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18 February 2015

HELL - Place or a Condition?

Does the Bible teach that there is a physical place called *hell*, a place where God punishes the wicked and they are tormented through-out eternity? For hundreds of years there has existed a difference of opinion as to the existence of hell. Of these, there three primary views on hell:

1. Views of a physical place of eternal torment were only taught in “intertestamental writings.” (non-Biblical writings of Jewish scribes during the time, 400 years, when God did not call any prophets). This is the approximate time between when the Old Testament writings ended, and New Testament writings began.

Daniel 12:2: *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.* Based on this scripture, all lay in the graves until resurrection, after which the righteous go to heaven and the wicked are destroyed. **Malachi 4:2-3:** *2. But unto you that fear my name shall the **sun** of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. 3. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts.* (i.e. people lie in the grave until resurrection)

2. The theory that when a person dies, the soul is separated from the body and goes, either to heaven or to hell to be tormented. (this seems to be the more common belief among Christians)

3. Limbus, Latin for limbo, the place where good people went before the cross, plus babies who were not baptized. This doctrine was held by the Roman Catholic Church from the 1300s until April of 2007, when they did away with it.

There is one Hebrew word, *sheol*^(h7585), rendered 31 times as *grave* and 31 times as *hell*. In more modern KJ Bible, the Hebrew word is often transliterated as *sheol* like in other versions. There are three words in the Greek, *hades*^(g86), *tartaroo*^(g5020) and *gehenna*^(g1067) translated as hell.

Hebrew *sheol*^(h7585): The meaning of this is word *grave, pit*. Lexicons add the definition of *hell*. The concept of hell as it is taught today, is not found in the O.T. (It is believed the concept is from Greek mythology, applied both in the N.T. and the O.T.) Here is a big problem theologians have with the current doctrine of *hell* in O.T.:

Genesis 37:34-35: *34. And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave^(h7585) unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.*

Numbers 16:30: *But if the Lord make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them (Korah, Dathan, Abiram) up, with all that pertains unto them, and they go down quick into the pit^(h7585); then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the Lord.*

So, both good and bad go into *sheol*^(h7585). These scriptures are what led the Roman Catholic Church to adopt the doctrine of Limbo, explained under #3 above.

Other passages use the word as a figure of the place where the spiritually dead go:

From the parable of the sower (Mark, chapter 4) can be seen that the earth is a symbol for the mind of man. The grave, a hole in the earth, is a person buried in man’s way of thinking and understanding.

Look at **Psalms 9:17** in different Bible versions:

*KJ: *The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God.*

*Living Bible: *The wicked shall be sent away to hell; this is the fate of all the nations forgetting the Lord.*

*ASV: *The wicked shall be turned back unto Sheol, Even all the nations that forget God.*

*YLT: *The wicked do turn back to Sheol, all nations forgetting God.*

Young is more accurate to the original, showing the reason the wicked turn back is that they forget God. The wicked, metaphorically turn back to the pit/grave - i.e. they turn from God's thoughts and ways to man's thoughts and ways (cf Isa 55:7-9), ways in which there is no peace (Isa 57:20-21).

Psalms 30:3: *O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave^(h7585): thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit^(h953).* It is common in Hebrew parallelisms to repeat a concept by expressing it with a different word with a similar meaning. *Bor*^(h953) is a pit and can be used to represent a *grave, well or dungeon*. The *pit* from which the Psalmist is delivered is not a literal hell, but the pit of man's understanding, or from self.

Sheol^(h7585) is used three times in a parable about the King of Babylon (Isaiah 14:4, 9, 11, 15). It is his pomp (or *pride*, verse 11) that brings him down to *sheol*, the "sides of the *pit*^(h953)". A King of Babylon is a figure of anyone walking in spiritual confusion - they are spiritually dead, resting in a spiritual grave.

Greek *hades*^(g86): During the Hellenistic period (Intertestamental) Jews were forced to worship all Greek gods, of which Hades was god of the underworld and ruler of the dead. His weapon was a pitchfork. In the Septuagint (Greek O.T.), the Greek word *hades*^(g86), more of a transliteration of the Greek, is used for *sheol*^(h7585). *Hades* is derived from (*eido*^{g1492}), which properly is *to see, to perceive with the mind*, and the Greek alpha (*a*), reversing the meaning of the word to which it is attached. Therefore *hades* in English is, *to not see (not understand), not perceive with the mind*. One out of 11 appearances, *hades* is rendered as *grave* (1Cor 15:53-55), speaking of the resurrection. The resurrection will resolve two things for the righteous - corrupted thinking and a dying body.

