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The Biblical Teaching of Hell

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Edited and expanded by David Sielaff, 2003 and February 2023

Read first the "[February 2023 Newsletter](#)"

Editor's Note: This article is a short summary of the true teaching about "hell" in the Scriptures. Other details on "hell" are presented in various places on the ASK website and in Dr. Martin's books [ABCs of the Gospel](#) and [The Essentials of New Testament Doctrine](#). DWS



The majority of Christians normally believe that the consequence of sins (if people are not covered by the blood of Christ) is to burn in hell for all eternity, while others think sinners will be annihilated in flames of judgment. It may come as a surprise to learn that the Bible nowhere teaches that every unrepentant sinner will burn in hell. It does say there is a lake of fire which will exist at the end of the Millennium (Revelation 20:10), but the Bible does not teach that *all* present day sinners will be consigned to it. Nor does the Bible say sinners will live within an inferno for eternity.

The very opposite is true. The Bible says the wages of sin is *death* (Romans 6:23), not to live for eternity. Everlasting life is a gift from God; it is not something inherent within man (Romans 6:23). What the Bible does show, and shows clearly, is that the penalty for unforgiven sins is *death*. God will determine the necessary means by which the *deaths* of unrepentant sinners will occur. And He will not use fire in every case to bring about such deaths.

Is There Eternal Fire?

It can be shown from biblical examples that hell fire is *not* eternal and that the penalty for unrepentant sin is *not* to burn in hell forever. Let us look at some modern examples which have a legal basis for punishment associated with them that reflect the judicial sentences for sins or crimes mentioned in the Bible.

Suppose you ran a stop light with your automobile and were apprehended by the police. When brought before the judge, he fined you \$50 or five days in jail. The wages of your particular "sin" (in this case) was \$50. But let us suppose you had no money in your pocket to pay the fine. If so, you would then be liable to spend the five days in jail.

"And the judge [shall] deliver you to the officer, and you be cast into prison. Verily I say unto you

[said Christ], **‘You shall by no means come out thence, till you have paid the uttermost farthing.’**

• **Matthew 5:25–26**

Every part of the sentence rendered by the judge must be met *in full!*

However, let us say you had a friend who accompanied you to court and that he had that amount of cash on him. He took the \$50 out of his wallet and paid your fine in full. Since he did this for you, you would be able to walk out of the court with your penalty fully met. But only if the complete amount were given to the clerk of the court would you be free. The Bible, as shown in the quote by Christ given above, supports the legitimacy of this example even in the sense of divine judgment. The point is: someone else paid your debt *for you*, but the person had to pay for your debt to society *in full*.

Let us now give an example of a more serious crime — say a felony was committed. The judge might say the wages of such a “sin” is *twenty years* in prison. In this case it would not be possible in our Western courts for some friend to take your place and go to prison for you (nor would a simple monetary fine be allowable), but the *theological* teaching of the Bible would permit a person to take your place.

This may seem absurd on the surface, but it is true. The Bible, in the matter of paying the penalty for sins against the Deity [not, however, against man], allows for vicarious payment. That is what the law of offering animals for sins was all about. The animal paid the penalty (in a symbolic way) instead of the person (Leviticus 16:30, 34).¹ This, of course, would not be sanctioned in our modern courts, *but* suppose the judge said “twenty years” and a person were legally able to represent the felon and suffer the punishment. If so, the substitute must meet the full penalty of the law, **“until the uttermost farthing be paid.”**

Let us now go a step beyond the example of a felony and say a person had committed the crime of murder. The judge might then say the wages of such a “sin” was death in the electric chair. Again, our modern courts would not allow a person to take another’s place in the punishment, but the Bible authorizes such things from a theological point of view. As a matter of fact, this is exactly what Christ did for each of us. He died for us — in our place. The wages of sin (our sins) is death, and that is precisely what Christ did for us. **“In due time Christ died for the ungodly”** (Romans 5:6). Christ paid the exact and full penalty which all people have accrued to themselves because of their sins. The punishment is death.

Suppose, however, the penalty for sins was not death (as the Bible explicitly says), but that the punishment was to live in the agony of a fire for all eternity with no hope of relief and such a sentence of judgment is the consequence of sin. If this were so, then for Christ to have paid your penalty and mine for our sins, He would have to go to that fire and be in that condition of torment for all eternity. Though the Bible makes it clear that Christ underwent the full and complete punishment of sins for everyone who has ever lived — it is evident He did NOT go to a hell fire to begin a torment which lasts forever.

