

The Use of “Hell” in the New Testament

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The term “hell” is found twenty-three times in the King James Version of the English Bible. There is a great deal of confusion among religious folks regarding this word due to the fact that the English form “hell” actually represents three different terms in the Greek New Testament. Let us give consideration to this matter.

Hades

The Greek hades is translated “hell” ten times in the KJV. Most recent versions transliterate the term, bringing it directly into English as Hades.

The origin of the word is a bit obscure. Most scholars suggest that it is derived of two roots: a (a negative prefix meaning “not”), and idein (to see), hence suggesting, “not to be seen” (Thayer, 11). Others think it may originate with hadō, “all receiving” (Vine, 368). In the final analysis, the theological meaning must be determined by the context in which it is found. There are several senses in which Hades is employed in the New Testament.

Hades is used for the general abode of the spirits of the dead, whether good or evil. Jesus affirmed that he possessed the keys (authority to open) of “death” (the receptacle of the body) and “Hades” (the realm of the departed soul) (Rev. 1:18). In one of his visions, John sees “death” riding a pale horse, followed by “Hades” (Rev. 6:8). Both death and Hades will be emptied at the time of the judgment (Rev. 20:13-14), i.e., the grave will give up the body, and the spirit sphere will surrender the soul.

By means of a figure known as a synecdoche (the whole put for a part), Hades is sometimes used to designate a limited region of the spirit world. Depending upon the context, that region may either be one of punishment or reward.

For example, Jesus warned that the wicked inhabitants of Capernaum (who had rejected his teaching) would go down into Hades (Mt. 11:23; Lk. 10:15). When the cold-hearted rich man died, his spirit was found in Hades, a place of torment and anguish (Lk. 16:23-24).

On the other hand, when Christ died, while his body was resting in Joseph’s tomb, his soul was in Hades (Acts 2:27-31), which elsewhere is called “Paradise” (Lk. 23:43). This seems to have been the same state as “Abraham’s bosom,” a place of comfort (Lk. 16:22,25).

When Christ promised to build his church, and declared that the “gates of Hades” would not prevail against it, he may have been suggesting that when he died, Hades would not retain his soul, thus preventing the establishment of his kingdom. Or, he may have been proclaiming that the church would share ultimately in his victory over death at the time of the resurrection.

Tartarus

The apostle Peter wrote that:

“God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell, and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment . . .” (2 Pet. 2:4).

Here, “hell” is from the Greek term tartarosas, a participle, the noun form of which is Tartarus (so rendered in the footnote of the ASV). This is this word’s only occurrence in the New Testament.

Originally it simply denoted a deep place; it carries that significance in Job 40:13; 41:31 in the Septuagint. Homer, the Greek poet, spoke of “dark Tartarus . . . the deepest pit” (Iliad, 8.13). Here, it is used of the abode of evil angels prior to their banishment to Gehenna, their ultimate destiny (cf. Mt. 25:41).

The ancient Greeks, however, applied the word to the region of the wicked dead. Since there is no indication that Peter assigns an extraordinary meaning to the term, it is reasonable to conclude that it denotes that area of Hades in which both rebel men and angels are punished preliminary to the day of judgment.

Note that 2 Peter 2:9 reads: “the Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment unto the day of judgment” (ASV; cf. NKJV). The present participle “under punishment” reveals that the penalty was already being inflicted at the time the apostle is writing. The KJV, which suggests that the punishment comes after the judgment, does not reflect the true sense of the original. Tartarus is therefore most likely the specific name of the Hadean realm where the rich man was languishing (Lk. 16:23).

Gehenna

The final and eternal abode of those who die apart from God is Gehenna. The word is found twelve times in the Greek New Testament. In eleven of these instances, it is Jesus Christ himself who employs the term.

Bertrand Russell, the agnostic British philosopher, once penned an essay titled: “Why I Am Not A Christian.” One of his main objections was this: “[Jesus] believed in hell.” At least he knew what the Lord taught on this matter, which is more than can be said of some who profess an acquaintance with the Scriptures.

Gehenna is a transliteration of an Old Testament Hebrew expression, “the valley of Hinnom,” which denoted a ravine on the southern side of Jerusalem. This valley was used by certain apostate Hebrews as a place where their children were offered into the fiery arms of the pagan god Molech (2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). It was thus an area of suffering and weeping. When Josiah launched his reformation, this valley was regarded as a site of heinous abomination (2 Kgs. 23:10-14). It finally became the garbage depository of Jerusalem where there was a continual burning of refuse. Gehenna, being associated with these ideas, appropriately served as a symbolic designation for the place of suffering to which evil persons will be consigned following the Lord’s return. Let us now consider the New Testament passages in which Gehenna is mentioned.

Jesus spoke of Gehenna several times in his “Sermon on the Mount.” For instance, he warned that whoever addresses another: “You fool!” shall be in danger of the “hell of fire” (Mt. 5:22). This does not mean that a legitimate use of the appellation “fool” (or its derivatives) is prohibited (cf. Psa. 14:1; 1 Cor. 15:36; Gal. 3:1). Rather, the Lord condemns the explosive use of pejorative barbs for the sake of venting one’s personal rage.

Employing several examples of hyperbole (for the sake of emphasis), Christ stressed that it would be better to proceed through life with great loss (e.g. deprived of an eye or a limb), rather than having Gehenna as a final destiny (Mt. 5:29-30; cf. 18:9; Mk. 9:43-47).

On another occasion, the Lord said: “And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Mt. 10:28; cf. Lk. 12:5).

In his blistering rebuke of the Jewish leaders who were on the brink of crucifying their own Messiah, Jesus charged:

“Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, you make him twofold more a son of hell than yourselves” (Mt. 23:15).

