

# THE ROAD *TO HELL*



EVERLASTING TORMENT OR ANNIHILATION?

FOREWORD BY LYNN GREEN

DAVID  
PAWSON

# THE ROAD TO HELL

David Pawson



True Potential  
REACH THE WORLD

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*Published in The United States of America by  
True Potential Publishing, Inc.*

*PO Box 904 Travelers Rest, SC 29690*

*www.tppress.com*

*This edition issued by special arrangement with Terra Nova  
Publications International Ltd*

*PO Box 2400 Bradford on Avon Wiltshire BA15 2YN*

*First published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1992*

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ISBN 978-0-9818961-5-1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008906165

*Cover design by Chelsey Corn*

*Printed in the USA*

‘The road that leads to perdition is wide with plenty of room,  
and many go that way.’

Jesus of Nazareth (*Gospel of Matthew*)

‘Our friends who long to get rid of the eternal punishment should  
cease to argue against God and instead obey God’s commands  
while there is still time.’

Augustine of Hippo (*City of God*)

‘Then I saw that there was a way to Hell, even from the gates  
of Heaven.’

Bunyan of Bedford (*Pilgrim’s Progress*)

‘The road to hell is paved with good intentions.’

Baxter of Kidderminster  
(quoted by Samuel Johnson and Bernard Shaw)

‘Whenever I see one or a thousand men running into hell, be  
it in England, Ireland or France, yea, in Europe, Asia, Africa  
or America, I will stop them if I can; as a minister of Christ, I  
will beseech them in his name, to turn back and be reconciled  
to God.’

John Wesley (letter to John Smith)

‘The principal danger of the 20th century will be:  
a religion without the Holy Spirit,  
Christians without Christ,  
forgiveness without repentance,  
salvation without regeneration,  
politics without God and  
a heaven without a hell.’

William Booth (at the end of his life)

‘Sir, if I believed what you, and the Church of God, say you believe, even if England were covered in broken glass from coast to coast, I would walk over it, if need be on my hands and knees, and think it worthwhile living just to save one soul from an eternal hell like that.’

Attributed to ‘Charlie’ Peace  
(convicted murderer in conversation with the  
chaplain in Leeds gaol, before being hanged)

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# FOREWORD

About five years ago I wrote a personal reminder in my notebook. It reads, 'I must preach more about hell.' I had been thinking about how, in the days of my youth, preachers had regularly impressed upon me that there was a 'heaven to gain and a hell to shun'. I was also feeling some alarm at an apparent lack of the fear of God in many Christians. It seemed to me that many who had become Christians in recent years had been taught about the loving care of Father God; but did they understand that he was also their judge?

In the years that have followed, I don't think the balance has been redressed much and, I must confess, I have not paid much attention to the note to myself. Now my friend David Pawson has come along with a sharp reminder.

Many who read this book will be aware that hell has become a subject of some controversy in recent years. In a recently published letter someone writes, '[hell] is a subject on which I must fight. I could not love a God who would torture people eternally.' David is, of course, very aware of that controversy and writes in chapter 6, 'Hell may be disputed, for obvious reasons, even among believers.'



## THE ROAD TO HELL

David Pawson has written about controversial subjects before, but this book has not been written as a contribution to the controversy nor as another voice in the dispute. It is written with obvious compassion, a high regard for God's Word and a godly jealousy for the character of God. I commend this book without reservation to those people who have reached conclusions similar to the ones expressed in it, but also to those who are still forming their views and equally to those who hold other views.

C Lynn Green

Youth with a Mission

Director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa

# INTRODUCTION

I once preached to a congregation of dogs, mostly of the breed known as Labrador. It was a guest service and each dog had brought a friend—who was blind! It was an annual gathering arranged by the Torch Trust for those who had lost, or never had, their sight.

When I began to prepare my message, I felt constrained to choose the subject of hell. Part of me resisted the thought. Surely these dear people had suffered enough already. They needed comfort rather than challenge, empathy rather than exhortation. But the words of Jesus kept running through my mind: ‘If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body rather than for your whole body to be thrown into hell’ (Matt 5:29, part of the Sermon on the Mount).

