

# **Whatever happened to Hell?**

John Blanchard

EP Books (Evangelical Press) Registered  
Office: 140 Coniscliffe Road, Darlington,  
Co Durham DL3 7RT  
admin@epbooks.org  
www.epbooks.org

EP Books are distributed in the USA by:  
JPL Books, 3883 Linden Ave. S.E.,  
Wyoming, MI 49548  
order@jplbooks.com  
www.jplbooks.com

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First published 1993  
Third impression 2003  
Fourth impression 2005  
Fifth impression 2012  
This edition 2014

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available  
ISBN: 978-0-85234-979-3

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## Preface

In the early 1960s I read a book written almost exactly 100 years earlier and which had recently been republished.<sup>1</sup> Its title was *The Rich Man and Lazarus*, and the author, Brownlow North, powerfully applied the meaning of a parable Jesus told about the lives, deaths and afterlives of two men, one rich and godless and the other poor and godly. The book was based on messages Brownlow North had preached to thousands of people at huge open-air services held in Northern Ireland in the summer of 1859, and this may account for the passion that came through its pages. As a young evangelist, I found it riveting.

Nearly thirty years later I had lost none of my admiration for the book, but sensed that it was in danger of being sidelined because the style and language were becoming increasingly out of date. What was needed was a modern replacement, something basic, simple and brief—about 100 pages would be fine—and directly aimed at unbelievers. I decided to make the attempt, but the plan quickly came unstuck, because I soon realized that there was an even greater need for a book that covered much more territory. Brownlow North wrote at a time when the man in the street had at least a nodding acquaintance with the general flow of the Bible's teaching and many of his readers a fairly good grasp of its central doctrines. Times had changed. Ignorance of biblical truth was of epidemic proportions. Polls taken in the United Kingdom in recent years indicated that fewer than four per cent of the population read the Bible on a regular

basis. There was ‘a famine on the land—not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the LORD’ (Amos 8:11), as a result of which the average person had virtually no idea what the Bible says about hell.

What was in some ways even more serious, many of those who professed and called themselves Christians had retreated from ‘the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints’ (Jude 3), and the pulpit had been as badly affected as the pew. We had seen a widespread defection from biblical truth, with many preachers blurring some of the crucial issues almost beyond recognition and others abandoning the whole idea of hell. This disastrous development needed to be faced and ‘Brownlow North revisited’ would not be the way to do it. So in 1993 *‘Whatever happened to hell?’* came into being, and the need for it to be reprinted several times since shows that it met a wider need.

Sadly, in the past twenty years the situation has deteriorated even further making the release of this Classic Series edition of the book both timely and urgent. My prayer is that it will not only help unbelievers to grasp the serious and urgent implications of what the Bible has to say about hell and to accept God’s wonderful offer of salvation, but that it will also encourage believers to respond as they should to the love of God, ‘who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace’ (2 Timothy 1:9).

I want to repeat my special thanks to an unofficial ‘team’ of highly respected friends—Andrew Anderson, Peter Anderson, Steve Brady, Brian Edwards, Paul Hill, Graham Hind and Geoff Thomas—who kindly read through the manuscript of the original edition and made numerous suggestions, almost all of which were incorporated into the finished work. I shudder to think of the flaws that might

have slipped through without their kind and careful work. I also remain indebted to Dr J. I. Packer for his very gracious Foreword. With countless other Christians all around the world I already owed him an incalculable debt for his wise and winsome teaching of biblical truth; in my case, that debt became much greater.

My late wife Joyce coped patiently with the long sessions, sometimes lasting weeks on end, when I needed to lock myself away in order to work on this particular project, and Joy Harling, my secretary when the book was first written, did a superb job in pulling it all together. In preparing this new edition Gill Snow efficiently handled the updating of Scripture references and the many revisions I made, and Marlene Williams excelled herself in the painstaking task of editing the entire text and revising the Indexes. I am deeply grateful to them all.

