

In the New Testament the equivalent for the Hebrew 'sheol' is the Greek word 'hades'. This also is probably derived from Greek words meaning 'not seen'. In the Bible it unquestionably means the same as sheol, being used to translate the Hebrew word in quotations from the Old Testament, in cases where the context leaves no doubt that death or the tomb are meant. (Compare **Psalm 16:10** and **Acts 2:27,31; Hosea 13:14**)

Many people, however, find difficulty in such words of Jesus as these: —

'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)

The word here translated 'hell' is a quite different Greek word: 'Gehenna'. It is derived from the name of a valley just outside Jerusalem where rubbish and carcasses were thrown and destroyed by fire. Because they were continually being fed by more material, the fires never died out, effectively destroying everything cast into the valley. Thus Jesus was using a graphic figure to impress on His hearers the ultimate destiny of those who are offensive in God's sight: utter destruction from the face of the earth. The ultimate destiny of such is not everlasting torment, but 'everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord'. **(2 Thess. 1:9)**

By contrast, the ultimate destiny of those who seek to honour God in their lives, by believing and obeying His word, is that described by the Psalmist: 'The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever'. **(Psalm 37:29)**

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The hell of the Bible

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The hell of the Bible

Little is heard today — unless it be in derision — of the old notion that hell is a place of fiery torment somewhere below the earth. There has been a revolt from the horrible doctrine that suffering without end is a just retribution for the sins of a few years of mortal life. This has partly resulted from a state of feeling which makes light of sin; but while we would repudiate any tendency to be-little sin, we would heartily agree that the doctrine of eternal torment cannot be reconciled with the belief in a righteous and loving God. Punishment for sin there must be; but it is a punishment consistent with God's character.

The tragedy is that this doctrine, which has been such a stumbling block to religion, need never have arisen if men had confined their ideas to what the Bible teaches about hell. Today we are likely to be told that 'hell' is not a place but a state of mind, or the 'consciousness of alienation from God'. This idea, like the other, has no warrant in Scripture.

The truth in the case is simple and reasonable. Hell in most cases simply means the grave. This must be evident from the following passages: —

1. 'The mighty ... are gone down to hell with their weapons of war, and they have laid their swords under their heads'. (Ezek. 32:27)

This could not be the popular hell. The supposed ghosts of wicked men do not take swords to hell with them. But the bodies of great men in ancient times were accompanied to the grave with the weapons they used in their lifetime: and this is the fact referred to in the passage, which shows that the hell spoken of is the grave.

2. 'Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell'. (Psalm 16:10)

Peter quotes this as a prophecy of Christ's resurrection from the grave. (Acts 2:27-32) With this meaning, it is possible to understand it; but how is it possible to contemplate the idea of Christ having gone to the conventional hell?

3. Jonah, referring to his temporary incarceration in a fish, says, 'Out of the belly of hell cried I'. (Jonah 2:1-3)

The fish was a living grave to him, but the conventional hell is out of the question.

4. 'The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me'. (Psalm 116:3)

David here speaks of death: and the grave is its natural associate. David could not mean that the flames of hell had begun to scorch the man after God's own heart.

5. 'My church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt. 16:18)

The gates of the grave close against Christ's people at their death; but they 'shall not prevail', because he will open them at his coming. Christ's people are never inside the gates of the conventional hell, on any theory.

6. 'I (Christ) have the keys of hell and of death'. (Rev. 1:18)

Applied to the grave, this is intelligible, for Christ is the resurrection and the life; it can have no meaning when applied to the old idea of hell.

Thus a glance at a few passages where the word 'hell' occurs in the English translation, is enough to show that it is the grave that is meant. But now look at some other passages where 'sheol', the word translated 'hell' in the foregoing passages from the Old Testament, is actually translated GRAVE.

'O that thou wouldst hide me in THE GRAVE (sheol)'. (Job 14:13) 'Let the wicked be ashamed; and let them be silent in THE GRAVE' (sheol). (Psalm 31:17) 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave ('hades' — the Greek equivalent of 'sheol'), where is thy victory?'. (1 Cor. 15:55) 'Bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to THE GRAVE' (sheol). (Gen. 42:38) 'He bringeth down to THE GRAVE, (sheol) and bringeth up'. (1 Sam. 2:6) 'In THE GRAVE (sheol) who shall give thee thanks?' (Psalm 6:5) 'Like sheep they are laid in THE GRAVE' (sheol). (Psalm 49:14) There is no work, nor device, nor wisdom, in THE GRAVE (sheol), whither thou goest'. (Ecc. 9:10) 'I will ransom them from the power of THE GRAVE' (sheol). (Hos. 13:14)

These passages show clearly that the hell of the Bible is none other than the grave, the place where men and women are laid out of sight in the unconsciousness of death. (See Gen. 23:4) The English word 'hell' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'helan', to cover or hide. The same root is found in the word 'helmet', a covering for the head. Hell originally meant simply a hidden, unseen or covered place. Only custom has given it another and more sinister meaning. ►►