

IS HELL REAL?

Do the unrepentant burn forever?

One of the most distorted, confusing and misguided teachings in traditional Christian organizations today is the subject of hell. According to a study conducted by the Barna Research Group, 71% of Americans believe that there is a hell. Almost a third of those respondents say that hell is an “actual place of torment and suffering where people’s souls go after death” (*Americans Describe Their Views About Life After Death*, The Barna Group, October 2003). The common impression among “believers” today is that hell is a place of unending punishment where sinners go when they die; a torture chamber where the wicked shriek and writhe in never-ending agony.

Where did such an idea come from? Secular historical sources trace this belief about hell to the influences of pagan philosophers, like Plato, upon the writers and thinkers of the Middle Ages. One such individual was the poet Dante Alighieri who wrote a collection of poems entitled *Divine Comedy*. Considered by many as one of the greatest works of world literature, Dante takes his reader into a journey through the *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. In gruesome detail, Dante depicts the inferno as a horrifying, nightmarish place where the wicked are condemned. At the entry of Dante’s inferno are inscribed these words: “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.” Is this hell real?

Man-made concept or divine revelation?

The *Encyclopedia Americana* asserts that “The popular idea of hell as a place of punishment...is the product of centuries of thinking on the great problem of reward and punishment which, instinctively almost, man associates with human deeds” (vol. 14, page 81). This concept then did not come from God but rather from centuries of human thinking!

What is vitally important to find out about this subject is what God reveals in His inspired book, the Bible, not the ideas of mortal

man! It's time we confronted the truth about hell. Millions of human beings have lived and died, under the threat that they could be flung into a fiery furnace to burn for all eternity. If there is a real hell of anguish and pain that God has reserved for those who defy Him, then it is vitally important to learn the truth about it. And there is only one, indisputable source of all truth—the Bible (John 17:17). God's inspired words in print will eliminate all confusion, distortion and misunderstanding about this subject of hell.

What the Bible says

In *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, there are four different Hebrew and Greek words that have been translated into the English word "hell" fifty-four times. It is translated in the Old Testament from the Hebrew *sheol* and in the New Testament from three different Greek words: *hades*, *gehenna* and *tartaroo*.

Both *sheol* and *hades* should be more properly translated "the grave" as they are in many places in the Bible. *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words* says *sheol* is that "underground cavern to which all buried dead go. Often incorrectly translated 'hell' in the KJV, *sheol* was not understood to be a place of punishment, but simply the ultimate resting place of all mankind."

According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, the Greek word *hades* occurs 11 times in the New Testament, and it is always translated as "hell" except in 1 Corinthians 15:55 where it is translated as "grave."

Scriptural references show that the Greek *hades* has a similar meaning as the Hebrew *sheol*. The apostle Peter gave his first inspired sermon on the day of Pentecost 31 AD, and he told the crowd on that day "He [speaking of David] seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption" (Acts 2:31). Peter was quoting from Psalm 16:10, where David prophesied of Christ's death, burial and resurrection. When we compare both references, we find that *hades* of the New Testament and *sheol* of the Old Testament both mean "grave." it

simply denotes that place where everyone eventually goes when they die. Obviously this hell cannot refer to that dark, dismal place of punishment and suffering, but rather the grave for those who have died and are awaiting a resurrection, because Christ never sinned! (Heb. 4:15).

God's Word has never referred to *sheol* or *hades* as a burning inferno of punishment and torture. Instead the hell which both of these words refer to is merely the grave. The distortion, confusion and misunderstanding about hell flourished and thrived because the literary works of writers like Dante were widely accepted and eventually adopted into mainstream religious teaching.

Another Greek word translated as "hell" in the New Testament is *tartaroo*. It is used only once: "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" (2 Pet. 2:4). This word does not denote a place but refers to a condition of restraint or confinement — a form of imprisonment imposed by God on the angels that sinned and followed Satan (Jude 1:6). It is never used in reference to man.

The third Greek word translated "hell" in the New Testament is *gehenna*, from the Hebrew *gai-Hinnom* meaning "the valley of Hinnom" (2 Kings 23:10). During the time of Christ, Gehenna was Jerusalem's dump site—a deep and narrow ravine where garbage, dead animals and corpses of criminals were thrown into the valley and burned up. Because of the refuse that was regularly dumped in this area, the fires constantly smoldered. But the garbage and the dead bodies were burned up and consumed; they did not continuously burn.

It was this "hell fire" that Jesus mentioned in Mark 9:47-48: "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." Christ explained that it would be better to rid ourselves of anything—friends, family, possessions, whatever—than to disobey and defy God and be thrown into this lake of fire.