“We thus judge, that if one [Christ] died for all, then were all dead.”

• **2 Corinthians 5:14**

Christ died for us; He did not enter an “eternal” fire.

“But God commends this love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

• **Romans 5:8**

“We see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of DEATH, crowned with glory and honor; that He by the grace of God should taste DEATH for every man.”

• **Hebrews 2:9**

¹ Leviticus 16:30, 34:

“For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before YHWH.

... And this shall be an everlasting [eonian] statute unto you, to make an atonement for the children of Israel for all their sins once a year. And he did as YHWH commanded Moses.” DWS

“Christ also has once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh.”

• **2 Peter 3:18**

What beautiful and instructive scriptures these are. All our sins, and those of every person in the world, have been fully dealt with. Christ suffered for those sins once — at one time, and once for all. He is not paying for them now.

“We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

... This man, after He has offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God.”

• **Hebrews 10:10, 12**

Throughout the Bible it is made abundantly clear that the penalty for sins is death, and Christ fully met that penalty. The punishment for sins is not to be in a hell fire burning forever. That is not possible. If that were the sentence then Christ would have to be in such a hell fire and remain there for eternity. After all, Christ came to pay the complete retribution for the sins of mankind. But notice this truth: He was resurrected from the dead three days after His crucifixion. Instead of being in everlasting torment in a hell fire, Christ is now with the Father in glory: **“Who ... when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on `the right hand of the majesty on high”** (Hebrews 1:3).

This example of Christ’s meeting the consequences of sin for us is proof positive that the wages of sin is not to burn in hell fire forever — else Christ would have to be in such a state now and for all time to come.

Eternal Death Not the Wages of Sin

There are some denominations which teach that the consequence of sin is not eternal life in hell fire, but it is eternal death. Such belief is equally erroneous. If eternal death were the penalty, then Christ would have had to die eternally in order to meet the exact judgment — **“to pay the uttermost farthing.”** Yet, Christ became alive from the dead three days after His death.

Let us note again what the wages of sin really are. The sentence for all sinners is death. And that is what Christ provided for us. He underwent a substitutionary death on the cross. Once this principle of punishment is clear in our minds, then we can be prepared to enter a discussion about the “hells” of the Bible.²

The Three Biblical “Hells”

In the King James Version of the Bible, written in the early 1600s, the English word “hell” is used for three different Greek terms. Our English word originally came from the Anglo-Saxon word *hel* which meant a hidden place. We find this primitive meaning in our English word *hole*, a hole in the ground. If one dug a pit or a hole and put in it a coin and covered it up, the coin could be said to be in a hidden place — it would be in the Anglo-Saxon *hel* (or by extension hell). Obviously, there were never any fires associated with such holes or hells. The original “hells” were simply pits in the ground or their equivalents and nothing more.

Now let us look at how this early English word relates to the biblical “hells.” The Anglo-Saxon *hel* represents an exact equivalent of the Hebrew *sheol*. The word *sheol* means “the unseen.” It is rendered “the grave” 31 times in the Old Testament. The King James translation also represented it by the English “hell” 31 times (with the margin showing 4 times, “the grave”), and they made it “the pit” 3 times. In every case, the translation “grave” (a hole in the ground) or a word describing “the state of death” would have been the best renderings and they would satisfy all contexts.

² For a full discussion on the Second Death, the Lake of Fire, the length of punishment for the incorrigibly wicked, and other such matters of judgment, see our articles on the ASK Website: [“What is the Sin Against the Holy Spirit?”](#) and [“Adulterers, Thieves, Liars, Whoremongers, Blasphemers and Murderers will not be in the Kingdom of God.”](#) For the good news about salvation see, among other articles, [“The Time Periods of the Resurrections”](#) and Chapter 16, [“Resurrections from the Dead”](#) in Dr. Martin’s book [The Essentials of New Testament Doctrine](#). DWS

Hades, the Grave

The Greek *hades* (the unseen) used in the New Testament has precisely the same meaning, in its original form, as the Hebrew *sheol* and the Anglo-Saxon *hel*. Though the Greeks finally adorned the primitive meaning of *hades* with many elaborations (and this is exhibited by their many mythological beliefs along with their own non-biblical ideas about the various stages of death), the New Testament writers associated the word *hades* with the Hebrew *sheol*.