Then in the same discourse: “You serpents, you offspring of vipers, how shall you escape the judgment of hell?” (33).

The final use of Gehenna in the New Testament is where James affirms that the tongue “is set on fire of hell” (3:6). This may suggest that the ability to control one’s tongue (speech) is about as difficult as it would be to contain the continuously raging (the participle is a present tense) flames of Gehenna. The point may be with reference to character, namely that the tongue is frequently given to such poisons as are hellish in nature. Or maybe the destructive quality of the tongue is in view.

The Nature of Gehenna

There are several important truths regarding the punishment of Gehenna that the Bible student must consider.

Body and Soul

Gehenna is a state that involves both the resurrected body and the soul. First, note that unrighteous people will be resurrected from the dead, just as the saints will (Jn. 5:28-29; Acts 24:15). Then, observe that Christ clearly indicated that the body, as well as the soul, will be subjected to the agonies of Gehenna (Mt. 5:29-30; Mk. 9:43-48; Mt. 10:28).

Consciousness

Gehenna involves a state of awareness. It is very important that this point be made, because there are those who allege that hell will consist in the wicked being annihilated (C. Pinnock, 40; cf. LaGard Smith, 1988). In their view, the occupants of Gehenna will eventually cease to exist. This concept is flawed indeed.

First, when the Lord affirmed that God will “destroy” both body and soul in Gehenna (Mt. 10:28), he employed the word *apollumi* (used about 92 times in the New Testament). It is translated by such terms as “destroy,” “perish,” “loss,” and “lost.” The term does not suggest the sense of annihilation.

When the prodigal son was in the far country, he was “lost” (*apololos*), i.e., estranged from the blessings of his home, but he was not annihilated. Jesus affirmed that he came to save that which stands lost (*apololos*). The perfect tense describes a present condition which has resulted from previous activity. The Lord did not come to save folks who were in a state of non-existence!

“In every instance where the word *apollumi* is found in the New Testament, something other than annihilation is being described” (Morey, 90).

Regarding *apollumi*, Vine notes: “The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being” (211).

Thayer defines *apollumi*, in connection with Matthew 10:28, as follows: “to devote or give over to eternal misery” (64).

Second, the Bible employs a number of expressions to describe the emotional state of Gehenna, which can only imply the concept of conscious agony. It is depicted as a place of “unquenchable fire” (Mk. 9:44) — fire being a metaphor for “the extreme penal torments which the wicked are to undergo after their life on earth” (Thayer, 558).

Jesus spoke of Gehenna as a place “where their worm dies not” (Mk. 9:48). The never-dying worm is a symbol of the unending “torment of the damned” (Arndt/Gingrich, 765).

The Lord describes Gehenna as a place of “eternal punishment.” The word rendered “punishment” is the Greek *kolasis*. Note the following statement from the patristic document known as 1 Clement (A.D. 95). “. . . [The Lord] does not forsake those that hope in Him, but gives up such as depart from Him to punishment [*kolasis*] and torment” (XI).

Punishment implies consciousness. It would be absurd to describe those who no longer exist as being “punished.” The wicked will be “tormented” with the fire of Gehenna (cf. Rev. 14:10-11). Torment certainly implies awareness (cf. Rev. 9:5; 11:10).

Finally, we would raise this question: If the condition of the rich man in Hades was one of “anguish” (*odunao* – “to suffer pain”), though it involved only the soul, does it seem likely that the ultimate punishment of Gehenna, which involves both body and soul, would entail less?

Eternal Duration

In conclusion it must be stressed that the punishment of those in Gehenna is unending. The fire is “unquenchable” (Mt. 3:12). The Greek word for “unquenchable” is *asbestos*, a term which denotes that which cannot be extinguished. The worm (gnawing anguish) “dies not” — which means “their punishment after death will never cease” (Thayer, 580). The punishment, or destruction, is “eternal” (Mt. 25:46; 2 Thes. 1:9). Adam Clarke has an excellent discussion of the use of “eternal” in Matthew 25:46.











“But some are of the opinion that this punishment shall have an end: this is as likely as that the glory of the righteous shall have an end; for the same word is used to express the duration of the punishment, *kolasin aionion*, as is used to express the duration of the state of glory: *zoen aionion*.”

I have seen the best things that have been written in favour of the final redemption of damned spirits; but I never saw an answer to the argument against that doctrine, drawn from this verse, but what sound learning and criticism should be ashamed to acknowledge. The original word aion is certainly to be taken here in its proper grammatical sense, continued being, aieion, NEVER ENDING.

Some have gone a middle way, and think that the wicked shall be annihilated. This, I think is contrary to the text; if they go into punishment, they continue to exist; for that which ceases to be, ceases to suffer."

Those who contend that the wicked will be annihilated are in error. But is the issue one of importance? Yes. Any theory of divine retribution which undermines the full consequences of rebelling against God has to be most dangerous.

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Scripture References

Revelation 1:18; Revelation 6:8; Revelation 20:13-14; Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15; Luke 16:23-24; Acts 2:27-31; Luke 23:43; Luke 16:22, 25; 2 Peter 2:4; Job 40:13, 41:31; Matthew 25:41; 1 Peter 2:9; Luke 16:23; 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; 2 Kings 23:10-14; Matthew 5:22; Psalm 14:1; 1 Corinthians 15:36; Galatians 3:1; Matthew 5:29-30; Mark 9:43-47; Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5; Matthew 23:15; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; Mark 9:43-48; Mark 9:44; Mark 9:48; Revelation 14:10-11; Revelation 9:5, 11:10; Matthew 3:12; Matthew 25:46; 2 Thessalonians 1:9

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