

What the Bible Teaches About Hell

By Wesley White
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David and Sue were happy with their lives. They had been married for 26 years. Their 22 year-old-son, Tony, had just graduated from college and was hired by a large corporation as a junior executive. David and Sue couldn't have been prouder of their son.

Then tragedy struck. Tony was killed in an auto accident. He died instantly when a drunk driver slammed head-on into his car. David and Sue went through the motions of preparing the funeral, but they were in a state of shock. During the first few days following Tony's death, everything seemed like a horrible dream from which it was impossible to awake.

A week after Tony's death, reality began to set in. At this point, David and Sue began asking one of the most important questions they had ever considered. "Where is Tony?" They wanted to know the condition of his existence. They needed to know his fate.

David and Sue were never what one might consider religious. They seldom attended church. They were not the type to study the Bible.

Nevertheless, they made an appointment to discuss this theological concern with a church pastor. They began the meeting by asking the minister, "Where is Tony right now?" The minister replied by asking, "Had Tony ever accepted Jesus?" David and Sue admitted that he had not.

"I hate to be the one to tell you this," the pastor sadly informed them, "but Tony at this very moment is burning in hell. He is being tormented day and night with pain like you have never imagined. And this will go on forever. There is no end in sight for his punishment." David and Sue were stunned! It was bad enough to lose Tony in his youth. But now to think that he was suffering in hell was just too much to take.

Perhaps you have wondered about a relative who had died “unsaved.” Have you ever been concerned that a deceased loved one might be burning in everlasting fire? What happens to people after they die?

Many denominations would have you believe in a false hell that only exists in the minds of many deceived individuals. They teach that living a Christian life is your “fire insurance.”

But we shouldn’t be deceived as we study this matter. We should go to the Bible for answers. We should ignore what men teach and instead concentrate on the written Word of God.

What Type of God Do You Worship?

We begin by acknowledging an excellent question which is often asked by atheists. They say, “How can you worship a god who would inflict such an enormous amount of pain on people—especially those who have lived fairly good lives? Why should individuals who have never hurt anyone have to suffer the torments of hell forever?” This question should be pondered by all who profess to be Christian.

Have you ever gotten up in the middle of the night to get a drink of water? It’s dark and you can’t see where you are going. As you feel your way through your darkened living room, you accidentally hit your knee on the sharp edge of the coffee table. That hurts. But this pain is felt in a very small part of your body. It lasts for only a few seconds.

Many ministers claim that the pain of hell is much, much more intense. It covers 100% of your body. And it lasts infinitely longer. According to them, it is never-ending suffering that is too horrible for the human mind to even imagine. They say the pain is worse than anything ever administered in any torture chamber.

Again, how do we answer the atheist who asks, “How can you worship a god who inflicts such suffering on people?”

In the United States today, there is controversy regarding capital punishment. No matter where you stand on the issue, everyone agrees that if you are going to execute a prisoner because he has broken laws, you should make his death as quick and as painless as possible. His physical suffering should not be extended any longer than is necessary.

The more civilized nations try to show mercy when putting criminals to death. Why then, would God take a much harsher approach where the guilty can never find relief? Is the God we worship some type of monster who delights in making lost souls suffer?

The answer is simple. The God of the Bible demonstrates immeasurable love and mercy. The God of the Bible does not make people suffer in extreme agony forever and ever and ever.

The teaching that people burn in hell for eternity is simply not found in the Bible. Like so many teachings of the churches of this world today, this doctrine has come from paganism. Again, it is essential that we get our information from the Bible. We must not take for granted that everything taught by the world’s churches is correct. Such a faulty premise can only lead to deception.

It is vital that we understand that there are FOUR types of hell spoken of in the Bible. Three of these types of hell are in no way synonymous. Each is different from the others.

Sheol = Hell

The word “hell” in the Old Testament was translated from the Hebrew word “Sheol.” When the Old Testament writers referred to Sheol, it was never in the context of a place where people are burned or punished. Rather, their concept of hell meant that the corpse was put in a place where it would decay and return to dust.

