

HELL

A NOT SO POPULAR TOPIC

In these times of increasing confusion concerning certain Biblical truths, one of the most disconcerting to me is the confusion that has risen around what the Bible teaches and, more importantly, what Jesus taught, concerning "Hell." Yes, that "four letter" word. These days it has truly become a "four letter" word within the Body of Christ. We are being told by many within the Body of Christ that it should not be

spoken of in our Corporate Gatherings. One reason why it is not spoken is because it is not a "happy" topic. It might make the listeners feel uncomfortable. The topic of "hell" has been taken out of the preaching and teaching of many well known pastors, speakers and leaders now popular within the "Christian culture." As we continue with our discussion, let's see what the Bible tells us about this unpopular topic of - "Hell."

Our English word "hell" comes from neither the Hebrew nor Greek language. It comes from the "Old English" word "*hel*" or "*helle*." These words actually originated from "Old Norse" mythology. Their mythology claimed that the name of the one who ruled over the evil dead in a place called "*Niflheim*" (the lowest of all worlds) was called "*Hel*." This "Old Norse" name, "*hel*" (or "*helle*"), has been transliterated to our English word - "hell." This English word, "hell," was used because it was the best way of referring to the Hebrew and Greek words used in the scriptures to describe, teach and bring forth this Biblical truth.

In the scriptures there are basically four words that have been translated to our English word, "hell:"

- Sheol (Hebrew - *shē'owl*)
- Geena – (Greek – *Gehenna* which actually is a transliteration from the Hebrew word - *gay'*)
- Hades (Greek - *hā'-dās*)
- Tartarus (Greek - *Tartaroō* - From the Greek word *Tartaros*)

It is important that we look at the Jewish, as well as the Greek, understanding of what these terms mean because that was the basis on which the people who were listening or reading would be hearing and understanding. This helps us to grasp the true concept of what Jesus was actually teaching His disciples, as well as what the writers of the scriptures were actually expressing to their readers. Of course, we now have the Holy Spirit within us to reveal plainly the truth and understanding of these terms. This in turn then helps us to know "why we believe what we believe." Therefore, let's take a look at what each of the above words are expressing from the "Jewish mindset," as well as the "Greek mindset," concerning this topic of "hell."

We will begin with the Hebrew word used within the Jewish scriptures – "Sheol." In Jewish thought, Sheol, refers to the grave or the bowels of the earth and is portrayed as the place of the dead. What is most important is that leaving Sheol was impossible. (2Samuel 12:23; Job 12:9) To the Jewish mindset, this is what makes Sheol different from Gehenna as we will discuss later. Sheol was considered to be the actual place where the dead now exist and retain their consciousness. During Jesus' time, the Pharisees and Scribes believed in this place called Sheol because they believed in the resurrection and the "afterlife." The Sadducees did not believe any of this because they did not believe in the "afterlife" so therefore, they did not believe there was a Sheol. They looked upon the concept of Sheol as a "metaphor (a figure of speech not to be taken literally) for oblivion." They did not believe that it truly existed and was an actual location.

In the scriptures, Sheol is referred to as "the Pit" (Psalm 88:4); a "horrible, dreary, dark and disorderly land" (Job 10:21, 22). It is called "the Land of Forgetfulness" (Psalm 88:12) where the wicked descend after death. It is also referred to as "the grave" (Psalm 88:11; Psalm 49:15). In Jewish thought, Sheol is the place that is the greatest possible distance from heaven (Job 11:8; Amos 9:2; Ps. 139:8). Revelation 9:11 refers to the Jewish thought of Sheol and the name of the one who "rules" over it as revealed to the Apostle John, "And

they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit (Sheol), whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon."

Therefore, to the Jewish mindset, Sheol was the place of eternal damnation with no possible way out. Sheol was the eternal destination designated for all Gentiles (for Gentiles were considered "unrighteous") as well as any Jew found to be "unrighteous." According to the rabbis, their "tradition" states that not all sins merited this eternal damnation to Sheol. According to their tradition, there were "four sins" that if a Jew were to commit any one of them, they would be found and declared to be "unrighteous" and therefore "worthy" of Sheol. These "four sins" were: heresy, publicly shaming someone else, committing adultery and rejecting the words of Torah.

We must remember that we do not see anywhere in the Jewish scriptures that these "four sins" are given as a criteria that merits eternal damnation in Sheol. As we know all sin brings separation from God and all sin is just that, sin – there are no differences. These "four sins" that supposedly led to eternal damnation came out of rabbinical teachings and thought and not from the Torah or the Tenach. As mentioned, this "rabbinical tradition/doctrine" of "Sheol was the mindset of the Pharisees during the time of Jesus. John 16:9 tells us that the only sin that we are all now held accountable for and to which the Holy Spirit reproves the world of, is the denying of Jesus as Lord and Savior.