In Acts 2:27, 31 Luke quotes Psalm 16:10 and renders the Hebrew *sheol* as *hades*. This equates *hades* with the simple Hebrew meaning of “the grave” or sometimes “the state of death.” This fact is manifested in the death of Christ. When He died, the Old Testament prophesied that He would be placed in *sheol* (Psalm 16:10) or, as Luke said, in *hades* (Acts 2:27, 31). This *hades* was inside *His* physical tomb where His body lay for three days. Christ was dead for those three days because it is consistently shown in the New Testament that Christ was resurrected **from the dead, not from among the living** (1 Corinthians 15:20).³ There were certainly no fires inside Christ’s tomb while He lay there dead for three days. His grave clothes were not scorched (John 20:6–7) nor did His body show any evidence of burns. The *hades* where Christ was, was simply “the grave” (or tomb), and that is what *hades* or *sheol* means.

In Luke 16:19–31, however, we do have a section of scripture which has the word *hades* associated with fire after the death of a person. The whole of the story is the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. The parable is entirely symbolic.⁴

Gehenna Fire

The second word in the New Testament translated “hell” in the King James Version is Gehenna. This is a Greek transliteration of a geographical term signifying in the Old Testament the “Valley of Hinnom” (Joshua 15:8; 2 Chronicles 33:6). This valley surrounded the western and southern walls of Jerusalem. In the southeast part of this valley, the refuse of the city was burnt. This was the place in which some earlier Israelites burnt their children to the pagan god Moloch (2 Chronicles 28:3). An altar raised up for this purpose gave the name Tophet also to the area (Isaiah 30:33).

By the time of Christ, heathen idolatry had ceased in the Valley of Hinnom but there were still fires in the southeastern region for the burning of the city refuse. The prevailing winds in Jerusalem are normally from the west or northwest and burning the garbage in this area of Gehenna normally kept the nauseous smoke away from the main part of the city. This city dump for the destruction of the refuse from Jerusalem typically served as a sign of the divine destruction which could come through God’s fiery judgments (Jeremiah 7:31–32; 19:11–14).

The prophetic determinations of God often involve fire. This is because the sins of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah were so great, God said through the prophet that He would bring “unquenchable fires” upon the city:

“But if you will not hearken to Me to hallow the sabbath day, and not to bear a burden, even entering in at the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day; then will I kindle a fire in the gates thereof, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.”

• **Jeremiah 17:27**

This was accomplished precisely according to 2 Chronicles 36:19 and Jeremiah 52:13. The fires of judgment burnt down Jerusalem completely. But as soon as the destruction of the city was over, the fires went out. They extinguished themselves back in the 6th century BC. They were “unquenchable” back at that time in the sense that no one was able to put them out until they had performed their prophesied duty.

³ Some have mistakenly thought that Christ preached to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:18–19) during His three days in the tomb, but a careful reading of verse 20 shows that Christ performed that particular preaching back **“in the days of Noah.”** *ELM*

⁴ For an interesting and unique analysis of the parable and what its symbols are designed to show, read the article [“The Real Meaning of Lazarus and the Rich Man.”](#) *DWS*

Likewise, Isaiah said that in a future time (Isaiah 66:24), the carcasses [dead bodies] of people who rebel against God will be given over to maggots for consumption. These worms will not die until they have consumed the bodies assigned to them. Other dead bodies will be set alight and **“neither shall their fire be quenched”** (Isaiah 66:24). These fires are prophesied to destroy the bodies of certain wicked people and God will not allow anyone to put out the fires — they are unquenchable. Obviously though, the worms are not immortal and the fires will finally go out of themselves when they accomplish their tasks.

Needless to say, the fires in the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) were not eternal — they long ago ceased. I have taken over 600 people on tours to Jerusalem and all of us have walked through Gehenna or driven cars through it. There are no longer any fires there. Indeed, there is a prophecy in Jeremiah that **“the whole valley of the dead bodies”** [Gehenna] will be made **“holy unto YHWH”** (Jeremiah 31:40). The prophecy shows that the burning of dead things in the region will permanently stop. Gehenna will even become “holy.” This demonstrates that even the symbol of Gehenna as a place where dead bodies and refuse are burnt will cease as a fit type of God’s destructive power.

