

Hartford Bible Students

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Shedding Light on What “Hell” Really Is

When evil people die, are they sent alive to a place called hell where they will writhe in agony forever in eternal flames? The doctrine of hell-fire is largely based on the assumption of an immortal soul (being eternally alive in the death condition). But there is no Biblical foundation for that commonly held doctrine. The dead are really dead—not alive—awaiting the promised resurrection.

Indeed, there is no consciousness or pain or any feeling whatever in the grave. God tells us the penalty for sin: “the soul that sinneth, it shall die.” God sentenced Adam to death for the sin of disobedience. There was no mention of an immortal soul and burning eternally for sin.

So how, then, did this doctrine of a burning hell enter church doctrine? Three factors led to the wrong interpretation of Scripture: (1) the Dark Age churches found the fear of hell to be a strong incentive to keep people in the Church, and to make new converts; (2) pagan ideas of an underworld were mixed into Christian doctrine; (3) parables and symbolic passages in the Bible were taken literally, distorting the true intent of the scriptural message.

Torment: The Ultimate Fear Factor

The fear of eternal torment has terrified Christians for nearly 1,700 years. History records that every device of tyranny, persecution, and torture in the name of God and religion has flourished to frighten the uneducated churchgoer into believing.

Harold O.J. Brown, a theology professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, declares the effectiveness of the fear of hellfire compared to that of simple non-existence at death: “... annihilationism [non-existence as a penalty for sin] takes some of the punch out of Gospel preaching. To tell the unrepentant that the worst fate that could befall them is extinction makes

continuing in sin seem less risky.” Is God honored by such fear tactics? “Their fear toward me is taught by the precepts of men....” (Isa. 29:13) His desire is a willing and obedient heart motivated purely by love for Him and His righteousness—not motivated by fear.

Pagans built sacrificial altars to their false god, Baal, where they burned their children alive in the fire. But God Himself declares that such a concept “never did enter My mind.” (Jer.19:5) The idea of torture is abhorrent to God. He forbade it in the Law of the Jews. The Apostle John states that “God is love... perfect love casts out fear because fear hath torment.” (1 John 4:16-18)

Entire congregations have been held captive to this fearsome interpretation of Scripture for centuries, because they have been unable to deny such a claim without the privilege of owning a Bible. Today, in this time of enlightenment, with free access to Bibles and study materials, investigation is not only possible, but also a necessity to understanding the true character of God and His loving plans for all—including those who do not accept Christ now. Indeed, for a Christian today to subscribe to such a doctrine without thorough investigation would be dishonoring to a God of love.

Compromise with Pagan Ideas

Pagan ideas of a fiery underworld date back as far as Egypt’s Nimrod. By the third century AD, many distortions of Bible doctrine had resulted from the church carelessly allowing pagan beliefs to mix with Apostolic teachings.

For example, in the sixth century BC, Zoroaster taught the Persians of a Lord of Lies who lived in the dark reaches under the earth recording the deeds of men as debits and credits. When the body died, the soul went to be judged, and if found to be evil, it would be doomed to torment. Eager to win pagan converts, the

church adopted this philosophy by associating Zoroastrian meanings to highly symbolic scriptures. Soon this compromise developed into a firmly held church creed.

The Catholic Encyclopedia states: "The church professes her faith in the Athanasian Creed [fourth century AD]: 'They that have done good shall go into life everlasting, and they that have done evil into everlasting fire...' the church expressly teaches the eternity of the pains of hell as a truth of faith which no one can deny or call in question without manifest heresy."

Originally, the old English word *hell* simply meant to conceal, to hide, to cover. In old English literature, records may be found of the helling of potatoes—putting potatoes into pits—and of the helling of a house—covering or thatching it. The word *hell* was, therefore, properly used if the translators were using the word *hell* as the hidden condition of death. However, because of the blending of truth with pagan error, the word *hell* became associated with Zoroaster's underworld of torment, and thus, the word *hell* was re-defined as a punishment more ominous than just the grave.

The Word Hell as Used in the Old Testament

Understanding the Bible definition of the word *hell* is key to establishing a proper doctrinal position on the subject. The Old Testament Scriptures were written in the Hebrew language. The words *hell*, *grave*, and *pit* were selected by the translators of the King James Bible to express the sense of the Hebrew word *sheol*. The same translators chose the word *grave* or *pit* in the Old Testament when *sheol* was to be the resting place for good people, and translated it as *hell* when referring to a bad person.

This clearly shows the bias of these translators. An example of this bias is evident in the case of the patriarch Job. "O that thou wouldst hide me in the grave [*sheol*]... until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldst appoint me a set time, and remember me!" (Job 14:12-13)

Here, righteous Job is speaking of hiding from his pain in the grave, *sheol*, waiting in sleep until the resurrection. How absurd it would have been for Job to have prayed to God to hide him in a hell of eternal torture, and so the translators used the word *grave* and not *hell*.

