

THE SECRET OF HIS PURPOSE .... THE PLAN FOR THE FULLNESS OF THE TIMES  
**TO HEAD UP ALL THINGS IN THE KING,**  
EVERYTHING IN THE HEAVENS AND ON THE EARTH,  
**IN JESUS....**

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#59

***Hell—Reality or Pagan Imagery?***

March 2019

It is not uncommon for words to take on new meanings as time progresses, and, without doubt, the word *hell* falls into this group.

Today, the word is synonymous with a variety of bad things. When people are going through pretty horrific times, it is often referred to as "going through hell." War is often referred to as hell. Religions (and ancient paganism) use the word to refer to the place the lost or infidels go for eternal or endless punishment, which is often described more on the line of eternal torture. Others see it as a place or existence of eternal separation from God. As such, man creates his own hell as he is tormented because he is outside the presence of God. Yet, others see it as the domain of the devil. These are probably the most prevalent modern-day concepts about the word, but, as with most things, there are variations on the theme. However, the intent of this article is not to attempt to sort out all the uses of the word; the intent is to debunk its use as a Christian doctrine.

To begin, let us consider the origin of the word.

The word *hell* is of Saxon origin, being derived from the word *helan*, which also has been spelled *hele*, *helle*, *hell*, and *heile*. In its original form, it simply meant "to cover, conceal, and hide." Thus, the expression "to *hele* over a matter" meant "to cover it." Another Saxon derivation is the word *holl*, which refers to a cavern or to the unseen place of the dead, which, in turn, has led some commentators to state that the word *hell* refers to "hole," which means "grave." A fascinating use of the word *hell* refers to a lover taking his love into a "hell" (hidden place) to kiss her. Try telling the love of your life that you are going to take her to hell for a kiss!

Most would agree that these words have a rather benign meaning and, most definitely, do not conjure up a picture of literal fire tormenting people forever and ever and ever and ever, as some emphasize. If everyone held to its benign meaning, then the word *hell* would be appropriate when referring to the grave (sheol, hades), as presented in Hebrew scripture—a state of unconsciousness where the dead know nothing whatsoever (Ecclesiastes 9:5), and the dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down to silence (Psalm 115:17). However, this is obviously not the view held by most in our day.

Today, the Christian view of hell is not much different from the pagan view; but again, to be sure, there are variations on the theme. When asked about the meaning of hell, some might respond that it simply means outside the presence of God, or that it is the realm of the devil and its angels, with no further elaboration of either meaning. As for outside the presence of God, how is this possible when God's ultimate purpose is to be *all in all*? If God includes ALL in His purpose, then how can anyone be outside His presence now, for all the ages to come, and at the consummation of God's plan?

However, it seems that one of the most commonly accepted meanings of hell is of a grotesque *place* of fire and worms that torments (actually tortures) human flesh endlessly as people scream for water to touch their lips to quench their thirst. God's eternal judgment of the wicked (lost) is an eternal existence in this hell with no chance of reprieve, for there are no second chances. Again, there are probably variations around this theme. Of course, Hollywood movies do much to perpetuate this image, and worse, with their sordid special effects and pagan-occult plots.

Strangely, in many depictions, human flesh is never consumed in this eternal hell-hole. The question that Christians should ask, but fail to because they don't see the need to apply a little logic to their theology, which is nothing more than a tradition of men, is: How could a human body survive with no water, fire licking at its feet, and worms eating at its flesh endlessly? It is impossible unless in hell people are given an immortal body by God so that they can be tortured forever and ever. Such an absurdity is nowhere to be found in scripture. Of course, there is one other even more pressing question: How could *God is love* (1 John 4:8) allow or, even worse, cause such a thing to befall His own creation that was created to be in His image? It is amazing how so many Christians vehemently and adamantly deny God His love and glory to save all mankind by insisting that God loves to torture because this is demanded by His justice. From where does such thinking come? Could it be that pagan mythology has become Christian theology?

Interestingly, in Greek mythology, the immortal Prometheus was credited with the creation of man from clay. He became known as man's champion when he stole fire for human use, which enabled the growth of man's civilization. According to the myth, the theft of fire displeased Zeus, the king of the Olympian gods, so he sentenced Prometheus to eternal torture by binding him to a rock so that every day an eagle could feed on his liver, which would grow back each day, as well, in order for the eagle to eat it the next day. Perhaps, this explains how the so-called *lost* will be tortured for eternity. Are we to assume that our loving heavenly Father is like Zeus?

