

A Word Study on Hell

Main Idea: To understand the meaning of various Bible terms associated with the word *hell*

Introduction:

All four of the following verses use the same English word *hell*. Do they all refer to the same place, or are there differentiations in their meanings?

For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption (Ps. 16:10).

And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom (Lk. 16:23).

For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment (II Pet. 2:4).

And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched (Mk. 9:43).

Outline:

I. The Hebrew word *Sheol*

- A. The word occurs 65 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In the King James Version it is translated as *hell* 31 times, *grave* 31 times, and *pit* 3 times. There is no clarity as to the exact etymology of the word.
- B. “It means really the unseen world, the state or abode of the dead” (*The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, p. 2761). “The meaning of the Sheol moves between the ideas of the grave, the underworld, and the state of death” (*New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed., p. 1103). “In the OT it is the place where the dead have their abode, a hollow space underneath the earth where the dead are gathered in” (Elwell, Walter A., ed. *Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. 2 J-Z, p. 1948).
- C. *Sheol* is the Hebrew equivalent to the Greek word *Hades*.

D. Characteristics of *Sheol*

1. Describes the abode of the dead (II Sam. 22:6; Job 17:13-14; Ps. 116:3).
2. It is a place that never reaches capacity (Prov. 27:20).
3. It is viewed as being down beneath the earth or in the lower parts of the earth (Ezek. 31:15-17; Num. 16:30, 33; Isa. 14:9).
4. It is a place of darkness (Job 17:13).
5. It is a place of conscious existence (Isa. 14:9-15).
6. It is a place of judgment for the unrighteous (Num. 16:33; Deut. 32:22; Ps.9:17; Prov. 23:14).
7. It possibly contains various levels (Ps. 86:13).
8. It is not removed from God's jurisdiction (Job 26:6; Ps. 139:8).
9. Some believe that at one time it consisted of two compartments. One compartment for the righteous (Paradise or Abraham's Bosom) and the other for the unrighteous (Hades). This is based primarily on Luke 16:19-31. Some would also believe that the inhabitants of Paradise were released to Heaven by Christ after His death on the cross (Eph. 4:8-10; I Pet. 3:18-19).

“The Old Testament teaching of the state of individuals after death was not as fully revealed in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. To be sure, never is there a contradiction between God's revelation in the past and that at a later time, but there is a progressively greater clarity to be found in later revelation” (*Meaning of Sheol and Hades*, www.opc.org).

II. The Greek word *Hades*

- A. *Hades* is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word *Sheol*.
- B. The word *hades* is translated as the word *hell* 10 times in the New Testament (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Lk. 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13-14) and 1 time as the word grave (I Cor. 15:55).
 1. Three of the ten times it is translated *hell* refer primarily to death or the abode of the dead (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:27, 31).
 2. Seven of the ten times it is translated *hell* refer to judgment or punishment (Matt. 11:23; Lk. 10:15; 16:23; Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13-14).
- C. “It is the fiery destination of only the immaterial (that is, the souls) rather than the material (that is, the bodies) portion of unredeemed man” (Mark Minnick, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, p. 10).

- D. “It confines the soul for only the intermediate time between physical death and final judgment. . . . Revelation 20:13 reveals that Hades holds the dead until it delivers them up to be reunited with their resurrected bodies for the Great White Throne Judgment following the Millennium” (Mark Minnick, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, p. 10).

“Those wicked men who lived before the flood, and went to hell [hades] in Noah’s time, are still there.” – Jonathan Edwards

III. The Greek word *Tartarus*

- A. The only occurrence of the this word in the New Testament is found in II Peter 2:4. *Tartarus* is a verb that requires four English words for a smooth translation – *cast down to hell*.
- B. “In light of this passage [II Peter 2:4] it is not unreasonable to suggest tartarus may be the underground prison house for a special group of fallen angels already in chains awaiting final judgment” (Harold Willimington, *Complete Guide to Bible Knowledge: Introduction to Theology*, p. 284).
- C. The word *tartarus* “in Greek mythology identified a subterranean abyss that was even lower than Hades (hell). Tartarus came to refer to the abode of the most wicked spirits, where the worst rebels and criminals received the severest divine punishment” (John MacArthur, *II Peter & Jude*, p. 85). The Bible does not clearly state that human souls are consigned to this place.

