

A Place Called HELL

**by
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The word “Hell” has become a commonplace term in our culture, and is often censored vulgar language. Though the word itself is not a “cuss” word, it can be used in a light and frivolous way, and there is nothing frivolous about it. Those who do not believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible subscribe to various beliefs about Hell. Many think of it as a place where people go for a while until they pay for their sins, then they get free to go to Heaven. Others have a hard time understanding how a loving God could send a person to such an awful place.

Even those who believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible often don’t understand Hell. Many Christians think that when an unsaved person dies, they go straight to Hell and stay there forever. However, that’s not entirely true either. With all of these errant beliefs about Hell, we need to understand for ourselves just what it is.

Hell Defined

In the Old Testament, the word translated as “hell” is the Hebrew word *sheol*. It appears sixty-five times and is also translated as “grave” or “pit”. Basically, *sheol* means “the place of the dead”. One place this word appears is in the story of Korah, who stood up in rebellion against Moses. The earth opened and swallowed him and all his followers, and they went down alive “into the pit” (Numbers 16:33).

The writers of the New Testament used *hades*, a Greek word similar to the Hebrew *sheol*. Ten times it is translated as “hell” and one time as “grave”. Neither *sheol* nor *hades* necessarily describes the place of eternal punishment for sinners. It is simply the place of the dead.

The location of *sheol* and *hades* cannot be known for certain, but it may possible be at the center of this earth. As we will see later, Jesus descended to this place after His death on the cross.

Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? (Ephesians 4:9)

The possibility exists that in times past that this place of the dead was divided into two compartments – Torment and Paradise (Abraham’s Bosom). In the Old Testament, all who died went to one of these two places. This is illustrated clearly in the account of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

After Jesus died, He descended into *sheol* and “led captivity captive” (Ephesians 4:8-10, quoting Psalm 68:18). This phrase means literally “captured captivity”. Most likely this is describing Jesus’ trip to Paradise during which He led the spirits of the dead saints out of *sheol* and into the presence of God. The prophet Isaiah interestingly notes that “Hell hath enlarged herself” (Isaiah 5:14), which, if taken literally, could describe an enlarging of the tormenting side of *sheol* to make room for the many who reject the grace and mercy of God. Those who die in Christ now go directly into the presence of God, never to enter *sheol*.

Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord: (For we walk by faith, not by sight:) We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6-8)

When Jesus came to earth, He clarified the afterlife by using a different term for what is generally described as Hell. He used the word *gehenna*, which means “Valley of Hinnom”. This word appears twelve times in the New Testament and is either translated as “hell” or “hell fire”. The valley to which Jesus referred is a valley right outside of Jerusalem. At one time, live child sacrifices to pagan gods were carried out in this place. Eventually it became a dump, where trash and criminals’ bodies were burned. One can conjure up an image of the awfulness of such a place. When the always colorful Messiah discussed eternal punishment for sin, He provided an image that all present could understand.

Hell Described

Beyond His comparison to Hell as being like the burning refuse in the Valley of Hinnom, Jesus described the place by recounting the experiences of a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus.

There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead. (Luke 16:19-31)

Several characteristics of Hell can be understood through this account. First, Hell is clearly a place of torment. The rich man “was in torments”. Second, it is a place of regrets – the rich man could remember that he had a sumptuous life, but it proved worthless in eternity. Third, it is a place of loneliness. The rich man knew that having his brothers with him would bring him

no comfort. Hell is not a place of partying – not even for the Devil. In fact, Hell was originally not created for man, but as a punishment for the Devil and the angels who followed him.

Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels: (Matthew 25:41)

Finally, Hell is eternal. After a person draws his final breath on earth, his eternal future is locked in, and nothing can change it.

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. (Mark 9:43-44)

Many people believe in the idea of purgatory – that some people will have to pay for their sins in Hell until they are worthy of Heaven. Zachary Hayes, a teacher of Catholic theology, wrote this summarizing his view of Purgatory:

In summary, the notion of a purgatory is intimately related to the conviction that our eternal destiny is irrevocably decided at the moment of our death and that, ultimately, our eternal destiny can be only heaven or hell. But not everyone seems “bad enough” to be consigned to an eternal hell. And most do not seem “good enough” to be candidates for heaven. Therefore, something has to happen “in between”. But this cannot mean a coming back to this life and getting another chance since our destiny is decided at the moment of our death. Therefore, some sort of a cleansing process is postulated between death and the entrance into heaven.

A contemporary Roman Catholic theologian, Cardinal Ratzinger, formulates the concept of purgatory in the following way. Purgatory, he writes, means that there is some unresolved guilt in the person who has died. Hence there is a suffering which continues to radiate because of this guilt.ⁱ

What both Zachary Hayes and Cardinal Ratzinger (who later became Pope Benedict XVI) are missing is an understanding of the sufficiency of the blood of Jesus Christ for salvation.

Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. (Romans 5:9)

In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: (Colossians 1:14)

A common question put forth by those who struggle with the existence of a literal Hell is “how can a loving God send people to Hell? The answer is that if God is holy, He has to send people to Hell as a fitting punishment for their sin. If God is loving, He will find a way of escape. The God of the Bible both holy and loving, and He did both. John Walvoord summed it up well: “God is a God of infinite righteousness as well as infinite love”ⁱⁱ.

Hell Deserved

The awful reality of Hell is that it is deserved by every man and woman who has ever lived. It is the result of sin.

For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

The natural course of man is to take the easy way out. He would prefer to ignore his sin and reject the possibility that he will be held accountable for it.

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

The way of salvation is not the easy way, and it is not the default path. A choice must be made to enter into the straight and narrow path of salvation.

Hell Destroyed

Those who die without Christ go to a place of torment in *sheol*. However, one day they will be called out and judged. Then they will be cast into a lake of fire, and sheol itself will follow.

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. 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. (Revelation 20:11-15)

Hell Defanged

Through the dark clouds of the reality of a literal eternal Hell shines a light of hope – Christ defeated Hell, rendering it powerless for His followers.

I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death. (Revelation 1:18)

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

Jesus Christ holds the keys of hell and death. For the Christian, therefore, death holds no power. The victory is won through Christ! The most famous verse in the Bible describes how one can realize this victory.

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. (John 3:16)

Hell cannot be defanged through penance, suffering, or good works. It only comes through belief in Jesus Christ. Believe that He is the Son of God and that He died and rose again, appeasing the wrath of God.

ⁱ Crockett, William, ed. *Four Views On Hell*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 99.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 27.