By the way, do you notice the biblical similarity of man being created from clay? It is not unusual to find traces of biblical accounts in pagan myths. The problem comes in when pagan myths infiltrate Christian theology and become so-called truths. Having some knowledge of history and the genesis of basic beliefs goes a long way to knowing and discerning what is true.

It is safe to state that much error regarding God's judgment has its origin, at least in part, in pagan mythology that became a tradition of men. Jesus put His finger on this danger as He addressed the Jewish leaders nearly 2,000 years ago.

"Neglecting the commandment of God, you hold to the tradition of men." (Mark 7:8 NASB)

Later, Paul picked up this theme and warned the church.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8 NASB)

Paul also warned of something that is most likely even more nefarious, *doctrines of demons*. He did not specifically identify an eternal hell in these doctrines, but then again, Paul, who preached *the whole counsel of God* (Acts 20:27), never once mentioned hell in any of his epistles, meaning hell is not part of God's counsel or plan. If the concept of hell came from pagan mythology, then couldn't we conclude that the concept is also part of the doctrines of demons?

But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons.... (1 Timothy 4:1 NASB)

Those with an inquisitive mind should be wondering where the doctrine of an eternal hell (along with the various concepts of an afterlife *in* death, eternal punishment, etc.) came from if not from scripture. The answer from commentators and historians is that it most likely began in ancient Egypt and was reinforced in ancient Babylonian, Greek, and Roman cultures.

However, before presenting some thoughts on the genesis of hell, let us consider what the old testament or what is called *Hebrew scripture* has to say about hell. Well, the answer is simple; it says nothing about hell, which means the ancient Hebrews did not know anything of the concept, at least as far as any revelation through the prophets was concerned. The judgments or punishments that God meted out on the wicked and disobedient were always presented as temporal (a now event, never eternal) and when carried to their full conclusions led to physical death of people and/or destruction of whole nations and cities. There was never any threat of being cast into some fiery place alive (or, in some afterlife body) and remaining there forever.

### **Adam and Eve**

Adam and Eve were placed in the garden with the two trees and warned not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the warning was simply judgment unto death, whether one believes it was physical death (mortality), or some relational death between man and God, or both. Read the account carefully to see if God ever warned them of eternal punishment or, worse, torture. He didn't even warn them that they would be tortured for a specific length of time. Death was it! If hell is God's place of eternal judgment, as many believe, how could it be that God, the Father of all, never warned His first children of this destiny if they were disobedient? After all, billions of future lives were at stake. God knows the end from the beginning, so why did He remain so silent on the matter if hell is/was a reality? The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), not eternal torture! Adam and Eve's punishment was temporal as their relationship with God changed and as their bodies began a long and slow process of corruption.

### **Cain and Abel**

The same argument is made in the case of Cain and Abel and the first recorded murder. Why didn't God threaten Cain with eternal punishment in hell? Instead, Cain was given an immediate temporal punishment.

"Now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. "When you cultivate the ground, it will no longer yield its

strength to you; you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth." Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is too great to bear! (Genesis 4:11-13 NASB)

Notice that Cain considered this an unbearable punishment that, most likely, tormented his soul, but it was not torture, and it was not forever. God even appointed a sign for Cain so that no one would kill him. Again, all of this was temporal.

### **Noah and the Flood**

Now the earth was corrupt in the sight of God, and the earth was filled with violence. God looked on the earth, and behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. Then God said to Noah, "The end of all flesh has come before Me; for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth. (Genesis 6:11-13 NASB)

God did not like what He saw on earth and in the condition of man, so He purposed to wipe it all out and start over with Noah and his immediate family. We might think that if there ever was a need for God to institute and warn the ancient pre-flood world of eternal torture in hell, this would have been the opportunity to do so. However, Noah and heaven were silent on the matter. Instead, with the exception of eight people, all the others destroyed—they died. Again, this was a temporal judgment.

According to the *Book of Jasher* (Joshua 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18), Noah and his grandfather Methuselah preached to an evil, wicked world for 120 years.

