



# Hell

## God's Eternal Lake of Fire

The Doctrine of Hell

December 4, 2013

### Introduction

The subject of hell has largely fallen off the radar in many churches and pulpits over the past few decades. Many preachers who are uncomfortable with this doctrine have tried to temper it into something nicer, or they reject it altogether. The idea of an eternal place of torture and punishment is not one that sits well with many people, especially in a culture driven by political correctness. And yet the biblical teachings on the subject are numerous and make it clear that hell is a real place. In fact, Jesus said more in the gospels about hell than He did about heaven! In this study, we will examine some key aspects of this doctrine along with refuting some false views on the subject.

### **Biblical Terms**

When we study the doctrine of hell, there are *five* biblical terms we should become familiar with. Unfortunately, the translators of the King James Version translated most of these terms as “hell” in English. However, each of these is distinct and carries a slightly different nuance when we consider how they are interrelated.

*Gehenna* (γέεννα) — This is a Greek word but has a Hebrew origin meaning “Valley of Hinnom.” The valley of Hinnom was located just outside of Jerusalem and was used for burning trash and disposing of human refuse. Because of literally centuries of piled waste, it was said that the fires would never stop burning, nor would the worms that infest the place ever die. There was also a horrific smell that accompanied the valley. All of these factors made for an adept analogy when comparing this to the final place of judgment. The term *gehenna* is what we most properly would call “hell.” This term appears in the New Testament 12 times — Matt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15; 23:33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

*Hades* (ᾍδης) — This word literally means “not seen.” It is the place of departed souls. On occasion this word is translated “grave” or

“death” (1 Cor 15:55). We may get the impression from reading the King James that this is the same place as hell, but that is most assuredly not the case. In Revelation 20:14 Hades itself is cast into the lake of fire, showing that these are two distinct places. Hades is closely related to the Old Testament term *Sheol* in that Hades is a compartment of *Sheol*. In fact, many New Testament passages will use *hades* to translate the Old Testament term *Sheol*. *Hades* is used 11 times in the New Testament — Matt 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Cor 15:55; Rev 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14.

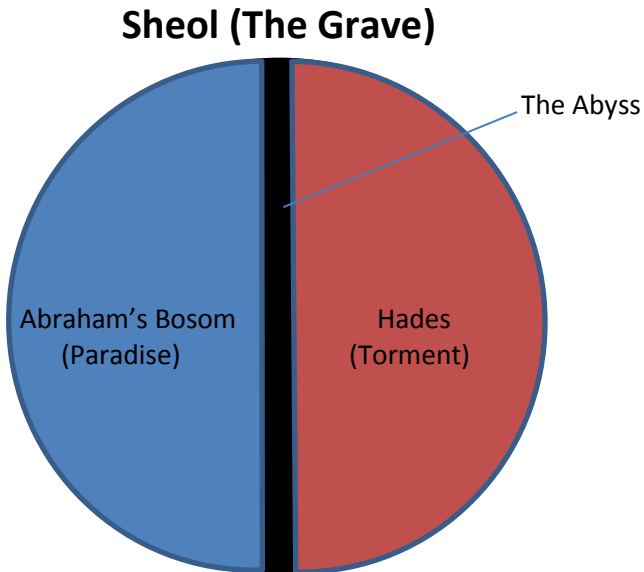
*Sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) — This is the Hebrew term for the world of the dead. It is commonly transliterated into English, but can also be translated as “the grave” or “the pit.” Prior to Christ’s resurrection, this was the place where every human soul was taken at death. Again, because this term was translated 31 times as “hell” in the KJV, there has been a common misconception that Old Testament saints would not enter *Sheol*. But this was not the case. There were two compartments to *Sheol* — one for the righteous, and another for the wicked. There was also a great abyss that separated these two compartments (see below). In the Old Testament, all souls would enter some part of *Sheol* upon death. The term *Sheol* appears 63 times in the Old Testament — Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Num 16:30, 33; Deut 32:22; 1 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 22:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 7:9; 11:8; 14:13; 17:6, 13; 21:13; 24:19; 26:6; Psalm 6:5; 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 30:3; 31:17; 49:14, 15; 55:15; 86:13; 88:3; 89:48; 116:3; 139:8; 141:7; Prov 1:12; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11, 24; 23:14; 27:20; 30:16; Ecc 9:10; Song 8:6; Isa 5:14; 14:9, 11, 15; 28:15, 18; 38:10, 18; 57:9; Ezek 31:15, 16, 17; 32:21, 27; Hos 13:14 (2X); Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Hab 2:5.

