

Degrees of Eternal Damnation

Here's 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 extremely wicked people get punished more, while less wicked people get punished less? How does it work?

Let's take a look and see what the Bible says. There are several different Scripture passages that address this topic. The first one I'd like to look at is in Matthew. Jesus was talking about the fact that He had performed amazing miracles in certain cities, but in spite of the fact that those cities had just seen the Messiah perform miracles *in person* they hadn't repented. Since those cities were eyewitnesses to Jesus, there would be particularly severe consequences for rejecting Him:

Matthew 11:23-24: “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. 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 said that if His miracles had been done in the wicked city of Sodom, those people would have repented. In fact, they would have repented so strongly that Sodom wouldn't have been destroyed! The people of Capernaum, however, did *not* repent. Even though they saw the mighty works of Jesus (the same works that would have led the people of Sodom to repentance) they refused to believe in Him. They were actually *more* wicked and hard-hearted than the people of Sodom.

Did their rejection of Jesus have consequences? Yes it did. Jesus said that when the day of judgment comes, the punishment of Capernaum will be more severe than the punishment of

Sodom.

This tells us two things. First, Jesus considers the final judgment of Sodom to still be in the future. Even though that city was destroyed by fire and brimstone from Heaven, that was *not* the city's final judgment. There's still a day of judgment to come, when the people of that city will be judged for their wickedness. The coming judgment will be their true judgment – not just for Sodom, but for all cities and all people.

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

The reason for that has to do with this principle:

Luke 12:47-48: “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. 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 sinned will be punished more harshly than those who didn't know better. Now, those who did something 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 witnessed 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's what Jesus was saying.

Now, some people teach that if a remote tribe never hears the gospel, God won't hold it against them because they never had a chance to believe. That's 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 the law of God will be judged by it. The people of Sodom never had the gospel preached to them, and yet God still annihilated their cities and said there was an even worse judgment still to come. Ignorance isn't an excuse; in order to be saved you must repent and believe.

That's why it's so important to send missionaries to all the world! If people are never told the gospel then they'll perish without it. It's *vital* that everyone be told the gospel. Even Sodom would have repented if they had seen the works of Christ! All of those people would have gone to Heaven – but instead they were damned. That's the difference the gospel makes, and that's why we must go and tell all the world what Christ has done.

But back to the question at hand. Matthew 11 isn't the only place where Christ teaches this principle. He had something similar to say in the previous chapter:

Matthew 10:14-15: “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. Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrhah in the day of judgment, than for that city.”

Why would it be more tolerable for Sodom than for those other cities? Because those cities saw the disciples perform

miracles and heard them share the gospel, and yet they refused to believe. Since they rejected a greater witness than Sodom ever had, their judgment will be more severe.

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

Up to this point we've 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 held accountable for all the deeds they've done:

Revelation 20:12-13: “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. 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 they've done in their life. But there's 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'll be held accountable for everything that they did *and* everything that they said.

Those whose sins are not covered by the blood of Jesus

will not escape this judgment. Revelation 20:15 teaches that all of those wicked people (whose sins were not forgiven by Jesus) will be cast into the Lake of Fire. We've already seen that those who were more wicked will be punished more severely than those who were less wicked. Everyone who is cast into the Lake of Fire will be tormented, but some people will be tormented more than others based on what they did in life. The day of judgment will be more tolerable for some than for others – but when you're being burned alive for all of eternity, “more tolerable” isn't the same thing as “actually tolerable” or “comfortable”. It will be unbearable for everyone who's there (which is why it's so important to repent now, while there's still time to be saved). But it will be worse for some than others.

The good news is that those who repented of their sins and believed in Christ will *not* be cast into the Lake of Fire. However, we will still be judged. We will still have to give an account of our words and deeds. This judgment, though, isn't about punishment; instead it's about rewards. We find it discussed in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

I Corinthians 3:14-15: “If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.”

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 what they did. However, those who wasted their lives and only served themselves will *not* be rewarded. As the verse says, they will suffer loss. They won't be cast into the Lake of Fire, but they will fail to gain the rewards that will be 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's just a little sin – will be called the least in the kingdom of Heaven, while those who keep God's commands and teach others to do the same will be called great in the kingdom of Heaven. This passage isn't talking about something God will give you in this life, but rather a reward in the life to come. Jesus warned that some who are 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 a tremendous impact in the life to come!