I am especially indebted to T. Calvin Wells, of Jackson, Mississippi, President of the Sam E and Burnice C Wittel Foundation, for his initiative in leading the Foundation to sponsor the publication of this particular project.

May God overrule its many weaknesses and imperfections and use this book 'to the praise of his glorious grace' (Ephesians 1:6).

**John Blanchard**

Banstead

Surrey

May 2014

# 1

## Fact or fantasy?

Hell seems to have fallen on hard times. A poll taken in the United States in 1978 revealed that over seventy per cent of those interviewed said they believed in hell.<sup>1</sup> Eleven years later a *Newsweek* survey, again taken in the United States, produced a figure of just fifty-eight per cent.<sup>2</sup> A poll conducted in Australia in 1988 indicated that only thirty-nine per cent believed in hell,<sup>3</sup> while in 1989 a Gallup Poll taken in Britain for the *Sunday Telegraph* revealed that no more than twenty-four per cent of those questioned did so.<sup>4</sup>

These are pretty poor ratings, but according to some people they are still grossly exaggerated. In novelist David Lodge's opinion the real situation is this: 'At some point in the nineteen-sixties hell disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't. Different people became aware of the disappearance of hell at different times. Some realized that they had been living for years as though hell did not exist, without having consciously registered its disappearance. Others realized that they had been behaving, out of habit, as though hell were still there, though in fact they had ceased to believe in its existence long ago.'<sup>5</sup>

That may be putting it a bit strongly (a novelist is not the same as a historian or a theologian) but there are both historians and theologians who would be inclined to agree

with Lodge, even if they disagree about when hell began to evaporate. When the American church historian Martin Marty, a professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, was preparing a Harvard lecture on the subject, he consulted the indexes of several scholarly journals dating back over a period of a hundred years to 1889, and failed to find a single entry. His conclusion was that ‘Hell disappeared and no one noticed.’<sup>6</sup> Gordon Kaufman, a professor at Harvard Divinity School, says that hell has been in decline for 400 years and is now so diminished that the process is irreversible: ‘I don’t think there can be any future for hell.’<sup>7</sup> Another theologian says, ‘Talk of hell started to fall off in western countries about the same time science began to make an impact, about the late nineteenth century.’<sup>8</sup> Speaking on BBC television, Richard Cavendish, author of *Visions of Heaven and Hell*, commented, ‘In our century there has been a kind of double development. We have created hells on earth on a bigger scale and perhaps of a more horrible kind than any previous century has done. Yet there has been a very general retreat from the idea of hell.’<sup>9</sup>

This retreat is reflected in theological literature. One volume of Christian doctrine, with nearly 800 pages, and edited by three highly respected Christian leaders, has only eight lines on hell;<sup>10</sup> yet even this is eight lines more than in another major work entitled *Handbook of Contemporary Theology*.<sup>11</sup> In 1957, an American religious writer, H. Buis, researching the subject had difficulty getting hold of a particularly important book published towards the end of the nineteenth century. When he eventually found one in a seminary library he discovered that it had been loaned out only twice in fifty years!<sup>12</sup> In the course of preparing this present book I asked the manager of a large Christian bookshop in Australia how many titles he stocked on the subject of hell. He replied,



‘None. We had only one, but nobody wanted to buy it, so we had to give it away.’ On another occasion I asked a minister with several thousand books in his library how many he had on hell and was told, ‘I did have one, but I seem to have mislaid it.’

### **The lively corpse**

Yet if hell no longer exists, or is on its deathbed, the word ‘hell’ may never have been more active or popular; it is certainly in no danger of becoming unemployed. It is often used to convey images of violence or aggression. In the Second World War, the United States 2nd Armour Division, led by General George Patton, was nicknamed ‘hell on wheels’ because of the havoc it caused on its way to becoming the first American unit to enter Berlin. During the popular revolution against Communism in Romania in December 1989 there was a last-ditch battle on the streets of Bucharest between the Securitate Secret Police and units of the Romanian army. One observer said, ‘All hell has broken loose.’<sup>13</sup> When fifteen people were killed and 186 injured in a collision involving seventy-five vehicles near Chattanooga, Tennessee in December 1990, a fireman described the scene as ‘three miles of hell.’<sup>14</sup> On the first night of the war in the Persian Gulf in 1991, Cable Network News reporter Bernard Shaw described the American bombing of Baghdad by telling viewers, ‘This feels like we’re in the centre of hell.’<sup>15</sup> Later in that extraordinary year, when there was a *coup d’état* in the USSR, the British politician Paddy Ashdown said, ‘The gates of hell are going to open on the Soviet Union.’<sup>16</sup>