That became my text. I told my unseeing hearers that most of the temptations of the sighted come through what the New Testament calls ‘the lust of the eyes’ (1 John 2:16). I asked them to pray for me because I could see.

There was an elderly lady present, who had never been able

to see and bitterly resented the fact. When I spoke of the spiritual handicap of sight, she began to feel pity for those who could see. Her heart was softened and opened to the Lord. Her friends told me that she sang praises all the way home in the coach —and died a few days later, rejoicing in her salvation. The first person she ever saw was Jesus.

This was not the first time I had dared to tackle this awesome subject. My records tell me that I began to do so in the Methodist church at Addlestone, Surrey, in July 1955. Though I had been brought up in that denomination and trained at Cambridge for its ministry, I cannot recall any mention, much less any instruction in, or discussion of, this topic. Such knowledge as I had came from my own study of the Bible.

I suppose each one of us carries a mental picture conjured up by the word ‘hell’ itself, usually associated with some horrifying experience in our past. Two such come to my mind, both from the time during which this book was written.

The first was in Hong Kong. Jackie Pullinger, that courageous and dedicated English lady who makes Christ real to the island’s drug addicts, took me into the ‘walled city’ (the wall is no longer there —the Japanese demolished it during World War II and used the rubble to build an airport runway out into the harbour). I can only describe it as a vertical shanty town, with dwellings piled on top of one another many storeys high. Inside it was dark, dirty and depressing. But what gave it its unique character was the extraordinary fact that there were no laws whatsoever over it, for this small area belonged to no one and was under no authority. Pimps and prostitutes, drug dealers and addicts, gamblers and the infamous triads —all might be found there, plying their degrading trades and exploiting human weaknesses. Later, when I had emerged from the bowels of this dreadful place into the welcome sunlight, I felt I had just visited hell. Yet even there the light of

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the gospel was shining —in the only brightly lit room I saw, at the very heart of the pile on the lowest level, where Jackie and her colleagues proved that Christ can set the captive free. Thankfully, the ‘city’ was to be pulled down.

The second was in Poland, at a place whose name makes the blood freeze — Auschwitz! Words cannot describe my feelings as I stood in the hermetically sealed ‘shower-room’ where thousands of Jews, gypsies and other ‘undesirables’ were suffocated with deadly Zyklon-B gas. Their hair was cut off to stuff cushions, gold teeth were extracted and sent to the bank, tattooed skin carefully removed to make lamp shades, fat melted down to manufacture soap, the skinny remains finally cremated and the ashes sold off as fertilizer. I had to remind myself that the men responsible for this unbelievable barbarism went home to love their wives, play with their children and sing Christmas carols! Otherwise I too would have been guilty of their perverted contempt which treated those made in the image of God as somehow sub-human and unfit to live. Once again, as I came out of the windowless chamber and saw the bright sun in a cloudless sky, I felt I had just returned from hell.

As I write, the words of Robert Browning come to me — ‘There may be a heaven,’ he said, ‘but there must be a hell’. It is a demand for a moral universe. If this life is all there is, then injustice reigns. But if there is a life beyond and it includes retribution for the evildoer, then it becomes possible to believe again that righteousness rules and that God is good.

To that extent, hell is good news. Even if the wicked escape the consequences and penalties of their crimes in this world, they haven’t got away with it. They will get their deserts.

Most would agree that some deserve no less than hell. Mass murderers, cruel dictators, drug dealers, child molesters, wife

batterers —we probably all have candidates for the lake of fire.

Why do we never include ourselves? Hell is always for the others! A recent Gallup poll revealed that two-thirds of the American public believed in heaven and that they were sure to go there; the same proportion also said they knew someone who was sure to go to hell!

Perhaps this is why the teaching of Jesus about hell is so unpopular. He seemed to suggest that the vast majority of the human race were heading there (Matt 7:13) and for such trivial offences — calling someone a fool or looking at a girl lustfully (Matt 5:22, 28).