Speak ye, and proclaim to the sons of men, saying, Thus saith the Lord, return from your evil ways and forsake your works, and the Lord will repent of the evil that he declared to do to you, so that shall not come to pass. For thus saith the Lord, Behold I give you a period of one hundred and twenty years; if you will turn to me and forsake your evil ways, then will I also turn away from the evil which I told you, and it shall not exist, saith the Lord. And Noah and Methuselah spoke all the words of the Lord to the sons of men, day after day constantly speaking to them. (Jasher 5:7-9).

Scripture tells us what God intended to do if the sons of men did not repent. What was the evil with which the Lord threatened them?

And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. (Genesis 6:7 KJV)

The word *destroy* means "to blot out," meaning the Lord was going to kill them and their world system in the flood. There is no hint whatsoever of a destiny in a place called *hell*. One could and should argue in favor of total and irrevocable annihilation based on this verse before arguing in favor of an eternal existence in the earth or elsewhere, for the latter is just not found in the account of Genesis. The mercy of God gave them 120 years to turn from their evil ways after which their fate would be swift and decisive.

The same argument can and must be made for Sodom and Gomorrah and the many other destructions that are recorded in Hebrew scripture. Not one hint of endless punishment is ever indicated.

### **Mosaic Law**

Through Moses, the Lord set forth the divine law along with the blessings and curses that would come upon the sons of Israel for either obedience or disobedience to God's law. In every single case of disobedience, the punishment under the law was always temporal, and there was never any indication of any eternal torture or torment of any kind. According to Deuteronomy 28-30, they were promised a whole host of punishments in the form of curses on their children, crops, flocks, health, and the general welfare of the nation, but never once were they warned of eternal punishment. People could even be stoned to death, but never tortured endlessly. If an eternal hell of torment and torture were God's plan for all disobedience, then why didn't He tell them? Are we to assume that God will blindly spring this upon them at the final judgment? Where is the justice in not telling people what they face for disobedience if it is greater than death? How does this fit in with *all Israel shall be saved* (Romans 11:26)? Could Paul have been making a case for the reconciliation of all, not on the basis of genealogy or bloodline, but on the basis of God's mercy and grace? Let us not forget that Israel had a history of gross violation of all of God's Law on par with the worst pagan nations recorded in history, most notably, the sacrifice of their own children. Wouldn't this warrant an eternal hell for those who committed such heinous crimes? But God was totally silent on the matter. His warning was death for these perpetrators.

Now, if God did not warn of an eternal hell, then its genesis must have come from another source, and that source could only be man. In other words, man created his own image of an eternal hell. We could say without much doubt that such a concept came from what is called *paganism* or *pagan religion*. But how and why did the pagan come up with such a horrific place? The answer is for fear and control!

### **Pagan Religion**

On one level, it seems that pagan religions generally germinate out of fear and superstition, and a need for leaders to control the masses through this fear and superstition. Yet, on another level, it seems that pagan religions are simply man's distorted and perverted response to what God put within them.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. (Romans 1:18-20 NASB)

For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (Romans 1:25 NASB)

Man knows that there is a power beyond him; he knows that there is more to what his eyes see, and it relates to a creator God. The problem comes in when that knowing gets distorted and is manifested in the natural realm with natural means (graven images) and unseen gods and worlds (under worlds, nether worlds) driven by spiritual powers of darkness. It seems that pagan man was and is simply responding to what God has placed within him; he knows he is created to worship God, but so do the powers of darkness that seek to deceive and devour. So, even though they are without excuse, they nonetheless were (are) responding to what God Himself put within them. In a sense, God has some responsibility regarding their response, and this is why He made provision to eventually and ultimately rectify the matter for all mankind, to His glory. It is realized that this goes against the grain of Christian orthodoxy and tradition, but let us not forget that Jesus was delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23).

Unfortunately, what has been presented so far seems to fall short of a logical explanation of the genesis of an eternal hell. Why would people conjure up an afterlife in which they would be tortured if they do not live a certain way? Why not hold to a belief system that death always leads to nirvana for everyone? It is the same type of logic that should be applied to the failed concept of *free* will. If all have *free* will when it comes to salvation, then why does most of mankind reject salvation that offers them immortality? Why choose to end up in an eternal furnace? It doesn't make sense.

