
BLESSED IS THE NATION WHOSE GOD IS THE LORD

Hell, The White Throne Judgment, and The Lake of Fire

By

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One of the things that the wicked and the ungodly would like to forget, but which God would have them remember is, that though they escape judgment for their evil deeds in this life, there is One who will see that they get it in the next. Both the wicked and righteous must eventually stand before God to give account for the deed in the body, whether good or bad.

But in the subject before us, we are dealing only with the wicked and unbelieving. They, too, must reap what they have sown.

What, then, is hell? And what is the lake of fire? Have you ever taken your Bible and a concordance and studied these words for yourself? I dare say that most of you have not.

Most people come to their Bibles with their minds already made up as to what they mean. They have, no doubt, heard many sermons on the subject from the church where they attend, or over the radio, or they have read about it in books or religious periodicals. But what we ought to be interested in, is, what does the Bible have to say about it?

I should like to make it clear first of all, that though God is love, the Bible also warns that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hand of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). All men are morally responsible to walk in the light that crosses their pathway.

In Hebrews 2:1-3, we find the writer saying

“Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him?”

The Nature and Purpose of God's

Judgments

But the question that needs a proper and scriptural answer is this. What is the nature and purpose of the judgments of God against the unsaved after death?

Punishment, as the mere exercise of a tyrannical power without an objective or purpose, cannot be associated with God. In the short run or in the long run, all God's judgments must be proved to be remedial in their design. They are chastisements for the purpose of correction and instruction in righteousness.

The Basis of Our Belief

A popular belief in Christian circles today is that hell is the eternal abode of the wicked. It is a place of endless suffering and torment. Once a man arrives here—wherever that may be—his doom is sealed. But will this belief stand the light of the Word of God? Is this belief a tradition, a theological interpretation handed down by man; or is it in truth the teaching of the Bible?

One would be amazed if he would but take the time to examine his doctrinal beliefs one by one, and ask himself such questions as, "How did I come to believe this? Did I get it out of the Bible for myself? Or is it something that was taught me, and I accepted it without question.?"

How little, my friend have most of us ever received directly from the Word of God. And how much of that which we hold to be Biblical is only a theological misconception of what the Bible teaches—especially in the realm of prophecy and with respect to Israel, heaven, and the Kingdom of God.

Hell is Sheol or

Hades

Let us now consider what is the Biblical teaching with respect to hell. If you have a good reference Bible, such as the Scofield, or if you have a good concordance, such as Strong's or Young's, you can discover for yourself that every mention of the word, hell, in the Bible is in reality, sheol or hades. And what are sheol and hades?

Sheol is the Hebrew and hades is the Greek for one and the same thing: it is the place where the dead go. It is, therefore, often spoken of in the Old Testament as the equivalent of the grave. It is the terminus toward which all human life moves.

The word hades, denotes the unseen world: it is the place of departed human spirits between death and the resurrection. It is not necessarily a place of judgment, but simply an intermediary state where the dead await the resurrection and the judgments of God.

There is nothing in the meaning of these words that even suggests a place of endless suffering and torment, or suffering of any kind.

In the New Testament the word, hell, also means, "The Valley of Hinnom" or "Gehennem." This valley was a place where garbage or refuse and sewage seemed to be ever burning. It thus became a symbol of the judgments of God and things evil, but it in no way allows for the great preponderance of teaching so often associated with hell.

With these facts before us, let us read a few verses in which sheol, hades, and the Valley of Hinnom are used. In Psalm 16:10,

we read these words:

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.”

Here we have a prophecy with respect to our Lord's resurrection. After His crucifixion and death, His soul was to go to the place of departed human spirits, but it was not to remain there. The word for *hell* here, as most good reference Bibles point out, is sheol.

According to the William Smith Bible Dictionary, it is unfortunate that the word, *hell*, is generally used by the translators to render the Hebrew sheol. It really means the place of the dead, the unseen world, without deciding whether it be the place of misery or happiness. It is clear that in many passages of the Old Testament, sheol can only mean the grave and it is so rendered in the Authorized Version.

I point this out because it should be obvious that the soul of our Lord did not go down into a place of torment and suffering, or into a hell from which other poor inmates could never hope to escape. It also reveals how far afield theologians can go when they come to their Bibles with their traditions and their preconceived notions. With their minds already made up that the hell they imagine is a fact, they apparently are not interested in taking the time to find out that their theory is based on a poor translation.

That hell is sheol, or hades, is an obvious fact for all Bible students to behold. And it is also an obvious fact that sheol and hades, as set forth in the Bible, in no way picture or describe the hell of modern theologians. Please keep in mind that the future punishment of the wicked is one thing, and their endless suffering in a burning hell is quite another.

Turning now to Psalm 55:15 we have an illustration of the use of the word hell, when it should have been “grave.”

“Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell: for wickedness is in their dwellings, and among them.”

Even the Scofield Reference Bible calls the reader's attention to the fact that these wicked are not to be thought of as going to hell, or David so wished them to go there, but to the grave.

The Keys of Hell and Death

Turning now to the New Testament and to Revelation 1:19, we read these words:

“I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for- evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death.” Christ is here said to have the keys of hell and of death. Here again is an error in translation. The word rendered, hell, does not mean a place of punishment, but the temporary home of the departed.