IV. The Greek word *Gehenna*

- A. The word Ghehenna is used 12 times in the Greek New Testament (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mk. 9:43, 45, 47; Lk. 12:5; James 3:6). Eleven of the twelve occurrences were spoken by Jesus Himself.
- B. The word Ghehenna is a New Testament word with an Old Testament background. “In the Old Testament, a wicked Israelite king named Ahaz forsook the worship of Jehovah and followed the devil-god Molech. In his insane and immoral attempt to please Molech, the king actually sacrificed his own children in the fires as burnt offerings to his abominable idol (II Chron. 28:1-4; II Kings 23:10. This all took place in a deep and narrow valley to the south of Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinnom. It was called by this name because of its owners, the sons of Hinnom. This terrible practice was stopped under the reign of godly King Josiah, but the Valley of Hinnom continued to be used as the dumping ground for

the garbage and filth of the city of Jerusalem (Harold Willimington, *Complete Guide to Bible Knowledge: Introduction to Theology*, pp. 284-285).

- C. “As one therefore combines both the Old Testament and New Testament meanings, he has described for him a place of filth and sorrow, of smoke and pain, of fire and death. This, then, is the word the Holy Spirit chose to employ in describing the final destiny for the unsaved. With all these things in mind, one is forced to the sobering conclusion that Gehenna hell is God’s final dumping and burning place for all unsaved men and apostate angels” (Harold Willimington, *Complete Guide to Bible Knowledge: Introduction to Theology*, p. 285).
- D. The twelve uses of the word Gehenna in the New Testament “reveal that this term is strictly reserved by the Holy Spirit for the final destination of both the body and the soul of the damned” (Mark Minnick, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, p. 11).

V. The phrase Lake of Fire

- A. This phrase appears five different times in the book of Revelation (Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8).
- B. The Lake of Fire is a synonymous term with Gehenna. “Because both Gehenna and the lake of fire are spoken of as the ultimate destination of the unredeemed, the two are obviously equivalent expressions referring to the same place” (Mark Minnick, *The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment*, p. 12).

VI. The Inhabitants of *Hades* and *Gehenna*

- A. Satan, the Antichrist, and the False Prophet (Revelation 19:20; 20:10)
- B. Fallen Angels (II Peter 2:4)
- C. All unsaved people (Revelation 21:8)

God gives us several lists in His Word of specific traits that characterize people who will occupy hell for all of eternity (I Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:19-21; Revelation 21:8; 22:15).

1. The Fearful (Prov. 29:25; John 12:42-43)

These are cowardly people. “They are placed at the top of the list in contrast to all the believers on earth who suffer persecution and hardship for the sake of Christ. Instead of living a life of dedication to the Lord, they fear danger and flee the consequences of confessing the name of Jesus” (Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation*, p. 561).

2. The unbelieving (John 3:36)

This term refers to those who are disloyal and unfaithful to God and His Word. It also refers to those who do not believe in Christ. “Literally, these are the disbelieving. No man ever goes to hell because he can’t believe, but rather because he won’t believe” (Harold Willmington, *Introduction to Theology*, p. 290).

“The most sobering statement of all is that the unbelieving will be in the lake of fire. The unbelieving! Men might concede that the abominable should be there and the murderers – but the unbelieving! Yet unbelief is the father of all wickedness. It opened the gates of Eden to sin and has kept men away from God and His salvation ever since” (John Phillips, *Revelation*, p. 250).

3. The Abominable (Proverbs 11:20)

This term refers to those who are polluted and defiled by sin – to be detestable. “They pursue a lifestyle that is diametrically opposed to biblical teaching, and they are an abomination in God’s sight” (Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation*, p. 561).

4. Murderers (Exodus 20:13)

This term refers to all homicide and hatred (I John 3:15).

5. Whoremongers (Ephesians 5:5)

This term refers to those who practice any type of sexual immorality.

6. Sorcerers (Leviticus 20:6, 27)

“The Greek word is pharmakos, which refers to an enchanter [magic spells and witchcraft] with drugs. In a general sense the word also covers those who commune with Satan through fortunetellers, mediums, and astrology” (Harold Willmington, *Introduction to Theology*, p. 291).

7. Idolaters (Romans 1:22-23)

This term refers to those who worship someone or something other than the one, true God of Heaven.

8. Liars (John 8:44)

“All people who turn the truth into a lie God dispatches with the lake of fire and sulfur” (Simon Kistemaker, *Revelation*, p. 561).

Conclusion & Application:

1. Sharpen your knowledge of the Scriptures by understanding the various words used in the Bible for hell.

Sheol – O.T term that refers to the general abode of the dead

Hades – Refers to a temporary place of suffering for the unredeemed souls of mankind. It is temporary in the sense that all of the souls in this place will exit and be reunited with their body when they are summoned to the Great White Throne judgment

Tartarus – A place of imprisonment for some fallen angels

Gehenna & Lake of Fire – Synonymous terms for the final place of judgment for the body and souls of unsaved men as well as Satan and the fallen angels

2. If you are a believer, give praise to the Lord for redeeming your soul by His grace and for granting to you eternal life in Heaven.
3. Never lose sight of the power of the gospel. God can radically transform sinners when they trust in Jesus Christ for salvation (I Cor. 6:11).