See *Whose Will Saves—God's or Man's* — <http://www.kingdomandglory.com/art/art33.pdf>

### **Power and Control Over the Masses**

So, what is the explanation? It is discovered in the words *power* and *control*. History is ripe with proof that leaders use fear and superstition, as their preferred weapon, to control the masses. In the case of hell, corrupt leaders fed the masses lies about an afterlife where they would be tortured if they did not live a certain way. If you don't believe this is possible, then read history and look around you today and ask yourself if there is not a move afoot to corral people into thinking certain ways based on fear. It is particularly abhorrent in our day, especially through the internet, agenda-driven media, politicization of nearly everything public, advertising, hyped-up medical pandemics, and the list goes on. Why? It is for power and control and, let us not forget the most nefarious of all—the love of money, the root of all evil. Corrupt and immoral leaders know that if the masses truly understand what is going on around them, they will revolt. How best to control them but to feed them lies? Today, people call it fake news!

Now, in regard to an everlasting punishment (i.e., hell), history tells us that men used the concept with the sole purpose of controlling the masses. Consider the words of some well-known ancient men.

**Timaeus Locrus**, a Greek Pythagorean who lived around 420-380 BC, wrote about the doctrine of rewards and punishments after death and how it was necessary to society:

"For as we sometimes cure the body with unwholesome remedies, when such as are most wholesome produce no effect, so we restrain those minds with false relations, which will not be persuaded by the truth. There is a necessity, therefore, of instilling the dread of

those foreign torments: as that the soul changes its habitation; that the coward ignominiously thrust into the body of a woman; the murderer imprisoned within the form of a savage beast; the vain and inconstant changed into birds, and the slothful and ignorant into fishes."

**Plato**, the famous Greek philosopher, lived around 427-347 BC, making him a contemporary of Timaeus. He endorsed Timaeus saying he respected the fabulous invention of these foreign torments. Others, such as Strabo, wrote that Plato invented fables concerning the future judgments of hell (hades). Plato was even accused of attempting to deter men from wrong by frightful stories of future punishments.

**Aristotle**, another famous Greek philosopher who lived around 384-322 BC, wrote: "It has been handed down in mythical form from earliest times to posterity, that there are gods, and that the divine (Deity) compasses all nature. All beside this has been added, after the mythical style, for the purpose of persuading the multitudes, and for the interests of the laws, and the advantage of the state."

**Polybius** was a historian who lived around 205-125 BC. He wrote: "Since the multitude is ever fickle, full of lawless desires, irrational passions, and violence, there is no other way to keep them in order but by the fear and terror of the invisible world; on which account our ancestors seem to me to have acted judiciously, when they contrived to bring into popular belief these notions of the gods, and of the infernal regions."

**Livy** was a historian who lived around 59 BC-17 AD. About the invention of the fear of the gods, he wrote that it was "a most efficacious means of governing an ignorant and barbarous populace."

**Strabo** was a geographer who lived around 63 BC-24 AD. He wrote:

"The multitude are restrained from vice by the punishments the gods are said to inflict upon defenders, and by those terrors and threatenings which certain dreadful words and monstrous forms imprint upon their minds. For it is impossible to govern the crowd of women, and all the common rabble, by philosophical reasoning, and lead them, to piety, holiness, and virtue—but this must be done by superstition, or the fear of the gods, by means of fables and wonders; for the thunder, the aegis, the trident, the torches, the dragons, etc. are all fables, as is also all ancient theology. These things the legislators used as scarecrows to terrify the childish multitude."

Some might respond to these quotes by stating these men would say the same thing about Christianity today, calling it a myth and a fable. Probably so; but we need to be reminded that these men wrote before Christianity, as we know it today, and at a time when a remnant of Jews had come out of Babylonian captivity and returned to Jerusalem, remaining under foreign rule. Keep in mind that Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 604 BC, and the temple was destroyed in 586 BC. Their captivity ended 70 years later in 534 BC, and the second temple was completed in 515 BC. The remnant that returned to Jerusalem had been under the influence of the Babylonian culture and religion for 70 years. However, later they came under the influence

of the Greek culture—as Alexander the Great spread his empire into Asia from 336-323 BC—and the cultures of the Egyptians and Phoenicians (Tyrians and Sidonians).