Such statements make us all feel vulnerable. Isn't that taking things a little too far? Surely most of us are not as bad as all that. Yet deep down lurks the uneasy feeling that if Jesus was right, we could be in serious danger —all of us.

Little wonder, then, that this is the most offensive and least acceptable of all Christian doctrines. We try to ignore it, but it won't go away. We attempt to explain it away, but it keeps coming back. Better to face the truth, even if it hurts. There can be no final comfort in delusions. This has not been an easy book to write. I have started and stopped a number of times. It is an awesome responsibility, knowing that, 'we who teach will be judged more strictly' (Jas 3:1). When my briefcase, containing the sole manuscript, disappeared from an airport car park in Bologna, I wondered whether the Lord was telling me not to publish. Providentially, in answer to many prayers, the police returned everything intact a few days later. I was encouraged to believe it was meant to be published.

But why write such a book at all? It is hardly the way to 'win

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friends and influence people’! The spirit of the age is certainly not conducive to our subject. Existentialism lives for this world rather than the next. Hedonism seeks pleasure and avoids pain. There are enough troubles to cope with in the here and now; why add distant worries about the there and then?

However, forgetting about hell neither abolishes it nor saves anyone from going there. If there is such a place and there is any risk of a single human being going there, it is an act of compassionate love both to warn those likely to go there and to tell them how to escape such a fate. But who are they?

The major thrust of this book will come as a surprise, even as a shock, to many Christians, since it is primarily addressed to them. It is far more likely to be read by ‘saints’ than by ‘sinners’ anyway. That is as it should be, for two reasons.

First, the spirit of the age has now invaded and infected the church itself. Believers are becoming preoccupied with temporal needs (both inside the church and outside in society) to the neglect of eternal destinies. Coupled with this major shift of emphasis is an alarming move away from the traditional understanding of hell as endless torment, even among Bible-believing teachers. Annihilation is the current favoured alternative. The question, ‘Where will you spend eternity?’ will have to be replaced by, ‘Will you spend eternity anywhere?’ Challenging this growing trend was one of my major motives in writing.

Second, the warnings of Jesus about hell were rarely aimed at sinners; they were occasionally aimed at religious hypocrites (like the Pharisees) but usually at his own disciples, particularly the twelve. This contextual fact seems to have been totally overlooked, even by those who still believe in, preach on and write about hell. Drawing attention to it is probably the unique contribution of this book to the present debate. The implications

are, of course, far-reaching —and very disturbing to those whose security rests on the cliché: ‘Once saved, always saved’ (a phrase found nowhere in Scripture) and who think that ‘saved’ means no more than ‘safe’. Hell is a reminder of the need for holiness as well as forgiveness. Who dare say that such a message is irrelevant to the contemporary church?

I am convinced that the recovery of this neglected truth is vital to the health of Christ’s body and essential to the task of completing the evangelization of all the nations (ethnic groups rather than political authorities). This was my basic reason for putting pen to paper.

The book will probably be no easier to read than it was to write. The opening chapters could be very depressing. The gospel has always been bad news (about God’s wrath) before it is good news (about his love) — Paul’s letter to the Romans is a good example. It would therefore be as wrong to skip reading the gloomy tones of the first four chapters as it would be to stop reading before reaching the glad tidings of the fifth and sixth.

The last was introduced at the suggestion of a number of friends, including the publisher. They felt that a book on hell needs the ‘relief’ of heaven. Since I did not intend to make this a general treatise on the after-life, I was reluctant to broaden its scope and at first considered adding an appendix. But heaven is a climax, not an appendix, so I have incorporated a chapter in the main text, using heaven as a contrast (‘the reverse’) to hell. I trust that readers will understand that the ratio of six chapters on hell to one on heaven in no way reflects the proportion of my thought and speech and is not intended to be a model for theirs. It is simply a reflection of the fact that hell is a greater cause of controversy than heaven, for obvious reasons.

## INTRODUCTION

The last part of the book consists of a number of scripture studies (including a number of passages which are either hotly debated or pointedly avoided). As well as providing exegetical evidence to support the general text, it is hoped these will also give the preacher some homiletical material which can be used in the pulpit.