People also use the word ‘hell’ to speak of a particularly painful experience. The British comic actor Terry-Thomas was once a millionaire, yet died in sad and lonely poverty

after contracting Parkinson's Disease, something he described as 'hell to live with'.<sup>17</sup> Another millionaire, the Marquess of Bristol, was jailed for a year in 1988 for smuggling cocaine into Jersey aboard his private helicopter. Asked what it was like for a man of his social standing to live in a prison cell smaller than any room in his own palatial home, he said, 'It was sheer hell.'<sup>18</sup> Talking in 1990 of the effects of taking cocaine, disgraced American football star Dexter Manley confessed, 'I went through hell.'<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, the word is used in situations not nearly so serious, yet in a way that expresses very strong emotions. When the England team reached the semi-finals of soccer's World Cup competition in Italy in July 1990, millions in Britain watched the match on television. There was chaos around London as hordes of people left work early to be home in time for the kick-off. In the words of one reporter, 'Heaven was anywhere there was a screen. Hell was a faulty fuse.'<sup>20</sup> Earlier in the same competition, England's captain had to return home because of an injured Achilles tendon, and the team manager commented, 'We miss him like hell.'<sup>21</sup>

Then there are times when the word is used to mean a great deal of power or effort. When England's cricketers were being humiliated during the 1990-1991 tour of Australia, the Chairman of Selectors defended them by saying, 'They are all trying like hell.'<sup>22</sup> In his book *How To Play Your Best Golf All The Time*, the famous Scottish golfer and teacher, Tommy Armour, advised his readers to 'whack the hell out of the ball with the right hand.'<sup>23</sup>

The word is also used to mean something difficult or dangerous. When my stepmother faced critical surgery in July 1990 the surgeon warned me, 'It's a hell of an operation.' About the same time, the Church of England asked advertising company Cogent Elliott to come up with slogans

for a campaign to recruit new clergy. One of the proposed posters read, 'The money's diabolical. The hours are ungodly. It's a miracle anybody does it. C of E clergy. It's a hell of a job.'<sup>24</sup> At other times those who use the word seem to be coming at it from two different angles at once. In 1990 an Australian newspaper carried an article on the holiday resort of Pattaya, in Thailand, where 'foreign tourists can stagger from go-go bar to brothel in a drugged stupor for as little as ten dollars a day'. The story was carried under the heading 'A Holiday in Hell'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Obvious or otherwise?**

The word 'hell' can also mean something good, enjoyable or exciting. In December 1990, Iraq's President Saddam Hussein suddenly announced the release of all foreigners held against their will since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait four months earlier. When hostage David Dorrington telephoned his wife in Britain to ask whether she had heard the good news, her reply was, 'Yes, all hell's breaking loose over here.'<sup>26</sup> On another page, the same newspaper reported that Durham County Cricket Club had been granted County Championship status by the Test and County Cricket Board. The club's treasurer told a reporter that it was strange to feel so calm because 'I thought I'd be as excited as hell.'<sup>27</sup> At a funeral service for the extravagant American millionaire Malcolm Forbes, held in March 1990 and attended by 2,000 mourners, his son Robert addressed his dead father with the words, 'It's been a hell of a party—thanks for the trip.'

In December 1991, England's soccer captain Gary Lineker learned that his two-month old son, George, was seriously ill with leukaemia. After the baby's first course of chemotherapy at London's Great Ormond Street Hospital, Lineker spoke of