It is easy to see how many great cultures could come to bear upon the Jewish mind at a time when they no longer heard the voice of God in their midst. The last of the Hebrew prophets (post-exilic prophets) prophesied during this period, with Malachi being the last one having warned God's people around 432 BC. After this, as far as we know, there was no recorded word given to God's people for about the next 400 years until 28 AD when John the Baptist came on the scene and then the Prophet of all prophets appeared a short time later in the midst of Jerusalem in order to begin His march to the cross.

Consequently, there was great opportunity for the Jews (and Judaism) to be moved away from what was given them through Moses. Simply, with their captivity and subsequent return to the land, the door had been opened for them to receive and believe foreign myths, fables, and superstitions on several fronts. This, in fact, is what happened, and Jesus knew it and often spoke against it. We could say that it was in this period that the Jews began to believe in doctrines of demons, and they divided into camps over some of these doctrines, as evidenced by the various sects known as Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes. These many influences from Babylon to Egypt to Greece and later to Rome, along with Hellenistic, Platonic, and Pythagorean philosophy, must not be underrated, but rather underscored in the context of the time.

### **Jewish Mind in Jesus' Day**

A few examples should suffice to underscore this thought.

First, the pagans believed that the soul is immortal, and it appears that the Lord's disciples believed this as well.

And passing by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, Teacher, who sinned, this one, or his parents, that he was born blind? (John 9:1-2 LITV)

It is easy to pass over the disciple's question, but there is more to it than meets the eye. The disciples were stating that the blind man was born blind because he had sinned. How is this possible? You mean a baby in the womb can sin? It makes no sense until we realize that there was a pagan doctrine that today is called *transmigration of the soul*, which teaches that not only are souls immortal in death but that they migrate to inhabit the body of another person to be born into the world. This belief is even held by pagans in our day.

But notice that Jesus never corrected His disciples; He simply stated the truth, which is generally how He dealt with all error. He stated: "Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents" (John 9:3). Jesus did not state that He held to or agreed with this pagan doctrine; He simply remained silent on the matter. Think about it; Jesus refuted error and lies not by arguing about them but by simply declaring the truth!

Second, when Jesus healed a blind and dumb man, the Pharisees accused Him of operating in accord with Beelzebub.



But hearing, the Pharisees said, This One does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, ruler of the demons. But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, He said to them, Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to ruin. And every city or house divided against itself will not stand. And if Satan throws out Satan, he was divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? (Matthew 12:24-26 LITV)

Again, Jesus did not correct them by making the point that the pagan Baal-god, which was known as the god of flies or of dung, was a false god to be ignored. Instead, Jesus asked: "If I by Beelzebub cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? For this reason, they will be your judges" (Matthew 12:27). *Beelzebub* is of Chaldean origin and was referred to as *baal-zebul*, which was a special deity of the Ekronites. Some teach that Beelzebub is satan, but Jesus was using the word as a parody, which treats a serious subject in a nonsensical manner, as in ridicule. Notice how Jesus hit them head-on using their own terminology. We could say that He threw dung at them. Are we to believe that Jesus believed in this deity? Of course not; but He made no attempt to correct this pagan theology. Instead, He simply stated the truth and referred to the kingdom of satan being divided.

Third, Jesus asked His disciples who people said He was.

And coming into the parts of Caesarea of Philip, Jesus questioned His disciples, saying, Whom do men say Me the Son of Man to be? And they said, Some say John the Baptist, and others Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. (Matthew 16:13-14 LITV)

Again, Jesus did not correct their pagan thinking. How could He be John the Baptist, since they were born six months apart? How could He be Jeremiah who was still in the grave? The only way this could be true is if He were reincarnated. Are we to believe that Jesus believed in reincarnation? Of course, not! But again, Jesus simply stated the truth of who He is.

Finally, one last example is the parable of the rich man in hades that so many Christians hang their hat on as proof that there is a place called *hell*.