*Tartarus* (ταρταρόω) — This is the deepest abyss in *Sheol*. It is a place of darkness and torment. The word is only used in 2 Peter 2:4, and is in a verb form meaning to incarcerate in the abyss. The only inhabitants of the abyss are a select group of fallen angels who sinned and are being kept there in chains until the final judgment. Satan will also be cast into this abyss and bound for 1,000 years during the Millennial Kingdom of Christ (Rev 20:1–3). Following the 1,000 years, Satan and his demons will be loosed from the abyss to lead one final rebellion before being cast into the lake of fire (Rev 20:7–10).

*Lake of Fire* — The lake of fire is a synonym for the term *gehenna*. In other words, the lake of fire *is* hell. This is the term used to describe the final and eternal place of torment for those who have rejected the Lord. The inhabitants will include the Antichrist/beast (Rev 19:20), the false prophet (Rev 19:20), the devil and his demons (Rev 20:10), death (Rev 20:14), Hades (Rev 20:14), and all the wicked whose names are not written in the book of life (Rev 20:15).

### **The Relationship between Sheol, Hades, Tartarus, and Hell**

Although these terms are related, they each have a distinct location and purpose. The most helpful passage for understanding the interrelation of these concepts is the parable in Luke 16:19–31. In this passage we have three locations identified in the afterlife: 1) Abraham’s bosom (v. 22); 2) Hades (v. 23); and 3) a great gulf/abyss between them (v. 26). Since both Lazarus and the rich man are taken to this place, we can understand this entire place to be *Sheol* or the grave. The great gulf that separates these two compartments of *Sheol* is *Tartarus*. This is where certain fallen angels are bound in chains, awaiting judgment. Hades is pictured as a place of conscious torment, while Abraham’s bosom is pictured as a place of comfort. We can graphically illustrate it in this fashion:



We should also recall that when Jesus was hanging on the cross, he told the repentant thief that he would be with Him that very day in paradise.

The paradise of which Jesus spoke is identical with “Abraham’s bosom.”

Note: The suffering Jesus experienced on the cross was what paid for our sins. He did not go and endure additional suffering in “hell” to atone for us. Remember Jesus words just before He died: “It is finished!”

During the three-day period between Jesus’ death and resurrection, He went to a place called paradise — the same place the thief on the cross went to. While there, Jesus preached a message of judgment to the wicked people who had perished in the flood, who were across the abyss in Hades (1 Pet 3:19–20). At His resurrection, He led a whole host of souls out of Sheol by taking the entire compartment of paradise with Him to heaven (Eph 4:8). After this time, every righteous soul who dies would also be taken directly to heaven. Thus with paradise emptied and relocated, the only remaining residents of Sheol are the wicked in either Hades or the abyss. Since there is no one righteous dwelling in Sheol in the New Testament era, some of the biblical writers will use Sheol and Hades interchangeably as the place where the wicked dead dwell. But we can still technically distinguish the two.

Notice also the order in which the lake of fire (hell) is populated:

- 1) The first residents will be the Antichrist (a.k.a. the beast) and his false prophet (Rev 19:20). These two will be responsible for leading a world-wide rebellion against the Lord and His people during the Tribulation period. They will be captured at the Lord’s Second Coming and cast alive into the lake of fire.
- 2) After the 1,000 year Millennial Kingdom, Satan and several of the fallen angels will be released from the abyss to deceive the nations. They will attempt an attack on the holy city of Jerusalem which will fail (Rev 20:7–10). Following the defeat they also will be cast into the lake of fire.
- 3) Following the Satan’s defeat, there is the Great White Throne judgment. At this time, Hades will be emptied of its residents and they will stand before the Lord in judgment (Rev 20:13). Since Hades was populated entirely by wicked unbelievers, none of their names will be found in the Lamb’s book of life. They will all be judged according to their wicked works and then cast into the lake

of fire (Rev 20:15). The level of punishment will correspond with the wicked deeds they have perpetrated in life.