May the Lord give you grace to read the whole of my book. You may find it intellectually demanding, emotionally draining and morally disturbing—but persevere. In reading, as in salvation, blessing awaits those who ‘endure to the end’. I could not bear the thought of anyone not reading far enough to know that there is no need for them to find themselves damned in hell. Our wonderful Lord, in his great love and mercy, has done everything he could possibly do to save us from this dreadful fate. I pray that the book will leave you filled with gratitude rather than dread, determined to know that perfect love which casts out all fear. Shalom!

## NOTE

When this manuscript was nearing completion, another appeared on the same subject: *Crucial Questions About Hell* by Ajith Fernando, Sri Lankan Director of Youth for Christ, published by Kingsway and with a Foreword by Jim Packer. It covered the same ground and took the same position as my first three chapters. I was tempted to abandon my efforts and leave a clear field for this excellent publication. However, like every other book on this topic, it failed to deal with the crucial fact that most of Jesus’ warnings were given to his committed disciples. Correspondence with the author revealed that this was, as usual, an unconscious oversight, as he had failed to take note of the context of these warnings. Having said that, it was clear that he would have interpreted this data in a similar way to myself, for his response to my drawing it to his attention was: ‘In my preaching I certainly warn believers about the possibility of forfeiting their



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eternal salvation by the failure to exercise persevering faith.’ I am grateful to him for his encouragement to go ahead with my book. (‘There is such a need for evangelical statements on this topic that the more there are the better in terms of the total impact on the Christian community’) and gladly recommend his study to my readers.

David Pawson  
Sherborne St John

# **Chapter One**

## **THE RESIDUE**

The following report appeared in newspapers and magazines around the world:

### **The Gates of Hell Opened?**

Scientists are afraid they have opened the gates to hell. A geological group who drilled a hole about 14.4 kilometers deep (about nine miles) in the crust of the earth, are saying that they heard human screams. Screams have been heard from the condemned souls from earth's deepest hole. Terrified scientists are afraid that they have let loose the evil powers of hell up to the earth's surface.

'The information we are gathering is so surprising, that we are sincerely afraid of what we might find down there,' stated Dr. Azzacov, the manager of the project to drill a 14.4 kilometer hole in remote Siberia.

The geologists were dumbfounded. After they had drilled

several kilometers through the earth's crust, the drill bit suddenly began to rotate wildly. 'There is only one explanation — that the deep centre of the earth is hollow,' the surprised Azzacov explained. The second surprise was the high temperature they discovered in the earth's center. 'The calculations indicate the given temperature was about 1,100 degrees Celsius, or over 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit,' Dr. Azzacov points out. 'This is far more than we expected. It seems almost like an inferno of fire is brutally going on in the center of the earth.'

'The last discovery was nevertheless the most shocking to our ears, so much so that the scientists are afraid to continue the project. We tried to listen to the earth's movements at certain intervals with supersensitive microphones, which were let down through the hole. What we heard turned those logically thinking scientists into trembling ruins. It was sometimes a weak, but high-pitched sound which we thought to be coming from our own equipment,' explained Dr. Azzacov. 'But after some adjustments we comprehended that indeed the sound came from the earth's interior. We could hardly believe our own ears. We heard a human voice, screaming in pain. Even though one voice was discernible, we could hear thousands, perhaps millions, in the background, of suffering souls screaming. After this ghastly discovery, about half of the scientists quit because of fear. Hopefully, that which is down there will stay down there,' Dr. Azzacov added.

The story has been traced back to a Finnish paper, but there the trail ends. For reasons which will become apparent later in the book (one of them being that hell is not yet inhabited), the account is highly suspicious and probably belongs to the realm of rumor or hoax. However, it prompts two appropriate reflections.

First, such a tale is more likely to provoke fear in people today than any 'hell-fire' preaching from the pulpit. That is because our age is more impressed with scientific discoveries than scriptural

declarations. Even Christians can fall into the trap of offering ‘scientific’ proofs for biblical truth, unwittingly locating authority in human reason rather than divine revelation. Perhaps we need to recall Jesus’ realistic assessment of human scepticism — that those who don’t accept the words of the prophets will not even be convinced by meeting someone who has returned from beyond the grave (Luke 16:31).