It is interesting to note that the Pharisees believed and charged Jesus of being guilty of committing at least three of these "four sins" mentioned above. Therefore, they were convinced that this gave them the right to condemn Him, not just to death by crucifixion but also by doing so, sentencing Him to "eternal damnation" in Sheol (...*cursed is the one who is hung on a tree*- Deuteronomy 21:22–23; Galatians 3:13).

Next we will discuss the Greek word "*geenna*," better known as Gehenna (Greek). "Gehenna" is the Greek form of the Hebrew word Gehinnom meaning "the valley of Hinnom." In rabbinical Judaism, Gehenna/Gehinnom is an afterlife place where unrighteous souls are punished. Although the term "Gehinnom" is not mentioned in Torah or Tenach, over time it became an acceptable term used in "Jewish tradition." It is found in ancient rabbinical teachings and was the accepted belief during Jesus' time.

As mentioned, the term "Gehenna" is the Greek form of the Hebrew words "*Gee*" and "*Hinnom*," meaning "the valley of Hinnom." This actual valley was located just south of Jerusalem. This valley was once used for child sacrifice by the pagan nations of Canaan to the pagan god of Molech. (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6) During the time of Jesus, this valley was used literally as the garbage dump of Jerusalem where continuous fires burned as dead animals and the refuse of the city would be incinerated.

According to Jewish tradition as found in rabbinical texts, the "spiritual" location of Gehenna is usually located beneath the earth, often described as a place of fire and brimstone where the "depths of darkness" exist. In rabbinical texts Gehenna has an important role in the "afterlife." It is a place where unrighteous souls, who did not commit the offenses worthy of Sheol, would be punished "for a time" in Gehenna. The rabbis taught that anyone who did not live in accordance with the ways of God and Torah, in other words anyone who sinned and did not repent of them before death, would "spend some time" in Gehenna.

In order to avoid Gehenna, the rabbis recommended that you do "good deeds" within your lifetime. Therefore, the concept of Gehenna was used to encourage people to live good, ethical lives and to study Torah. Jewish tradition does not believe that Jewish souls would be condemned forever to eternal punishment unless of course you committed those sins "worthy of Sheol." "The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months," states one of the rabbinical texts (Shabbat 33b). Other texts say the time frame could be anywhere from three to twelve months. Remember, this is from Jewish "tradition," not the Jewish scriptures. The important thing to note about Gehenna was that, in Jewish thought, it was a place of "temporary" punishment meant to "purge" one from their sins and prepare them for paradise, which

according to Jewish tradition was referred to as “Abraham’s bosom.” Where as in Sheol, there was no way out. In modern terms we would refer to Gehenna as a type of what Catholicism calls "purgatory."

Another Greek term translated to “hell” is “hades.” Hades is associated with the Greek mythological god known as “Hades, the god of the underworld.” His realm was known as “Orcus” - the infernal regions; a dark and dismal place in the very depths of the earth thought to be the common receiving place of “disembodied spirits.” A Greek speaking Gentile or Gentile believer, when the term “*hades*” was used, would understand it as the abode or eternal destination and dwelling place of the wicked. (Luke 16:23, Rev 20:13, 14) In other words there would be no way out. To put it in simple terms, the Greek word, “*hades*” and the Hebrew word, “*sheol*,” are referring to the same place. The Greek word “*hades*” is translated to our English word “hell” in the following scriptures - Matthew 11:23; Matthew 16:18; Luke 10:15; Acts 2:27,31; Rev 1:18; Rev 6:8; 20:13; 20:

The only use of the Greek word “Tartarus” (*Tartaroō*) is found in 2Peter 2:4. “Tartarus” in Greek thought is the deepest abyss of Hell. It is the name of the subterranean region regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the most, wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds. Peter used this term because he was writing to mainly Greek speaking, Gentile believers who knew of and could relate to this Greek thought rather than Jewish thought as he was referencing the terrible place of “hell.”

The Bible teaches us in Revelation 20:13-15, at the time of the “Great White Throne Judgment” what the ultimate eternal destiny of the unrighteous and wicked will be - the lake of fire. *“And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”* Those who have rejected Jesus as their Savior and Lord, whether they be living at the time of the “White Throne Judgment” or have died and are in the “place of the dead,” whether it be called Sheol, Hades, Gehenna or Tararus, will have the lake of fire as their final destination for eternity - a place of unspeakable agony and unrelenting torment forever and ever.