And being in torments in hell [Greek *hades*], lifting up his eyes, he sees Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom. (Luke 16:23 LITV)

There is a lot that could be said about this parable, but there is one fact that places this story among the previous examples. The Egyptians believed in the pagan idea of punishment in an underworld that they called *amenti*. The Greeks later borrowed ideas from the Egyptian myths surrounding *amenti* and referred to it as the Greek *hades*. In the *Doctrine of Eternal Punishment* (chapter 3, page 7), Thomas Thayer states that: "*The Amenti of the Egyptians originated the classic fables of Hades and Tartarus.*" Are we to understand that Jesus believed in the Egyptian and Greek torture chamber called *hell*, a place of pagan gods? Some of the Jewish elite (Pharisees) of the day believed in the pagan *hades*, but again, Jesus did not see fit to correct their error; He simply used it as a teachable moment for them. In other words, He used something they knew to make a point, even though its source was pagan.

Why didn't Jesus correct all these errors; after all, look at the mess He left the church in regarding this subject? Well, He didn't make it a mess; we did. We are to walk by faith not by doctrine! Of course, some might still reject that this is error and continue to hold to pagan theology because "the word says it is so, so we must believe it." Really? Then go ahead and cut off your hand if it sins so you can enter heaven with one hand rather than go to hell with two hands. Does this make any sense to you?

So, it appears that the ancient world believed in an underworld hell that infiltrated the thinking of the religious elite of Jesus' day, perhaps, as well as His disciples. But, what about the early church—what did they believe? It is this writer's opinion that they were not so much concerned with this subject, for they were caught up in the fact that the one who was crucified was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven and is coming back again. Read Acts and then read Paul's epistles to see if this is true. Paul never once incorporated any teaching on an eternal tortuous hell in his gospel, and, as stated already, he gave forth the whole counsel or plan of God. Surely, if hell were real and part of God's plan, then Paul would of necessity have preached it because, according to modern-day theology, billions of people are destined for an eternal fiery furnace.

By the way, Paul did reference the wrath of God in his epistles, but he never referenced it as eternal torment or torture. A careful read of his usage of the word *wrath* indicates he used it in terms of a temporal judgment that was coming, sooner than later. Based on the words of Jesus, especially in Matthew 24, a temporal judgment (wrath) was coming upon Jerusalem and the Jewish religion called *Judaism*, which did come in 70 AD. Also, based on Daniel 2:31-35, in all likelihood, Paul knew that the kingdom of iron legs, the Roman empire, was going to suffer the wrath of God, as well, and be crushed by the stone kingdom of Christ. This occurred in 476 AD with the fall of Rome and the western Roman empire.

### **Roman Church's View**

From a modern-day perspective, it is believed that the concept of hell was embraced by the Roman Catholic church, especially during what is called the *Dark Ages* when people were not allowed to have direct access to scripture and were subject to all sorts of fear and superstition and control; they were left in the dark regarding the truth of God. Purgatory, indulgences, and many other false teachings entered into Christianity, once again, in order to keep the people under the control of an elite leadership.

One source of such error came through the *Divine Comedy* written by Dante Alighieri, the Roman Catholic troubadour who lived from 1265-1321 AD. Part of the *Divine Comedy* is called the *Inferno* in which hell is described as a place of torture and torment. Dante even had Christians and popes in hell. The history behind the *Inferno* is quite interesting but beyond the scope of our present subject. The fact of the matter is that the modern-day *hell* is similar to the *Inferno*. If we had lived through this period of history, which was truly dark, we too might have thought it to be a living hell as conjured up by pagans. Some of the imagery preceded Dante as many other pieces of apocalyptic literature existed in that day (and later), but he played a part in pushing it forward. Centuries later, the Catholic idea of hell was reinforced by the English poet John Milton (1608-

1674 AD) in his classic *Paradise Lost*. Of course, men's books do not prove the existence of hell, as envisioned by the pagans, Hollywood, or the tradition of men.

In case there is still some doubt as to the present-day influence of these works—some years ago, a well-known pastor claimed that Dante's *Inferno* proves there is a hell. He didn't say that the Bible proves it; he declared that the *Inferno* proves it. To compound the challenge, it is not uncommon for Christians to believe in hell because others have gone to hell and back and have written books about their experience. So, books like *23 Minutes in Hell* have become part of the gospel, at least according to many Christians. We don't need to challenge the experience these people have had, but we do need to critically evaluate their interpretations in light of scripture, not in light of pagan imagery.

Now, what about Greek scripture—the new testament? What does it teach on the concept of hell as eternal punishment? Again, the simple answer is that it does not teach anything; but this would not satisfy the skeptic, so let us consider some Greek words that English translations have translated into the word *hell*.