Now compare Job 14:13 with Psalm 86:13, which reads: "Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell [*sheol*]." The Hebrew word *sheol*, being the same in both cases, there is no reason why the same word, *grave*, should not be used in both. Indeed, *sheol* does not mean torment, but quite the reverse. Instead of a place of blazing fire, it is described in the context as a state of darkness (Job 10:21), and instead of representing in any sense pain and suffering, in each case, the context describes *sheol* as a place or condition of silence. (Psa. 115:17; Psa. 88:11,12) "There is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, in the grave [*sheol*] whither thou goest." (Eccl. 9:10)

Examples of Hell [Hades] in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the Greek word *hades* corresponds exactly to the Hebrew word *sheol*. In Acts 2:27, for example, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in *hades*," is a quotation from Psalm 16:10, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in *sheol* [the grave]." In 1 Cor. 15:54,55, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave [*hades*], where is thy victory?" is an allusion to Isaiah 25:8, "He will swallow up death in victory" and to Hosea 13:14, "O death, I will be thy plagues; O *sheol* [grave], I will be thy destruction."

Even though *hades* is defined in these scriptures as the grave, biased translators still rendered the same word, *hades*, as *hell* in Luke 10:15. "And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust down to hell [*hades*]." Again, since the Greek word *hades* is the same in both cases, there is no reason why the word *grave* should not be used consistently.

Parables & Symbolisms

A key to understanding Scripture is knowing when something is to be interpreted literally or as a symbolic picture of something else. Often, God will tell the reader in Scripture what the symbols mean. An example is the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel Chapter 2 where the symbols in the dream are interpreted. At times, however, the reader must recognize symbolisms without the aid of Divine interpretation to find the true meaning of a scripture. This is true with the symbolic language “the lake of fire” in Revelation 20, “the chains of darkness” of 2 Peter 2, and “the everlasting fire” of Matthew 13 and 25.

In the New Testament two highly symbolic words are translated as hell; namely, *gehenna* and *tartaroo*. Cultural anthropology gives an important clue as to the real meaning of these words. The Valley of Hinnom, called *gehenna*, lay just outside the city of Jerusalem, and served the purpose of garbage burner to that city. Its fires were kept continually burning to completely consume all things deposited there, brimstone being added to assist combustion and insure complete destruction. But no living thing was ever permitted to be cast into *gehenna*. God’s Law to the Jews prevented torture of any kind to any creature.

In addition to garbage, certain very detestable criminals, being refused a dignified burial, were thrown into *gehenna* after death. These were cast with the carcasses of dead dogs, the city garbage, etc., into *gehenna*, there to be totally consumed.

In symbol, *gehenna* illustrated the future dealings of God in committing to destruction all the impure elements of this earth, thereby preventing them from defiling His holy city, the New Jerusalem. This symbolic burning of all evil elements is termed in Scripture “the Second Death”—final and complete destruction. From this there can be no recovery, for after that, “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins,” but only “fiery indignation which shall devour [destroy] the adversaries.” (Heb. 10:26-27)

We also find it stated that those not found worthy of life are to be cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15)—fire here, as elsewhere, being used as a symbol of destruction, and the symbol “lake of fire” being drawn from this same *gehenna*.

The trial of the Millennial age of judgment is a time of fully proving and separating, with unerring accuracy, the sheep (those who hear and obey the Master’s voice) from the goats (those who rebel in disobedience). (Matt. 25:31-46) Then all the righteous will see the justice as well as the wisdom of the utter destruction of the incorrigible, wilful enemies of righteousness, as it is written: “They shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.” (Isa. 66:24)

The Greek word *tartaroo* occurs but once in the Scriptures, and has been translated *hell*: “God spared not the angels who sinned, but cast [them] down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment.” (2 Pet. 2:4)

In this quotation, all the underlined words are translated from the one Greek word *tartaroo*. The fall of the angels who sinned was from honor and dignity into dishonor and condemnation, and the thought seems to be that “God spared not the angels who sinned, but degraded them, and delivered them into [symbolic] chains of darkness.”

This verse is frequently used to support the idea of a nether world where the disobedient angels and other sinners, are held forever. But a careful examination reveals that the term “chains of darkness” only refers to a temporary restricted condition imposed by God on the fallen angels. This restricted condition does not allow them to be visible, and the only way they can manifest themselves is by entering into the mind of a human or animal. Appearances of this kind are well documented by the Apostles, who, like Jesus, cast out many demons.

God’s Compassions Fail Not

There is a hell, *hades*, *sheol* to which all our race were condemned because of Adam’s sin, and from which all are offered redemption by our Lord’s death. That hell is the grave—the death condition. God said that in the

day Adam disobeyed His commandments, "Dying thou shalt die." (Gen. 2:17) Jesus died, the just for the unjust (Adam and his race), and this payment for sin is called "the ransom for all to be testified in due time." (1Tim. 2:3-6)

God's plan calls for a full and fair opportunity wherein the majority of all who have ever lived will come forth in the resurrection to learn and choose righteousness under favorable conditions. "For when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." (Isa. 26:9)

Yes, God's compassions are far more generous than man has accepted through their false interpretation of Scripture. His merciful plan has been the golden thread woven throughout His Word. He has provided that the sin of man will "...be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord... Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.... him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass, that every soul which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people." (Acts 3:19-23)

Gehenna, the picture of Second Death—utter destruction—is the final penalty upon all the disobedient who, after being redeemed and brought to the full knowledge of the truth, and to full ability to obey it, shall choose a course of opposition to God and righteousness. These incorrigible will be only a few by comparison and "will be destroyed from among the people."

Thank God that the majority of the world will choose life everlasting when they finally see for the first time, with eyes unhindered by false doctrines, the beautiful harmony of the Scriptures.

Send to: Hartford Bible Students
P.O. Box 493
Manchester, CT 06045
Phone: (860) 785-4959
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