

QUESTIONS WE WANT ANSWERED

40.1 Is Hell a Reality or a Myth?

Part I

Scripture: Psalm 73:12-19

Last Spring we spent several weeks studying what the Scriptures have to say about heaven. The subject of heaven is part of a wider doctrine known as Biblical eschatology. This rather impressive word is a coming together of two Greek words, “eschatos” meaning furthest or last, and “logia” meaning doctrine or saying. The idea put forth by the word is seen in various phrases in the New Testament. For instance, in John 6:39 it is recorded that Jesus said, *“And this is the will of My Father, that every one who beholds the Son, and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day.”* Eschatology deals with the coming again of Christ, the establishment of His Kingdom, the destiny of the world and the eventual dawn of the eternal morning. It is an inevitable subject. The rational mind persists in probing the future.

But there is a personal eschatology. Christianity teaches that there is heaven and hell and the full measure of justice to be realized one day. While we were studying about heaven I was asked, “Are you going to deal with the other place also?” Well, today we consider the “other place.” I can't imagine a more difficult aspect of Christian teaching than the subject of Hell. If our Christian belief was derived of our own dispositions and desires, surely there would be few who include such a dreadful fate for the unbelieving in their thinking. Perhaps Col. Robert Ingersoll, the militant agnostic, might express what many feel, “Ladies and gentlemen: The idea of hell was born of revenge and brutality on the one side, and cowardice on the other. I have no respect for any human being who believes it. I have no respect for any man who preaches it. I dislike this doctrine, I hate it, I despise it. I defy this doctrine. The doctrine of hell is infamous beyond all power to express.” In some respects we are able to identify with Robert Ingersoll. I too dislike the doctrine, I hate it, I despise it. People of all ages have felt the same way about it. Yet, strangely enough, the doctrine of Hell persists even in the face of strong objections which can be raised against it. Let us go to the Scriptures and seek to understand what they teach about this subject as well as to say something about the conclusions people have come to.

I. **THERE ARE THREE HISTORIC INTERPRETATIONS OR DOCTRINES OF HELL:**

We will be looking at many Scripture verses together, but before we do it might be well for us to consider the specific views which have been held and the variations which exist as people approach the subject of Hell. Let me say that people who believe in Christ as personal Savior and Lord differ in their understanding of what the Bible teaches. It is possible for people to have a high regard for Scripture and at the same time hold to a view which is different from our own. Christians do disagree while still believing their views are upheld by God's Word.

Of course, when we speak about people having differing opinions, we mean people who are able to give a reason for the hope that is within them. What God has said in His Word is more important than what man says or chooses to think. If Scripture is set aside we will go in as many ways as there are ideas in our quest for truth.

1. **Everlasting Separation from God:**

Through the centuries this understanding has been believed and defended. Tertullian (2nd century), Augustine (4th century), Thomas Aquinas (13th century), Martin Luther (16th century), John Calvin (16th century), John & Charles Wesley (18th century) are a few who can be mentioned. The most powerful proclaimers of the Bible have believed in eternal torment. John Chrysostom and Ambrose (4th century), John Wyclif (14th century), Jerome Savonarola (15th century), George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards (18th century), Charles Spurgeon and Dwight Moody (19th century) and of course Billy Sunday and Billy Graham on the 20th century. The doctrine is set forth in the Athanasian Creed; the Augsburg Confession, Augustine's **City of God**, Calvin's **Institutes**, Dante's **Inferno**, Milton's **Paradise Lost**, and Bunyan's **Pilgrim's Progress**. The belief is drawn from such passages as Matthew 25:46. *"And these shall go away into everlasting punishment; but the righteous into life eternal."* Here the Lord refers to the state of bliss and the state of punishment as being of the same duration by using the same word, **aioonios**, to describe them. The most reputable scholars give to the adjective the meaning of unending. Of the 71 times **aioonios** or **eternal** is used in the New Testament, there is not a single instance where it can mean temporary.

Another statement of Christ is found in Mark 9:43-44. We will look at other verses in this regard.

2. Universal Restoration:

The view which holds that there will be an ultimate reconciliation of all men to God was first set forth by Origen in the 2nd century. His view is that punishment was not final but corrective. Familiar names in league with this view are Alfred Tennyson and Leslie Weatherhead. Verses often quoted are Psalm 22:27 and 86:9. Proverbs 11:31 and Psalm 145:9 are referred to. Some New Testament verses are Colossians 1:20 and Ephesians 1:10; II Corinthians 5:19 and Philippians 2:11. Origen's doctrine was based upon Malachi 3:2-3. Other passages which support or appear to support the universalist's theory are Romans 5:18; 11:25-26; I Corinthians 15:22 and Psalm 139:8. In this view hell becomes a means of grace.

3. Conditional Immortality:

It is the feeling of some people that man is mortal and becomes extinct after being judged by God unless given immortality by virtue of faith in Christ. The view is that evil is not eternal. Only God and good will last forever, but Satan and evil will one day be completely destroyed. People who hold to this view believe that eternity cannot be attributed to a being which as condemned is separated from divine life. Where divine love ends, being ends. Genesis 3:22-23 are frequently mentioned in reference to the belief that man does not have an immortal soul and that man was created with the possibility of enjoying eternal life, but that right was forfeited by disobedience.

These are the views. They are not new. They are of ancient origin. Our concern is to hold to that which we believe is most Scriptural, rather than to find Scripture to support our own view. Objections to believing in Hell are many. The fact that God is love, righteous, wise, all powerful and the revealer of truth, have been mentioned. Furthermore, fear should never be used as an incentive to believe. There are answers to these objections.