Second, the absence of any explanation of the concept of ‘hell’ is striking and deeply significant. The reporter assumes, quite correctly, that most of his readers are already well acquainted with the idea of myriads of human souls tormented by unbearable heat.

Such a picture is deeply rooted in Western folklore. It is probably an example of the most effective communication in the history of the church.

## **MEDIEVAL TRADITION**

In the days when the majority of worshippers were illiterate and the Bible remained a closed book studied only by Latin scholars, Christian doctrines were communicated to the eye rather than the ear — both in a dynamic mode (ritual) and a static one (stained glass, sculpture, painting). Few cathedrals of the Middle Ages lacked a vivid visual reminder of the destiny of the unsaved (the stone frieze above the west door in Swiss Fribourg is typical). Such lurid scenes left an indelible impression. When the fear they engendered was linked with an ecclesiastical claim to sacramental monopoly, the sacerdotal stranglehold on society in those days is easily understood.

The medieval concept of hell has survived almost intact, in spite of the Protestant Reformation. But the method of its

communication has radically changed. During subsequent centuries, this sombre truth has been conveyed *verbally* rather than *visually*. There was a precedent for this in the fourteenth century: Dante's *The Divine Comedy* traced a journey through hell and purgatory to paradise. This poetic approach would surface again in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. But it would be through preaching rather than poetry that the tradition would be perpetuated. Many have heard of, though few have actually read, the most famous sermon on the topic, by the American Puritan, Jonathan Edwards, entitled *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, which stimulated revival across the Atlantic and has been widely emulated, from Victorian preachers to latter-day televangelists.

It has to be said that both the visual and verbal portrayals frequently went beyond the restraints of holy writ. Indeed, the horror of hell is probably more effectively conveyed by the meagre information in scripture than by the detailed descriptions of some expositors. It may even be that some of these attempts to improve its impact have been counter-productive, bringing the whole subject into disrepute and even ridicule. However, a reaction against such crudity is not the only reason why hell is taken less than seriously in contemporary thinking.

### MODERN TRIVIALIZATION

Hell is still a familiar feature in our mental landscape. Yet the familiarity no longer inspires fear, much less terror. Modern man has come to terms with it — through blasphemy, comedy and existential reinterpretation.

It is ironic that the word itself is far more used outside than inside the church. Together with related curses (like 'Damn you'), it is one of the most common swear-words in daily use. At root, such blasphemies are a form of defiance, a show of bravado,

daring the deity to strike one down for using holy words in an unholy way (which explains why most obscenities are drawn from the two most 'sacred' relationships: between man and God, man and woman).

'Hell' is now used so frequently that it is considered no more than a mild expletive. Take the classic example of Charlie 'Dryhole' Woods, who after years of fruitless drilling, discovered the biggest oil gusher in California (eighty thousand barrels a day) and described his find to the media in lively though limited vocabulary: 'It's hell. Literally hell. It roars like hell. It mounts, surges and sweeps like hell. It's uncontrollable as hell. It's black and hot as hell.'

Such sloppy usage debases the word, using a greater threat to describe a much lesser one. Its emotive content can be reduced as much by using it too frequently as by using it too rarely.

Hell is also being trivialized in our day through comedy. Laughter is a defence mechanism, especially to shake off fears (how many stage comics are melancholics in private life).

We literally 'laugh it off'. From 'naughty' sea-side postcards to television 'sitcoms' (situation comedies), jokes exploit the widespread knowledge of the Christian belief. Many are variations of the 'heaven for climate, hell for company' theme. Others include a reference to Saint Peter and the 'pearly gates'.

Again, the concept is debased. Apprehension is at least reduced, and even removed altogether. Humour copes with the intolerable. Reverence and ridicule cannot co-exist. Perfect laughter casts out fear.