The most graphic portrayal of the above is found in Revelation 14:9-11. - *“And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, ‘If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.’”*

Ultimately, hell is the total absence of God. It is a place of total darkness – the total absence of light, God’s light. It is the total opposite of everything of the Kingdom of God, which is Light. It represents the farthest distance possible from God both spiritually and geographically. As we read in the very beginning of Genesis, God “divided” or separated the darkness from the Light. (Genesis 1:4) The sun and moon were not created yet therefore, this was speaking spiritually. God separated the kingdom of darkness from the Light of His Kingdom – and never the two shall meet. It is a literal place of eternal and total separation from God.

We reviewed all of the above for the purpose of stating that the teaching and understanding of “hell” has always been, and still is, an integral part of the scriptures and the Gospel message. We call Jesus our Savior. We say that as disciples of Jesus, we are “saved.” Well, this is what we are “saved” from. Through believing in the atoning blood of Jesus and all that He did through His crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, we are “saved” from eternally being separated from God (spiritual death) and we are “saved” from the horrible eternal torment that the scriptures teach concerning the final destination of those that do not choose to allow Jesus to be their Lord and Savior. If there is no teaching or understanding of “hell” then we do not know what we are “saved” from and we are missing a fundamental truth of the Gospel message.

Jesus taught His disciples through His parables and teachings the truth concerning “hell.” It was a part of His “Gospel” message. They needed to know the truth. Part of the Good News is to let people know that *“the gift of God is eternal life but the wages of sin is death.”* (Romans 3:26) The Jewish people needed to know that they were not “guaranteed” a spot in heaven simply because they were children of Abraham. The Jewish people were just as much on the road to eternal destruction as the Gentiles were – because of sin. We were all on that road. He taught them the dangers of hell and that it was a real place as seen in the teaching of Lazarus, the beggar and the rich man. (Luke 16:19-31). In the parable of the wedding supper, found in Matthew 22:1-13, Jesus teaches that those without a “wedding garment” are cast into outer darkness where people weep and gnash their teeth. Again, we see Jesus teach in the parable of the sheep and the goats this same thought. He concludes the parable with Matthew 25:46, *“And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”* Remember this is JESUS speaking.

This is the essence of John 3:16-17, *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”* Jesus teaches His disciples that believing in Him brings them to a place of eternal life – relationship with the Father and with Jesus, forever. Those that do not accept and believe will “perish.” The word perish comes from the Greek word *apollymi* which means to be separated, destroyed and brought to utter ruin. It points to being totally obliterated and being in a state of total oblivion - which is one of the definitions of “*Sheol*.” Revelation 9:11 uses a form of this Greek word “perish” for the name of the ruler over the place of perishing – “*Apollyon*.” We must always keep in mind that God desires none to come to this place of perishing (2Peter 3:9).

Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:28 that we should not fear those who can kill our bodies, but fear those who can cast both body and soul into hell. This is a sobering truth that should evoke reverent fear for the full truth of God’s Word to be spoken by those who choose to speak, preach and teach God’s people. Unfortunately, there are many well known “leaders” and “Christian television preachers” in the Body of Christ today that refuse to teach, nor even mention, the Biblical truth concerning hell. Jesus warned us about those who would deceive the very elect. He taught His disciples to beware of the doctrines and traditions of men. (Mark 7:7) Paul refers to these deceptions as doctrines of devils. (1Timothy 4:1) The whole Epistle of Jude is dedicated to warning us concerning such as those mentioned above. The subtle strategy of the enemy’s attack is coming from within the Body of Christ – not from without. I believe deceptions such as this will be used by the enemy to subtly bring forth the “falling away” that is foretold in 2Thessalonians 2:3.

I know that by this time, many of you may be very upset with this discussion – and with me. After all, talking about “hell” is such a “downer.” However, it does not matter what we think or what we want to think or what we hope, like, dislike, desire or not desire. What matters is what the Bible, the total Word of God, teaches and instructs in all things – including its teachings concerning hell. We cannot pick and choose otherwise it is not the “full Gospel message.”

Heaven, which is the place of being in total oneness with the Father and Jesus for eternity, is promised to those who have believed and received the Gospel message concerning salvation through Jesus. Now, as His disciples, we have a whole Bible full of great and precious promises because of our beloved Savior and Lord, Jesus. We must never forget what He did for us and what He has saved us from. The Biblical truth of “hell” reminds us that God is a just, holy and loving God who sent His only Son, Jesus, to truly save us from the horrible destiny of being eternally separated from a loving Heavenly Father, as well as, from that very real place and final destination of eternal torment known throughout the scriptures – from beginning to end - as that not so popular topic of, “hell.”