Most scholars admit that the Old Testament actually teaches that the departed dwell in Sheol “...in a land of oblivion and forgetfulness from which there is no return...Within the Old Testament there are passages in Job and the Psalms, for example, where the writers’ faith reaches out beyond the bounds of this life. But it is a faith that has not yet found an appropriate form in which to express itself.” (D.S. Russell, *From Early Judaism to Early Church*, p. 130).

David was one of the first prophets to address the issue of life after death. Speaking of the Messiah, he said, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Sheol]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (Psalm 16:10).

There are two points that we learn from the above verse:

1) David talks about being in hell or Sheol after his death. But he had no intention of being in eternal fire. He was talking about a place where he would be in a state of rest. Like other writers of the Old Testament, David knew that when a person was dead, he was in a state where he knew nothing. He was no longer aware of himself or of his surrounding (Ecclesiastes 9:10; Psalms 88:12; Psalms 115:17).

These Scriptures contradict the false teaching that, after death, you are either in a state of bliss in heaven or in a state of suffering in the bowels of the earth.

2) David knew that after death, the human body would be subject to “corruption”; that is, it would decompose.

Again, the Bible scholars concede that when Old Testament writers talked about life after death, “...it was in the form of the resurrection of the dead, rather than of the immortality of the soul (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2). Resurrection is to be distinguished from resuscitation or reanimation of the physical body. It denotes a complete transformation of the human being...” (*Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, article “Resurrection”).

David, like many other Old Testament prophets, knew that God has a master plan of salvation for His people. The elect would rest in their graves—in Sheol—until God raised them at the end of history.

Job wrote: “I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God” (Job 19:25-26). Job also knew that the righteous would one day be brought back to life to share in a future messianic kingdom. Although their physical bodies would decompose, they would be resurrected to live in the presence of God.

Hades = Hell

The second type of hell we find is in the New Testament. There are ten instances in the New Testament where the word “hell” has been translated from the Greek word “Hades.”

The meaning of the word Hades is “grave.” Just like the Hebrew word Sheol, this word has no implications of fire, torment, or eternal punishment. In fact, Sheol and Hades are virtually synonymous. There is little, if any, difference between the two words.

Like Sheol, Hades simply means a state of decay where the person knows nothing. He is resting or sleeping. The New Testament writers frequently use the metaphor of sleep in reference to the dead (Matthew 27:52; I Corinthians 11:30; I Thessalonians 4:13).

Listed below are the ten Scriptures where Hades is translated as hell:

Matthew 11:23

Matthew 16:18

Luke 10:15

Luke 16:23

Acts 2:27

Acts 2:31

Revelation 1:18

Revelation 6:8

Revelation 20:13

Revelation 20:14

Note that in Acts 2:27-31, Peter expanded on what David was trying to convey about Sheol and a future life in Psalms 16:10. When Jesus died, He was in Sheol or Hades or the grave, but His body did not return to dust because He was resurrected 72 hours after His death.

By His resurrection Jesus became the “first fruits of them that slept” (I Corinthians 15:20). He was the first human being to receive the promise of life after death described by the prophets.

Gehenna = Hell

The third type of hell we discover is found only in the New Testament. There are 11 instances where the word “hell” has been translated from the Greek word “Gehenna.” We finally find a word that involves fire and punishment! Again, we cannot confuse this hell (Gehenna) with the other two types of hell (Sheol or Hades). This Gehenna hell is mentioned in the following Scriptures:

Matthew 5:22

Matthew 5:29

Matthew 5:30

Matthew 10:28

Matthew 18:9

Matthew 23:15

Matthew 23:33

Mark 9:43

Mark 9:45

Mark 9:47

Luke 12:5

James 3:6

Gehenna was and still is a valley located outside Jerusalem where children had at one time in Israel's history been sacrificed by fire to Molech (II Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). Later, it became a prophetic symbol for judgment (Jeremiah 7:31-32).

The New Testament associates Gehenna with a fiery judgment of the wicked. John calls this place of punishment "the lake of fire" (Revelation 19:20; 20:10; 20:14; 20:15; 21:8). Now notice what Jesus said.

"And so shall it be at the end of the world; the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:49-50).