A more subtle form of reductionism relates to our existential

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preoccupation with our present situation. The next world has become unreal and irrelevant. This world is the only one that really matters. We therefore make our own ‘heaven’ or ‘hell’ here on earth. There is neither pleasure nor pain beyond the grave.

There are two significant implications of this common outlook. One is the transference of retribution from the eternal to the temporal sphere. The facts of life hardly sustain such a theory. The Bible is more honest with its observation that life here can be quite unjust, the innocent suffering and the guilty prospering (see Ps 73:3–14, for example).

The other is the transference of judgement from the divine to the human realm. It is no longer God who decides our destiny — we choose our own. The supreme sovereignty of theism is replaced by the assertive autonomy of humanism.

Hell is no longer an imposed punishment, but a freely chosen preference — even a right to be defended (‘If I want to go to hell, who’s going to stop me?’). It is no longer a verdict of the divine will, but a victory of the human will. And man is even free to escape from this hell of his own making — by committing suicide.

A hell that has been trivialized in these three, or any other ways will no longer arouse fear. But human nature abhors a vacuum, and many other fears have moved into the empty house — fear of AIDS, the bomb, cancer, pollution, redundancy, etc. Surprisingly, the process of dying (which can be painful and humiliating) is now more feared than death itself (which it is assumed leads to oblivion, a welcome relief for many, particularly the elderly).

Self-preservation is one of our most profound and primitive

instincts; no cost is considered too great to save life from premature death, especially in a context of sudden disaster. Yet our generation is increasingly sympathetic to euthanasia, the hastening of death for the terminally ill or feeble aged. This apparent inconsistency is explicable when death is understood as deprivation of life, which in turn must be seen to be worth living.

The real fear of death itself springs from a belief in the continuity of conscious existence beyond the grave, coupled with the belief that the quality of that life will bear a direct moral and judicial relation to the way we have lived in this life. It is anticipation of retribution which gives death its most painful sting. We shrink from the thought of accountability.

For an older generation, death ushered creatures into the presence of their Creator. Lives would be examined and verdicts announced. 'Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement' (Heb 9:27). In the Bible, both events are equally inevitable.

That unbelievers in the world should seek to evade this challenge is at least understandable. A pleasure-seeking generation finds such thoughts extremely unpalatable. But that believers in the church, committed to the truth as God has revealed it, should also become evasive is astonishing. Yet that also is a facet of life today.

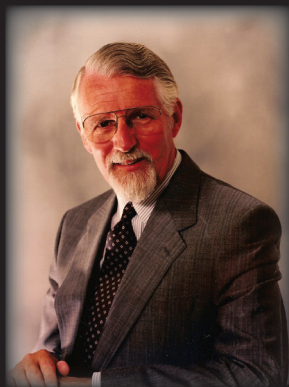


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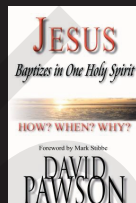
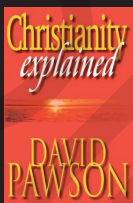
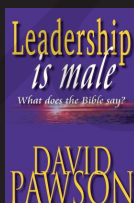
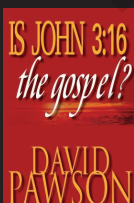
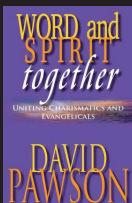
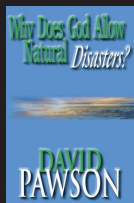
# THE ROAD TO HELL

*'Hell is the most offensive and least acceptable of all Christian doctrines. We try to ignore it but it won't go away. Better to face the truth, even if it hurts.'*



Challenging the modern alternatives of liberal 'universalism' and evangelical 'annihilationism', David Pawson presents the traditional concept of endless torment as soundly biblical, illustrating his argument with in-depth Scripture studies on controversial passages. Heaven is also a reality, he affirms, but it is hell which is being overlooked.

**David Pawson** is well known to countless Christians as an outstanding Bible teacher and author. His teaching on television and in other media is received by millions around the world. Pawson explains the Bible clearly, encouraging Christians to go back to Scripture and to consider its teaching for themselves. His books are available at <http://pawsonbooks.com>



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