

JUST WHAT IS HELL?

Many religions would have us believe that God will torment millions for all eternity, in a fiery place called *hell*. But how can Christians believe that, since the Bible they profess tells us that "*God is love*" (1 John 4:8)?

Given the importance of hell in popular Christian culture, one would think that the topic saturates the pages of the Bible, but did you know that in its most accurate modern English versions, the entire Bible typically features only 13 occurrences of the word *hell*? Thirteen occurrences are exactly what can be found in the American Standard Version (ASV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), and the very popular New International Version (NIV). The equally popular English Standard Version (ESV) and New Living Translation (NLT) feature respectively 14 and 17 references to *hell*.

When *hell* appears 13 times, it is because it was used consistently to translate the New Testament's 12 occurrences of the Greek word ***gehenna*** and its single occurrence of the Greek word ***tartaroo***. Are the meanings of these two words in harmony with what people understand *hell* to mean?

Gehenna refers to the Valley of Hinnom, just south of Jerusalem, where trash, garbage, dead animals, and the bodies of executed prisoners used to be thrown. At the time of Christ, it functioned as an incinerator whose continually burning fires consumed and destroyed all that was cast into it. Jesus used *Gehenna* metaphorically to denote total destruction, *not a place of torture*.

Tartaroo occurs only in 2 Peter 2:4 where it is erroneously translated "*cast down to hell*". According to Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, *tartaroo* "signifies to consign to Tartarus, which is the place where those angels whose special sin is referred to in that passage are confined 'to be reserved unto judgment;' the region is described as 'pits of darkness' in the Revised Version." This is not a place of torture either, not to mention that it is of temporary duration.

It should be no surprise that several Bible versions (for example the 2000 World English Bible) have dared to break with tradition, preserving the place names *Gehenna* and *Tartarus* instead of substituting the misleading word *hell*.

Sheol and hades

What hasn't helped matters is that the monumental 1611 King James Version (KJV) of the Bible translated as *hell* almost half of the 66 occurrences of the Hebrew word *sheol* in the Old Testament, and all 10 occurrences of the equivalent Greek word *hades* in the New Testament. But according to Vine, *hades* is most probably derived from *hado*, signifying *all-receiving*. Accordingly, subsequent Bible translations have left *sheol* and *hades* untranslated, or like the NIV and NLT, have translated them with the word *grave* or something like *the realm of the dead*. Indeed, the Bible says that the place "of all receiving", where those who die go, is the grave! Are you surprised?

To better understand, we need to know about the condition that prevails at death. Jesus spoke of death as a *sleep*. Jesus said of his friend Lazarus, who had been dead and in the grave for four days, that he had been *asleep* (John 11:11).

Hear the words of Job: "*If only you would hide me in the grave and conceal me till your anger has passed! If only you would set me a time and then remember me!*" (Job 14:13, NIV). *Grave* in this verse is the Hebrew word *sheol*. If *sheol* were a place of torment, Job would never have asked to be hidden there. We read in Ecclesiastes 9:5 and 10: "*For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even their name is forgotten... Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.*" How clearly does this description agree with Jesus that the condition of death is a sleep! But Jesus also said that there would one day be an awakening: "*Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment*" (John 5:28-29, NLT). The Bible teaches two resurrections in this verse. There is the *first resurrection* for those who faithfully follow Jesus at this present time, during the Gospel age (Revelation 20:6), and later there is *the resurrection to judgment* for the rest of the world.

The resurrection is such an important teaching that the Apostle Paul said, if there is no resurrection "*our preaching is useless and so is your faith*" (1 Corinthians 15:13-14, NIV). Jesus died by crucifixion, paying the ransom price to redeem all mankind back from sin's penalty of death. 1 Timothy 2:5-6 tells us, "*For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.*" This will be revealed to all mankind when they are resurrected to a time of judgment, as told by the prophet Isaiah: "*When your judgments come upon the earth, the*

people of the world learn righteousness" (Isaiah 26:9b). This is the very thing that Christians have prayed for some two thousand years in what is known as The Lord's Prayer: "*your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*" This prophecy and prayer will indeed come true when Jesus returns with His church to set up His 1,000-year earthly kingdom.

For a more in-depth look at this subject, we invite you to send for the free booklet, "The Truth About Hell." Mail your requests to:

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