The Spirits in Prison (Hell)

The third and final New Testament word translated “hell” is *Tartaroo*. It is found only in 2 Peter 2:4. The Greeks understood it to be a subterranean area designed as a prison for the Titans (giants, see Genesis 6:4) who rebelled against Zeus. These spirits possessed men before the Flood and caused the sons of God (“righteous men”) to marry the daughters of men (“wicked women”) and giants were born to the women.⁵

These giants would answer to the Titans of Greek mythology. All the humans died in the Flood except Noah’s family, but the spirits who caused the mischief were consigned to the subterranean areas of the earth. Not being humans they could live in such a place of captivity. This may be the region referred to by Peter when he said that in the days of Noah Christ **“went and preached unto the spirits in prison”** (1 Peter 3:19). That such a prison for spirit beings does exist [even now, at this moment! *DWS*] under the surface of the earth is attested in the Book of Revelation.

“And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit [Greek: abyss — the underworld or lower regions of the earth or oceans] and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him [as in a prison] a thousand years.”

• ***Revelation 20:1–2***

That there are at this moment beings under the earth is mentioned in Philippians 1:10, **“That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things UNDER the earth.”** In Exodus 20:4 (in the Ten Commandments) this subterranean area is associated with the oceans. It speaks about fish and other aquatic animals being there. But the area is also called an abyss or pit. Could live beings live there? It may seem strange to us but Revelation 5:3 has a reference to conscious beings in a place **“under the earth.”**

In Revelation 9:2 we read that spirit beings in this region will be able to come to the surface of the earth. But at the present time the area of Tartaroo is considered a prison (1 Peter 3:19) where spirit beings are, or can be, **“kept in chains”** (Revelation 20:1–3). There is no information in Scripture that would indicate that these beings **“under the earth”** are suffering the pangs of fire. Such torment is reserved for the lake of fire which occurs later (Revelation 20:10).⁶

Christ was able to preach to those in the “underworld prison” (*tartaroo*) and His message is destined to take root even with these estranged beings, because Paul went on to say, **“Every tongue [including those in “the underworld”] should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God”** (Philippians 2:11). God will, through Christ, reconcile all things to Himself (Colossians 1:20). Even those in *tartaroo* (the underground

⁵ Dr. Martin later modified his view of the Sons of God. He came to understand that they were powerful spiritual beings, not humans who were possessed. *DWS*

⁶ See Dr. Martin’s article, [“The Lake of Fire: Where is it Located?”](#) *DWS*

prison) will share in the reconciliation when they confess that Christ is truly Lord and they will rejoice in the fact that He is the Savior of all.

Conclusion

It is true that God has used fire as a judgment in the past. He will also do so in the future.

- There is **“the lake of fire”** (Revelation 20:10).
- The fires of the symbolic Gehenna (Matthew 23:33), and
- The fires which will finally melt the elements of the earth (2 Peter 3:10–12).

When these fiery judgments are over, there will be a new heavens and new earth. **“We, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwells righteousness”** (2 Peter 3:13).

All the judgments of fire are intermediate. They play a part in preparing the earth and the universe for the perfect creation in which no more punishments will be necessary.

The major point one should remember is the biblical teaching that the penalty for sins is not to be placed in hell fire to be tormented forever. If so, then Christ would have to be there for all eternity paying for our sins. But Christ **“ONCE suffered for sins ... being put to death in the flesh”** (1 Peter 3:18). Likewise, the consequence of sins is not eternal death, or Christ would now have to be eternally dead in paying for our sins. The punishment of all sins is death (Romans 6:23) and that is exactly what Christ did for us. He died to save you, to save the whole world (1 Timothy 2:4–6), and finally He will save the entirety of the universe (Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:15–20).

And while it is possible for God to destroy both body and soul (Matthew 10:26) — and all of man’s bad works will be destroyed — God wills that no one will perish forever (2 Peter 3:9). **“If any man’s work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire”** (1 Corinthians 3:15).

The intermediate fires of judgment will one day come to an end when they have accomplished their tasks. This will occur when ...

“... at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of

[1] **things in heaven, and**

[2] **things in earth, and**

[3] **things under the earth; and**

[with the result] **that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”**

• **Philippians 2:10–11**

Time Periods: Eons

More information about time periods is available in the following articles: [“When the Eons Began,”](#) [“How the Eons Began,”](#) [“The Doctrine of the Ages in the Bible,”](#) and [“Resurrections from the Dead”](#) from Dr. Martin’s book [The Essentials of New Testament Doctrine](#). Now you know the truth about hell.

Editor’s note: See also [“Assumptions About Satan”](#) and learn more about this interesting creature. DWS

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Edited by David Sielaff, February 2023