- 4) In conjunction with every unbeliever being cast into the lake of fire, both Hades and death itself will be cast into the lake of fire. This is called the second death. Everyone who dies not having faith in Christ will experience this second death in the lake of fire.

### **A Biblical Description of Hell**

There are many passages that describe hell as noted above. Notice some of the details associated with it:

- It is a real place, just as the sea is a real place (Rev 20:13).
- Those cast into hell are in their resurrected bodies (Rev 20:13).
- It burns with brimstone (Rev 19:20).
- Jesus is given the keys and authority over Hades and death (Rev 1:18).
- It is a place of wailing and gnashing of teeth (Matt 13:42)
- In hell, there is a fire that will never be quenched, and the worms will never die (Matt 9:43–48).

Notice also how Sheol (Hades) is pictured in the Old Testament:

- It is a place of sorrows (2 Sam 22:6; Psalm 18:5)
- It is like drought and heat (Job 24:19)
- It is a place of pain (Psalm 116:3)
- In Sheol there is no hope (Isa 38:18)
- It is a place of affliction (Jonah 2:2)

The word “hell” is not used in any book from Romans to Hebrews. Paul preferred the term “wrath.” This refers both to eternal punishment as well as the wrath of God displayed during the Tribulation. God’s wrath is mentioned several places in the New Testament — Rom 1:18; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; Rev 14:10. Jesus also used this term in reference to God’s anger, indignation, and vengeance. This is really synonymous with the punishment meted out in God’s wrath.

### **Wrong Teachings on Hell**

There are many false teachings that proliferate on this subject, and there is not enough space to elaborate on them all here. But a few key groups should be noted:

### The Roman Catholic View of Hell

Catholics teach that not only will the wicked be condemned to hell, but many Christians will suffer a similar, yet temporary fate in a place called purgatory. This idea has been a staple of Catholic doctrine since the Middle Ages, but it is clearly not biblical. This idea of purgatory is somewhat of a corollary to the idea that salvation is obtained by doing good works. In order to “purge” away your bad works, a few thousand years of purgatory are in order to cleanse the soul.

Biblically speaking, purgatory does not appear *anywhere* in the Scriptures. There is a reference to this concept in the apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees, but this was not added to the Catholic Old Testament until the 1600s, following the Protestant Reformation. One of the main reasons they canonized this book was to offer a “biblical” argument against the protestant (and biblical) doctrine of salvation by faith alone. On the issue of canonization, we must recognize that the Jews do not hold 2 Maccabees to be part of their Old Testament. And since the Old Testament Scriptures were committed to the Jews (Rom 9:4), no church or group of Christians should be seeking to add to the Old Testament canon 2,000 years after it was finished. The Scriptures are clear that the righteous will be ushered immediately into the Lord’s presence upon death (Luke 23:43; John 14:1–3).

### The Jehovah’s Witness View on Hell

The JW’s utterly reject the reality of hell. Many other religions and individuals follow this idea as well. The notion that souls will simply be annihilated upon death, or enter a kind of “soul sleep” is clearly unbiblical. Death is not a synonym for extinction, as the JW’s would hold. There is a real existence following physical death, as well as a bodily resurrection for every human being — the righteous to eternal life, the wicked to eternal death and destruction. But eternal death is still a conscious, tormented, bodily existence for the wicked. Heaven and hell are real places — just as real as the physical earth we see around us. We would do well to heed the Bible’s warnings about God’s wrath and the danger of being cast into hell.

### Conclusion

It is imperative that we make sure that we are saved from these awful places. The consequences described in Luke 16:19–31 for lack of repentance are too terrible to play with.

~AWB