The Bible defines the Bible

But what did He mean “the fire is not quenched?” Christ did not say that the fire burns forever. Notice God’s stern warning to the nation Judah: “But if ye will not hearken unto 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” (Jer. 17:27).

God used Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, to burn the palaces in Jerusalem. Once Jerusalem was indeed destroyed and burned, the fires went out. Jerusalem does not continue to burn today. The word “quench” means to put out or extinguish. What this is saying is that God would not allow that fire to be extinguished until it had burned everything up. Once its purpose had been accomplished, it went out!

In the book of Matthew, Christ speaks of an “everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (25:41). What did Jesus mean by “everlasting fire?”

God does not leave it up to us to draw conclusions using our own instinctive and faulty reasoning. He tells us exactly what He meant through the inspired letter of the apostle Jude: “Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 1:7).

Sodom and Gomorrah were utterly destroyed by fire and brimstone. These cities have been consumed and are not still burning today! The fires that destroyed both these cities died out when everything was burnt up. Everlasting, eternal fire is that fire whose results are permanent or everlasting.

Sodom and Gomorrah is a vivid example for us today of what will befall the unrepentant wicked—total, complete and permanent destruction. It is the eternal, everlasting punishment of death.

Christ used this word *gehenna* to describe the “hell fire” that would burn up unrepentant sinners! Notice Revelation 20:14: “And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.” The Bible declares this lake of fire is the place of final punishment or “the second death.” This is the second death.” The Bible declares this lake of fire is the place of final punishment or “the second death.” This is the only word translated as hell that has any association with fire in the Bible. It is never described as a fire in which the condemned sinners live, but a fire in which the condemned sinners die. Gehenna was a place of death and destruction, of eternal *punishment*; not a place of endless suffering and living torture, of eternal *punishing*. Your Bible says the “wages of sin is death,” not an eternity in torment (Rom. 6:23).

Consider Psalms 37:20: “But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away.” In plain, simple and straightforward language, God tells us that there is no burning fire that burns forever and does not consume anything. Contrary to what Satan would have us think, God is not a cruel, pitiless monster who sadistically desires to inflict pain forever on humans because of the sins they have committed.

Rather, in His word, God tells us that the ultimate end of all those who refuse to obey is death—the second death in the lake of fire. The unrepentant, defiant wicked will die (Ezek. 18:20). They will have no feelings, emotions or thoughts (Ecc. 9:5, 10). They will be dust and ashes under the feet of the righteous (Mal. 4:3).

The Bible speaks of an eternal punishment of man, not an eternal punishing. That punishment is death—total and complete, for all eternity—not an eternal life of endless suffering.

God’s plan of hope

The Bible proclaims the good news of the soon-coming Kingdom of God. Christ was the messenger bringing this message of hope and

joy from a merciful and loving God to a lined mankind, groaning under the burden of their sins. The truth and the way to eternal life He has offered now to His little flock, His church, who will be ruling with Jesus Christ at His return. At that time, for the first time in human history, He will reveal that truth and that way to all. Every man, woman and child who has ever lived will then receive their chance to know the Real Christ and His true message. They will be given their ONE opportunity to obey, be resurrected and become immortal spirit members of God's Family.

There will be those who will utterly and totally rebel against His way of life, who will defiantly refuse to keep His laws and who will stubbornly set their *minds* in complete opposition to God. These are they who will be cast bodily into *gehenna*, the lake of fire, to put a merciful end to their lives.

We should now begin to understand directly from God's Word that hell fire is not a threat of unceasing pain and agony, an eternal punishing from a Loving and Merciful God. Rather, hell fire is the final judgment, the ultimate removal and destruction, the death of those individuals who adamantly reject His rule, His laws and His ways after they have received the full knowledge of His truth.

His plan and purpose for His creation does not include a nightmarish hell of endless torment, a sadistic torture chamber of eternal horror and anguish. Make no mistake, however: there is a very real hell fire! It is the lake of fire—that final, real, death-dealing hell-fire God has reserved for those who insist on disobeying Him.

There is no need to fear the faulty and baseless conclusions of men. We do not have to be afraid that Satan the Devil will plunge us into a fiery inferno of an every0burning hell. Jesus Christ identifies WHO we need to be fearful of, WHO we must stand in awe and great reverence of: "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

The Great Power of the universe, the Supreme Sovereign Ruler, God Almighty is the One we must honor and revere, have a deep respect for and proper fear of. He is the Creator Who alone is able to save us from being burned up in the lake of fire that is *gehenna*-hell. He alone gives us abundant life for all eternity with Him in the glorious Kingdom of God.