

Good question! My answer won't be perfect but I'll try to give my best shot from an Orthodox Christian perspective.

What is hell? This is an important question to ask because there are a lot of myths about this among both Christians and non-Christians which emerges from contemporary and overly-literal interpretations of obviously figurative sayings in scripture, which an ancient reader would interpret differently. One of these is the description of "fire" in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which is one of Jesus's parables in the Gospels. I'll paste the parable below as it's worth the read. It's one of the most vivid depictions of hell within the Gospels.

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’

“Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said to him, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’ ”

First of all I'm going to say, Jesus isn't known for always speaking in the most plain/obvious language, as he incorporates metaphor, parables, and various literary tools to communicate an even deeper meaning. Furthermore, there are multiple passages in scripture, including in Jesus's teachings where hell is described as a place of darkness. And for obvious reasons, it can't be both a place of *literal* fire and *literal* darkness. The conclusion we can draw from this is that these depictions of hell are metaphorical for something else.

In scripture, we can also see that God is described through fire, and that God's love is (metaphorical) fire. "For our God is a consuming fire" (Heb 12.29) who "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim 6.16). But what both scripture and the church fathers teach (such

as St. Isaac of Syria) are that **these two kinds of fire are the same**. That is, the (metaphorical) fire that torments us in hell is the same fire as God's love. While counterintuitive. This explained well in St. Paul's 1st letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:9-15). Again I'll paste the passage below and would highly recommend reading it.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation *with* gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on *it* endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

In one instance, a loving fire can heal you, and in another, it hurts you. What determines the result? What foundation you're built upon. As the Orthodox Church of America Website puts it, "God simply reveals Himself in the risen Lord Jesus in such a glorious way that no man can fail to behold His glory. It is the presence of God's splendid glory and love that is the scourge of those who reject its radiant power and light." Here's another quite practical way to understand this: "There's nothing worse than someone you hate, loving you"

As humans, we're all inclined to worship something, whether it's God, or something else, such as money, our nation, or even ourselves, and through free will, God allows us to choose between worshipping God and worshipping something else. It's following God's will vs. The will of the self. Furthermore, what we worship is what we place as our foundation. How is God a unique foundation? Well, out of all foundations we can possibly have, **God as a foundation is the only one that's truly infinite**. Every other thing we worship will eventually erode, or get boring, or even torment us. Some people object to the idea of heaven by saying "won't heaven eventually get boring?" but that objection lies on the idea that the foundation in heaven material pleasure. No, the foundation of the Kingdom of Heaven is God, and God's love for us, which is infinite.

Some people describe this idea as a Christ shaped hole, saying that we all have a Christ shaped hole that can only be filled by Christ, yet we keep on trying to fill it with other things, which eventually leads to us tormenting ourselves. Only by filling that hole with Christ can have something infinite.

So, hell is a rather natural consequence of where we place our foundation. It's God loving us when we separated ourselves from him, and explicitly rejected him, where the other, finite foundations which we've built ourselves upon, have no longer become empty and void.

I hope this helps. Let me know if you want me to attempt to clarify anything. God Bless you.

Here's a quote by St. Isaac of Syria:

those who find themselves in hell will be chastised by the scourge of love. How cruel and bitter this torment of love will be! For those who understand that they have sinned against love, undergo no greater suffering than those produced by the most fearful tortures. The sorrow which takes hold of the heart, which has sinned against love, is more piercing than any other pain. It is not right to say that the sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God . . . But love acts in two ways, as suffering of the reprovved, and as joy in the blessed!