

# BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

## HELL

### Hell in the Old Testament

In the Authorised Version of the Old Testament the word 'hell' appears thirty-one times (Deut. 32:22; 2 Sam. 22:6; Job 11:8; 26:6; Ps. 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 55:15; 86:13; 116:3; 139:8; Prov. 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11,24; 23:14; 27:20; Isa. 5:14; 14:9,15; 28:15,18; 57:9; Ezek. 31:16,17; 32:21,27; Amos 9:2; Jon. 2:2; Hab. 2:5).

In the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament the word 'hell' does not appear in any of these verses. Instead the word 'Sheol' appears. What does Sheol mean? *Sheol* is a Hebrew word which means "a hollow and subterranean place, full of thick darkness" (Gesenius). The New International Version of the Old Testament does not use 'Sheol' or 'hell' in any of these verses but rather 'grave', 'death' or 'the depths'.

In none of the verses where *sheol* appears is there any association with the idea that this is a place of torment or punishment. The verses which do comment on what is experienced in *sheol* indicate that there is a complete lack of conscious thought or deliberate action there. For example:

"For in death there is no remembrance of Thee: in the grave [*sheol*] who shall give Thee thanks?" (Ps. 6:5);

"there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave [*sheol*]" (Eccl. 9:10);

"the grave [*sheol*] cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth" (Isa. 38:18).

'Hell' in the AV of the Old Testament is, therefore, to be understood as referring to that place to which *all* are gathered at death.

### Hell in the New Testament

In the Authorised Version of the New Testament the word 'hell' appears twenty-three times. This may cause confusion because in the original Greek three different words are to be found. These are *gehenna* (Mt. 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mk. 9:43,45,47; Lk. 12:5; Jas. 3:6), *hadēs* (Mt. 11:23; 16:18; Lk. 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27,31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13,14), and *tartaroō* (2 Pet. 2:4).

The confusion is compounded in the New International Version, which renders *hadēs* as 'hell' in Luke 16:23, as 'grave' in Acts 2:27 and as 'Hades' in Revelation 1:18. In the Revised Standard Version there is less confusion and more consistency because *gehenna* is always translated 'hell', and *hadēs* is left as 'Hades' (Matthew 16:18 uses 'death', but the margin indicates 'Hades').

### What do these Greek words mean?

*Gehenna* means 'the valley of (the sons of) Hinnom'. In the Old Testament it is associated with idolatry, fire rituals and child sacrifices (2 Kgs. 23:10; Jer. 7:31,32; 19:1-6; 32:35).

In New Testament times it was still associated with fire and death. It was the place where the bodies of convicted criminals were thrown and where waste materials were

deposited to be destroyed by the ever-burning fires. With the exception of James 3:6 it is used only by Jesus, and in passages in which he is stressing the certainty of annihilation at death if behaviour and attitudes are not changed. "Hell fire" is not, therefore, speaking of the nature of the punishment for those adjudged as wicked but is a picture of what will happen to the unworthy. As the hot and corrosive conditions in the valley of Hinnom utterly destroyed anything left there, so the unworthy will cease to exist.

*Hadēs* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol* and generally refers to that which the dead occupy: the grave. It is translated as 'grave' in the AV in this passage: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave [*hadēs*], where is thy victory?" (1 Cor. 15:55). This appears to be quoting Hosea 13:14, where, interestingly, *sheol* is translated 'grave': "O death, I will be thy plagues; O grave [*sheol*], I will be thy destruction".

In Luke 16, however, in the parable of the rich man and the beggar, Jesus uses this word (*hadēs*) in conjunction with a statement about the bosom of Abraham. Referring to the rich man, Jesus says: "and in hell [*hadēs*] he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (v. 23).

Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote a Discourse to the Greeks concerning Hades. In this he refers to a place called "The Bosom of Abraham", which appears to be a temporary abode of the just, having died, as they await "that rest and eternal new life in heaven, which is to succeed this region". These ideas discussed by Josephus have no support in Scripture, but describe a scenario of man's devising of what happens to the righteous and the unrighteous after death. Jesus brings attention to the inconsistencies of these mistaken beliefs through his parable, which is designed to alert them to the fact that they were following the teaching neither of Moses nor of himself.

*Tartaroō* means 'to cast down to Tartarus'. Tartarus was "regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead" (Thayer). The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* informs us that it was "the infernal regions of ancient Greek mythology . . . where the gods locked up their enemies".

It is, therefore, an imaginary, mythological place, and Peter, like Jesus in the parable referred to above, was using an idea from the culture of the day. He combined this then current idea with historical incidents from the Scriptures to emphasise his message—the certainty of God's eventual judgement and punishment of the "unjust" (2 Pet. 2:4-9).

## Conclusion

All go to hell when death comes. Even Jesus was no exception (see Acts 2:25-31). It is not, however, a fearful place where those who have not satisfied God's requirements suffer eternal torment by fire.

Its meaning must be derived from the original Hebrew and Greek words used and be in harmony with overall Scriptural teaching. This teaching is that the bodies of the responsible dead wait to be regenerated and brought to life again at the return of Jesus so that all might receive the decision of the righteous judge. Those accounted worthy will be made immortal and inherit the earth (they do not go to heaven). Those accounted as not worthy of immortality will perish (they do not suffer eternal torment in the raging fires of an imaginary hell).