

Watch Out for Hell

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The eyes of a young man are burning like coals. Long flames come out of his ears. He hardly can breathe. When he opens his mouth blazing fire rolls out of it. The blood is boiling in his veins. The brain is boiling and bubbling in his head. The marrow is boiling in his bones, and yet he is conscious, and one can talk to him. He will be suffering torment and pain not only for hundred millions of years but throughout eternity. This description of hell is found in a tract for children published in 1855. Does the Bible know of such a place called hell?

I. There Is a Hell

(1) Jesus knows about hell - Matt 18:9; 23:33; Luke 12:5.

(2) There are only two options: (1) life eternal or (2) being lost/destruction/eternal fire - John 3:16; Matt 7:13-14; Matt 25:31, 32, 41. However, destruction/eternal fire is a future event connected to Christ's second coming. Therefore, "hell" still lies in the future.

II. What Does Hell Look Like?

Some Bible translators have rendered various words with "hell" which in reality have other meanings. Four words have been translated with the term "hell": (1) *sheol*, (2) *hades*, (3) *tartaros*, and (4) *gehenna*.

1. Sheol

Sheol is used 66 times in the Old Testament. It is the realm of the dead who are in the grave. Normally the Greek translation of the term is *hades*.

Gen 37:35 Jacob expects to go down to *sheol*/the grave, to his son Joseph.

1 Sam 2:6 God brings down to *sheol*/the grave and raises up.

Ecc1 9:10 In *sheol*/the grave there is no activity, no planning, and no knowledge. *Sheol* is the place of the dead. There is no fire, neither is there torment. The righteous and the unrighteous are found there.

2. Hades

Hades is found ten times in the New Testament. It is also is the place of the dead, the grave. It corresponds with the Hebrew *sheol*.

Acts 2:27, 31 In *hades* there is decay. Jesus was the exception.

In Asia Minor the term *hades* is frequently found on tombstones. But relatives of the deceased did not want to say that their loved one was in hell. He or she rests in the grave. *Hades* is not hell which supposedly is already burning.

3. Tartaros

The Greek *tartaros* is not directly found in the New Testament, however, the verb "to cast in *tartaros*" is. It occurs in 2 Peter 2:4 only and is the abode of the fallen angels, who cannot return to the presence of God in heaven. It is not used to describe the place of the dead nor a hell in which people are cast after their death.

4. Gehenna

In the New Testament twelve times *gehenna* is mentioned. This is the hell about which Jesus spoke. It is the future place of punishment of the unrighteous. The term may be derived from *gê hinnom* pointing to the valley of Hinnom, a gorge near Jerusalem. According to Jer 7:32-33 it is a place of judgment. Rabbinical tradition understood it as a place outside Jerusalem for burning carcasses and rubbish.

Mark 9:43 Here *gehenna* is associated with fire. This fire begins only after Jesus' second coming (Matt 25:41), at the end of the age (Matt 13:49-50). Until then people "sleep" in their graves.

Luke 12:5 Because God alone possesses immortality (1Tim 6:16), *gehenna*/hell does not begin immediately after death for the person that has passed away.

Rev 20:9-10, 15 Does not mention the word *gehenna* but talks about the lake of fire in which after the millennium the unrighteous are burnt up. Since *gehenna* is associated with fire and is a future event after the Second

Coming, having to do with judgment, it is best to understand hell in the context of Rev 20. This is the hell Jesus warned us about.

5. *The Term "Forever"*

Does the future hell last "forever and ever" (Rev 20:10)? The term "forever"/"eternal"/"everlasting" as used in Scripture is broader than the English word. It may describe (1) something or someone existing without beginning and without end (in connection with God); (2) something or someone with beginning but without end (the eternal life of the redeemed—John 5:24; Rev 21:3-4); and (3) something or someone with beginning and with end in the sense of "for some time" (Exod 21:5-6; 29:9; Jonah 1:17; 2:6).

6. *The Second Death*

The unrighteous suffer "hell" for a limited time only. However, the results are eternal.

Rev 20:9 Fire devoured them.

Rev 20:14-15 This is the second death.

The unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12) cannot be extinguished until its work is done and everything is burned up (Matt 13:40-42; Jer 17:27—Jerusalem does not burn any longer). Eternal life is available only for those who belong to Jesus. Satan is not the Lord of hell, but will also be destroyed (Matt 25:41; Rev 20:10).

7. *Conclusion*

Scripture knows about hell, but hell is still future. Greek philosophy is the mother of the doctrine of purgatory and eternal torment in hell. Socrates (born around 470 B.C.) supported such concepts, but acknowledged that they were fictitious stories.

III. Consequences

The doctrine of an already now and ever burning hell twists Scripture, misrepresents Christianity, and distorts the character of God, his love and his justice. It may even hurt people. Reports claim that after sermons on hell some people became mentally ill. The doctrine of eternal torment in hell is immoral. How can a merciful God of love torture people in all eternity for having sinned temporarily? We believe in a God of love and justice and in his kingdom in which sorrow, pain, crying, and death will be no more (Rev 21:3-4).

10/05