or lack thereof – and He responds accordingly. The choices that we make have consequences.