

# The population of hell

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## Main content

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Sometimes the complaint is heard that no one preaches about hell any longer. The subject of hell, if not attractive, is at least fascinating, as any reader of Dante's *Inferno* or Milton's *Paradise Lost* can testify. Equally fascinating, and decidedly more pressing, is the question of how many of us may be expected to go there when we die.

As we know from the Gospels, Jesus spoke many times about hell. Throughout his preaching, he holds forth two and only two final possibilities for human existence: the one being everlasting happiness in the presence of God, the other everlasting torment in the absence of God. He describes the fate of the damned under a great variety of metaphors: everlasting fire, outer darkness, tormenting thirst, a gnawing worm, and weeping and gnashing of teeth.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus indicates that some will be condemned. The Son of man says to the goats: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41). In the Gospel of John, which says comparatively little about hell, Jesus is quoted as saying: "The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Father's] voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29).

The apostles, understandably concerned, asked: "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" Without directly answering their question Jesus replied: "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be able" (Luke 13:23-24). In the parallel passage from Matthew, Jesus says: "Enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few" (Matthew 7:13-14). In a parable immediately following this exchange, Jesus speaks of those who try to come to the marriage feast, but are told: "Depart from me, all you workers of iniquity. There you will weep and gnash your teeth" (Luke 13:27-28). In another parable, that of the wedding guest who is cast out for not wearing the proper attire, Jesus declares: "Many are called, but few are chosen" (Matthew 22:14). Taken in their obvious meaning, passages such as these give the impression that there is a hell, and that many go there; more, in fact, than are saved.

The New Testament does not tell us in so many words that any particular person is in hell. But several statements about Judas can hardly be interpreted otherwise. Jesus says that he has kept all those whom the Father has given him except the son of perdition (John 17:12). At another point Jesus calls Judas a devil (John 6:70), and yet again says of him: "It would be better for..."

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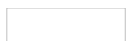
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The subject of hell, if not attractive, is at least fascinating, as any reader of Dante's Inferno or Milton's Paradise Lost can testify. Equally fascinating, and decidedly more pressing, is the question of how many of us may be expected to go there when we die. As we know from the gospels, Jesus spoke many times about hell. Throughout his preaching, he holds forth two and only two final possibilities for human existence: the one being everlasting happiness in the presence of God, the other everlasting torment in the absence of God. He describes the fate of the damned under a great variety of m In religion and folklore, Hell is an afterlife location in which evil souls are subjected to punitive suffering, often torture, as eternal punishment after death. Religions with a linear divine history often depict hells as eternal destinations, the biggest examples of which are Christianity and Islam, whereas religions with reincarnation usually depict a hell as an intermediary period between incarnations, as is the case in the dharmic religions. Religions typically locate hell in another dimension