When will this punishment phase take place? It is not happening at this time. No one is suffering in the lake of fire today. Punishment in Gehenna will not take place till the end of the world or the end of this age. Furthermore, Jesus clarified that the wicked dead will have to be raised—resurrected—in order to receive judgment.

"Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they have done good, unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

Why would God resurrect people if their immortal souls are already burning in hell? The answer should be obvious. The concept of an ever-burning hell in the center of the earth already peopled with billions of tormented souls does NOT agree with the Bible.

Tartaros = Hell

One other Greek word, "Tartaros," is translated as "hell" in the New Testament. This word is used only in reference to the angels who sinned (II Peter 2:4). God has consigned them to darkness and chains for their wickedness and rebellion. The environment of their punishment is more similar to a prison than a furnace.

"And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day" (Jude 6). Tartaros has no relationship with human punishment.

Punishment of Wicked People

The Bible clearly shows that evildoers will receive the penalty of death. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die...the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die" (Ezekiel 18:20-21).

"Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? Saith the Lord God; and not that he should return from his ways, and live?" (Verse 23).

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promises...but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). Notice that this Scripture does not talk about the wicked suffering for eternity. Rather, it says that the wicked will perish, that is, cease to exist.

So here is our answer to the atheist. God does NOT delight in seeing people die. He is not a monster who revels in suffering. He would like to give eternal life to all mankind.

But, since some will not follow His laws and since He refuses to allow the wicked to hurt and destroy indefinitely, He will simply put them to death in a merciful fashion. In accordance with God’s divine plan, all humanity is now subject to death. As mentioned before, Jesus said that the good and the wicked are both waiting for a resurrection to receive their rewards.

Daniel 12:2 likewise mentions this future event. “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Those who have died are not in heaven or in hell at this time. They are waiting for judgment. “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). Do not carelessly assume that this judgment occurs immediately after death. It does not. The judgment hasn’t happened yet.

When Jesus returns to the earth, the dead in Christ will be resurrected to eternal life and those Christians who are alive will be transformed into immortal spirit beings (I Corinthians 15:50-54; I Thessalonians 4:13-17). Revelation 20:4-6 calls this the “first resurrection.”

But did you know that there will be a *second* resurrection? **This beautiful truth is one of the best-kept secrets of the churches of this world!**

Here is where we find the fate of those who died “unsaved.” Here is where we see what happens to those millions of babies who died so young. Here is where we learn the destiny of the billions of Third World people who died never even hearing the name of Jesus in their entire lifetimes. “The rest of the dead will be raised during the second resurrection” (Revelation 20:11-15). The billions of people who have not known the truth of God will have an opportunity to receive salvation.

The wicked will also be judged. This period of judgment is called the Great White Throne Judgment; all whose names are not written in the book of life are cast into the lake of fire, that is, Gehenna. This time they receive the second death from which there is no return.

Is there going to be eternal torment? Yes. But who will receive this never-ending punishment? It will not be any human being, because evil people will receive eternal death—the merciful second death.

Then who is to be tormented eternally? Only the devil (Revelation 20:10). All human beings who reject God are consumed in the lake of fire.

Malachi 4:1-3 describes this future event. “For behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch...And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I do this, saith the Lord of hosts.”

The False Understanding of Hell

Biblical scholars have correctly pointed out that the idea of eternal torment in hell was first elaborated in the New Testament apocrypha, not in the New Testament itself. The uninspired *Apocalypse of Peter*, for example, describes various places of punishment. In each case, the type of punishment fits the sins of the lost soul. After the sixth century, a belief in the eternity of suffering in hell was accepted by both the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches. But, again, none of this is biblical.

Further, it was this post-New Testament tradition that Dante used when he wrote his *Inferno*, arguably the most important literary work to shape the Christian concept of hell. And what a tragic sway it has held these many centuries!

Thank God that He is not the sadistic, hateful Deity of Dante's writings. Thank God that your departed loved ones who never accepted Jesus are not now enduring indescribable torment. Thank God they are peacefully asleep in death at this time, awaiting the second resurrection when they will have an opportunity to accept Jesus.

We pray that this wonderful truth will provide you with comfort and inspiration as you seek the loving God of the Bible.

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