

Where is Hell?

Little is heard today - unless it is 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 that makes light of sin; but while we would repudiate any tendency to belittle 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 beautiful. Hell in most cases simply means the grave. This must be evident even to the unlearned English reader who considers 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 the hell spoken of is the grave.
2. "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell" (Psa. 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 question.
4. "Thou Capernaum shalt be brought down to hell" (Matt. 11:23). The overthrow and ruin of a city may be described as a bringing to the grave; but a city cannot be pictured as going down bodily into a fiery hell; or as experiencing a mental state.
5. "The sorrows of death compassed me: the pains of hell gat hold on me"

(Psa. 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.

6. "My church: 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.
7. "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*.

8. "O that thou wouldest hide me in THE GRAVE" (*sheol*) (Job 14:13).
9. "Let the wicked be ashamed; let them be silent in THE GRAVE" (*sheol*) (Psa. 31:17).
10. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave (*hades* - the Greek equivalent of *sheol*), where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55).
11. "Bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to THE GRAVE" (*sheol*) (Gen. 42:38).
12. "He bringeth down to THE GRAVE (*sheol*) and bringeth up" (1 Sam. 2:6).
13. "IN THE GRAVE (*sheol*) who shall give thee thanks?" (Psa. 6:5).
14. "Like sheep they are laid in THE GRAVE" (*sheol*) (Psa. 49:14).
15. "There is no work, nor device, nor wisdom in THE GRAVE (*sheol*), whither thou goest" (Ecc. 9:10).
16. "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 (compare Gen. 23:4). The English word hell comes from the Anglo-Saxon *helan*, to cover or hide, and originally meant "the hidden or unseen place". Only custom has given it another and more dreadful meaning.

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”; but whatever its derivation, in Greek after Homer’s time it was used to mean “the grave” or “death” (as in such a phrase as “death by sea”). 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 Psa. 16:10 and Acts 2:27, 31; Hosea 13:14 and I Cor. 15:55).

Another word, Gehenna, also translated “hell” in the New Testament, is the name of a place where refuse was destroyed outside Jerusalem. Here rubbish was burnt by fires which were never quenched until they had burnt all there was to consume; and so the word is used to describe the utter destruction of unrepentant sinners, for whom there is no further place in God’s universe.

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