Matthew 11:23: *And you, Capernaum, which are exalted unto heaven, shall be brought down to hell (*hades*^{g86}); for if the mighty works, which have been done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.* Sodom was destroyed because of its wickedness; Nineveh, a wicked city, repented at the preaching of Jonah. Capernaum and the surrounding cities had been given the gospel straight from the Lord, with most rejecting Jesus and the gospel (cf Mark 6:5, 6) - i.e. The people were lifted up to a heavenly knowledge but would be brought to the grave, or the spiritual ignorance of man, because they refused to repent.

Greek *tartaroo*^(g5020): **2Peter 2:4-5:** *4. For if God spared not the angels (messengers; cf false teachers, verse 1) that sinned, but cast them down to hell (*tartaroo*^{g5020}), and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;*

5. And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly. (cp 2Peter 2:1-6, 10-12; Jude 1:4-8, 10)

Angel is a Greek word, which in English means *messenger*. The *angels* in verse 4 refer to the *false prophets*, or *messengers* in verse one. The place in which the Greek mythological god Hades ruled was called *tartaroo*, or the realm of the dead. Peter is using the word as a type for the spiritual grave in which false prophets and teachers reside, called also *chains of darkness*. Jeremiah was a prophet of God, called to deal with the false prophets and teachers of his day causing Judah to stray from God (Jer 1:4-5; Jer 23:1-2, 11-12, 26-27, 30-32).

Greek *gehenna*^(g1067): The words *Sheol* and *hades* were fairly easy to understand. However, understanding *Gehenna* one must understand parables, symbols and use of words and stories as allegories.

Matthew 5:22, 29-30: 22. *But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca (Aramaic for worthless), shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, You fool, shall be in danger of hell (gehenna^{g1067}) fire.*
 29. *And if your right eye offend you, pluck it out, and cast it from you: for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be cast into hell (gehenna^{g1067}).*
 30. *And if your right hand offend you, cut it off, and cast it from you: for it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body [might] be cast into hell. (gehenna^{g1067}).*

Judge not, lest you be judged (Luke 6:37) is the principle laid down in the teachings of Jesus. We condemn others by how we see them, and not by the way God sees them. To do this is to be in danger of *Gehenna*. The origin of the Greek *gehenna* is from the Hebrew phrase *valley*^(h1516) *of the son of hinnom*^(h2011). It refers to the valley located outside the east gate of the city of Jerusalem, where ancient Israelites practiced idol worship and sacrificed, by fire, their own children to the idol Baal (Jeremiah 19:2; 32:35; 2Chronicles 28:1-3). In Jesus' time it had become a place to dump city refuse and entrails of animals, and where a fire was kept burning all the time. To fully understand the use of the word in the N.T. the connecting symbols must also be recognized.

Eye: understanding (Ephesians 1:18); Hand: our works (Proverbs 10:1; Isaiah 2:8); City: a way of thinking, good or bad (cf Jeremiah 1:18); it is synonymous with a spirit (Proverbs 25:28); and a woman (Revelation 17:18), it is a mind-set or way of understanding. The righteous are said to be like a city set on a hill, that cannot be hid (Matthew 5:14). Children are a symbol for our thoughts (Psalms 127:3-5), like the quiver is a figure for the mind, that holds arrows (words which come from thoughts, cf Psalms 64:3, 7-8). East is a symbol for self (Job 15:2-6). The sun rises in the east - it can represent light of a person's own understanding, from which we defile ourselves, or Christ's understanding (Malachi 4:2) from where we obtain God's righteous way of thinking. Hell is a state of mind of the sinner, a place of torment when not resting in Christ; it is a place of the spiritually dead. We are to get rid of any faulty understanding (pluck out the eye) or faulty works (cut off the hand) that causes us to act contrary to God's ways, and instead, show graciousness to others.

With the foregoing explanations, the following should be easier to understand:

James 3:1-6: 1. *My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.*
 2. *For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body.*
 3. *Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body.*
 4. *Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor [wishes].*
 5. *Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasts great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindles!*
 6. *And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell (gehenna^{g1067}). (cf Isa 42:25 for a fig.)*

Gehenna is our unsanctified tongues, likened to fire, which issues forth words that can destroy another person's feeling, their character or their understanding of God. The tongue, which expresses our understanding, can make a person into a beast (Psalms 73:22). The tongue of the Lord does just the opposite. The fire of His words will remove our iniquity:

Jeremiah 23:29: *Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord... Jeremiah 5:14:* *Wherefore thus saith the LORD God of hosts, Because you speak this word, behold, I will make my words in your mouth fire, and this people wood, and it shall devour them. Amen!*