Keys are often used as a sign of authority. Here they suggest that Christ, as the absolutely Living One who “*has life in Himself*” and is the Source of life in others, has control not merely over the passage from this world into another, but over the other world itself. He can recall departed souls from their resting place.

All this reminds us of the words of Paul in I Corinthians 15:22 where he says:

“As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Because Christ has this key, therefore death and hell, or death and hades, can have power as long as He pleases.

In Ephesians 1:10 (Weymouth) Paul tells us that it is

“God's merciful purpose for the government of the world when the times are ripe for it, to restore the whole creation to find its one head in Christ.”

Through the blood of the cross, the power of sin and death have been broken. He, therefore, has the keys that will loose all that have been held captive by them.

We have said that sheol, or hades, or hell, was but a temporary or intermediate state of the dead while they await the

resurrection. We have reason to believe that before the resurrection and ascension of Christ, all men, whether godly or ungodly, whether good or bad, went down into sheol.

But when He ascended on high and *“led captivity captive,”* from then on the righteous dead are believed to ascend to a place prepared for them in the heavens. Paul says,

“To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.”

The White Throne Judgment

That we might further see what the Bible has to say about hell, let us turn to the 20th chapter of Revelation, verses 11-15, where we have an account of the final judgment, more commonly known as “The Great White Throne Judgment.” Let us begin reading at verse 12:

“And I saw the dead, both 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 judge every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.”

What a dramatic scene do these verses depict. The dead, small and great, stand before God and they are judged by two books. The first one, I believe, contains the story of each life—what it did with the light it had; and the second Book, of course, is the Word of God. He who sits on the throne will judge all who appear before Him in righteousness out of the Book.

Hell Is Emptied

And now notice something. In verse 13, we are told that the only hell that the Bible has anything to say about is emptied. Its occupants stand before God for judgment and are then cast back into hell where they spend eternity. Is that what verse 14 says? On the contrary, it says that *“death and hell were cast into the lake of fire.”* Then will you pray tell me how hell can be eternal?

No, I am not saying the wicked will not be judged and punished according to their works. But I am saying that the hell of the Bible—which is quite different from that of many theologians—is here emptied and its inhabitants are placed some place else. Then if the popular hell is eternal, it will have nobody in it after the White Throne Judgment.

The Lake of Fire

This leads us to a consideration of the lake of fire. “What if hell is not eternal,” you ask, “what could be worse than being cast into a lake of fire? Is that not like going from the frying pan into the fire?” Let us consider the lake of fire for a moment and see.

The lake of fire is mentioned but five times in all the Bible, and all five of these appear in the last three chapters of the Book of Revelation. Only once in these five times does it have anything to say about its duration. In Revelation 20:10 we read,

“And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

Ferrar Fenton translates the last part of this verse more correctly when he says they shall be tormented *“day and night through the ages of ages.”*

The next thing I would have you note, is, that no mention is made here of punishment after this manner for anybody but the devil, the beast, and the false prophet. But even here the punishment is *“day and night through the ages of the ages.”* This may be a long time, but it is still the language of time.

An age is a period of time and *“the ages of ages”* is an indefinite number but it is all relative. In fact, none of us know how to think

in terms of eternity which is absolute. There is no such thing as “time” in eternity, let alone endless time. And anyway, what would people living in the popular concept of hell, know about day and night?

The Second Death

What, then, is the lake of fire?

We are not left to guess or speculate as to this, for twice in the five times that John mentions the lake of fire, he tells us what it is. He says it is the “*second death*.” It is at once obvious that the lake of fire was not meant to be taken literally but is symbolic of the judgments and conditions under which the wicked will have to live in this period. Death is not a location but a condition of being.

If life in the lake of fire is called the “*second death*,” then there must have been a life in what might be called the “*first death*.” The first death would have to be our death in Adam. When Adam sinned, he died and brought sin and death on the whole human race. The natural man is said to be dead while he lives. It is not until he comes to know God through faith in Jesus Christ that he begins to have real life (I John 5:12).

All who die in their sins in a state of spiritual death will be raised at the White Throne Judgment to live again in a state of spiritual death. That this “second death” is symbolized by a lake of fire indicates that it will be a time of severe chastening, correction and judgment—but not without a purpose. These people are to be judged according to their works, but the judgments of God lead eventually to repentance.

Surely the God who has commanded us to love our enemies, has not prepared a place where He will torment His forever. Fire is used for purging and cleansing. Therefore the lake of fire is a symbol of Divine cleansing and purifying. Hearts stained by sin will learn obedience through the things which they suffer until every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear that Jesus Christ is God to the glory of the Father.

I would have us note here that the second things of God are better than the first. God sets aside the first that He may establish the second. The Second Adam is greater and better than the first; and the second heaven and earth are better than the first. The spiritual man is better than the natural, etc.

Is it not unreasonable to believe, therefore, that the second death is better than the first? The first death takes the wicked to the grave and leaves him in the condition in which he died, while the second death will end in his being purged of all sin and brought to a knowledge of the true and living God.

All of this is in harmony with God’s sovereignty, His foreknowledge and His love. Praise ye the Lord.