II. THERE ARE FOUR IMPORTANT WORDS TO BE STUDIED AND UNDERSTOOD:

It is important when studying the subject of hell to have a Scriptural word study. In other words, there is some vocabulary we have to become familiar with. Four words come from the pages of Scripture for us to examine.

1. There Is the Hebrew Word Sheol:

This term is found more than 60 times in the Old Testament and is used to describe the place of departed spirits. About 250 years before Christ the Old Testament was translated into the international language of the Mediterranean area, which was Greek. Sheol was rendered Hades, which is the New Testament word. Therefore, Sheol and Hades can be studied together. Sheol appears to have a variety of meanings in the Old Testament, but there are some errors to avoid. It is unfortunate that the Authorized (King James) Version in struggling for a word rendering for Sheol used the word grave. Sheol is translated hell 31 times, grave 31 times and pit 3 times. Sheol should never be used in relation to the body, it is related to the soul of man. It is important not to confuse the grave where the body goes, and Sheol or Hades where the soul goes. Sheol is not simply the grave.

Another mistaken notion concerning Sheol is that it is a place without any distinction among its occupants. It is true that many passages seem to indicate neither punishment nor blessedness. It appears as a kind of half substantial place where there is a weakened consciousness. People appear without strength, they are only shades of their real selves. In Genesis 37 we have the familiar story of Joseph. He was hated by his brothers who plotted against him. Finally, they sold him into slavery. He is reported dead and his father Jacob mourns. Jacob cried, *"Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son."* (37:35) Now there is no thought of torment here whatsoever. But let us move on.

There are several things which can be noted about Sheol. Evidently, the dead do not praise the Lord there according to Psalm 6:5 and Psalm 30:9-10. In Psalm 88:3-12 we have one of the rare description's of the way the ancients viewed the afterlife. We can also note that there are certain warnings issued in regard to Sheol. These are found in Psalm 9:17; Proverbs 5:5, 7:27, 15:24.

In reading more about Sheol we find that Moses speaks of God's anger burning there. See Deuteronomy 32:22. In Jonah 2:2 there is a cry of desolation associated with Sheol. *"I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and he heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and thou heardest my voice."* Jonah compares his being in the belly of the great fish to being in Sheol. There are certain desires mentioned in connection with Sheol. Notice Habakkuk 2:5, *"Who enlargeth his desire as hell, and is as death, and cannot be*

satisfied." At times Sheol is seen as a place where the wicked are located. See Psalm 55:15, and 9:17. Yet, there are those verses which speak of believers facing death with joyful expectation. Notice Numbers. 23:10, Psalm 16:9-11, 17:15, 73:24-26. Sheol is presented as the place or state into which a person descends. The word has a variety of meanings, and each use of the word is given meaning by its context.

Both the righteous and the unbelieving are described as being in Sheol. The Psalmist describes the righteous person in Psalm 88:3, *"For my soul is full of trouble, and my life draweth nigh unto Sheol."* Psalm 89:48 reads, *"What man is he that shall live and not see death, That shall deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?"* The prophet Hosea writes, *"I will ransom them from the power of Sheol; I will redeem them from death: O death, where are thy plagues? O Sheol where is thy destruction?"* (13:14) Concerning the unbelieving, we read about Korah in Numbers 16:33, *"So they, and all that appertained unto them, and they perished from among the assembly. They went down alive into Sheol and the earth closed upon them."* In Psalm 49:14 we read, *"They are appointed as a flock for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; And the upright shall have dominion over them in the morning; And their beauty shall be for Sheol to consume."*

By these verses we can conclude there is a spiritual distinction among those who have gone to Sheol. Again, the Jews of old had a faint view of the afterlife. Job's confidence was very great as recorded in Job 19:23-27, and David mourned the loss of his son in II Samuel 12:20-23.

2. There Is the Greek Word Hades:

It is this word which means the same as the Hebrew word Sheol and the English word Hell. It was the Septuagint translation of the Scripture's that Jesus and the apostles were familiar with. Hades and Sheol are one and the same. This identification is established in Acts 2:21 where we read the words, *"Thou shalt not leave my soul in Hades."* The quotation is from Psalm 16:10, *"Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol."* Hades is a generic term for the unseen world into which the souls of all men passed before the resurrection of Christ. The New Testament information we have concerning the abode of the dead is much stronger than that of the Old.

Hades is found in Matthew 11:23, 16:18; Luke 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 2:31; Revelation 1:18, 6:8; 20:13-14. In the 16th chapter of Luke the Lord Jesus

Christ lifts the veil to give an astonishing glimpse of two historical men. Both died and went to the place which is called Sheol, hades, and Hell. It is a remarkable conversation which is carried on in hades between a rich man, whose body had been buried comparatively recently, and Abraham whose body had been buried in the cave of Machpelah 1800 years before. But in Sheol or Hades there is a distinction in the exact place of their abode and they are separated by a great gulf. One of the men died having a relationship with God through the covenant God had made with Abraham. His name was Lazarus, and it is said of him that he was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. (Luke 16:23-26) Before Christ died and arose no believer went to heaven with the exception of Enoch and Elijah. Everyone went to Abraham's bosom which was located in Sheol, where it appears, they were in a state of consciousness so much so that they could see, speak, feel, remember, reason and be comforted. This was a place where all who died went, somehow to be separated from one another. Believers were in a state of rest though separated from God's immediate presence. They were described as being in captivity. (Ephesians 4:8-10) It was to this place that Christ went.

Spending three nights and days apart from His body, the soul of the Lord went to Hell. Listen to Peter in Acts 2:25-21. *"Moreover my flesh shall rest in Hope; because thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption."* Peter then points out that his prophecy did not apply to David because we know that his body did see corruption. He shows that it was Jesus who died and went to Hell and who arose from the dead. (Acts 2:28-32)

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