### **Hebrew and Greek Words Translated as *Hell***

The *King James Version* (KJV)—one of the most widely used and influential Bibles in the world—uses the word *hell* more than all translations (54 times). The *New King James Version* is a little better, with only 32 uses. These 54 times are translated from the words *sheol*, *hades*, *tartarus*, and *gehenna*, which appear in scripture 31 times, 11 times, 1 time, and 12 times, respectively. To confuse matters, the KJV also translates *sheol* and *hades* into *grave* and *pit*, as well as *hell*.

Recognizing the difference in these words, some of the more modern translations have moved away from the word *hell* and retained the words *sheol*, *hades*, and *tartarus*, all of which refer to the unseen and not to a place of torture for the "living dead" (an oxymoron, i.e., contradictory terms). Yet, the word *gehenna*, which is associated with a temporal judgment unto physical death, is translated as *hell* in most English translations.

Other translations use the word *hell* from 12 to 14 times (e.g., *American Standard*, *New American Standard*, *Revised Standard*, *New Revised Standard*, *New Living Translation*, *Amplified*, *New International*, *Darby New Translation*, and *New Century*). However, there are several versions that attempt to remain closer to the original languages and do not use the word *hell*. These include *Benjamin Wilson's Emphatic Diaglott* (1942), *Concordant Literal New Testament* (1926, 1983), *Young's Literal Translation* (1898), *Rotherham's Emphasized Bible* (1902, 1944), and *Weymouth's New Testament in Modern Speech* (1903).

The following presents how the KJV translates the Hebrew or Greek words *sheol*, *hades*, *tartarus*, and *gehenna*, thus, revealing how often the word *hell* is used.

*SHEOL* occurs 65 times and is translated by the KJV:

*HELL* 31 times: Deuteronomy 32:22; 2 Samuel 22:6; Job 11:8; 26:6; Psalm 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 55:15; 86:13; 116:3; 139:8; Proverbs 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11, 24; 23:14; 27:20; Isaiah 5:14; 14:9, 15; 28:15, 18; 57:9; Ezekiel 31:16, 17; 32:21, 27; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Habakkuk 2:5

*GRAVE* 31 times: Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; 1 Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 7:9; 14:13; 17:13; 21:13; 24:19; Psalm 6:5; 30:3; 31:17; 49:14, 14, 15; 88:3; 89:48; 141:7; Proverbs 1:12; 30:16; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Song 8:6; Isaiah 14:11; 38:10, 18; Ezekiel 31:15; Hosea 13:14, 14

*THE PIT* 3 times: Numbers 16:30, 33; Job 17:16

*HADES* occurs 11 times and is translated by the KJV:

*HELL* 10 times: Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14

*GRAVE* 1 time: 1 Corinthians 15:55 (not in all manuscripts)

*TARTARUS* occurs 1 time and is translated by the KJV:

*HELL* 1 time: 2 Peter 2:4

*GEHENNA* occurs 12 times and is translated by the KJV:

*HELL* 12 times: Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6

## **Sheol and Hades**

*Sheol*, a Hebrew word found in the old testament, and *hades*, a Greek word found in the new testament, have the same meaning. Generally, in scripture, Hebrew words set the meaning for Greek words. This is an important point, for there is a difference between the Hebrew and Greek languages. We could say that the Hebrew language originated with God, for it began with the Hebrews and was the primary language for capturing God's word given through the prophets. Initially, there was no use for Hebrew in literature. Consequently, there was no other literature in use that could corrupt the language. It was used for God's word; thus, the meaning of what was written could be and still can be determined by the Hebrew text alone.

However, the Greek language is a different matter. Before Greek scripture was written, there were countless pieces of Greek literature in use that determined the meaning of words. For example, the Greeks believed in mythology and many gods and, as such, held many beliefs associated with the spirit world. *Hades* was viewed by the Greeks in light of their pagan mythology. Consequently, a Greek reading the word *hades* in Greek scripture might relate the

word to the world of darkness, the spirit world, or some intermediate state after death. The pagans believed in an afterlife, and *hades* would have been associated with such a life.

Thankfully, the word of God gives the meaning of *hades*, as seen by comparing Acts 2:27, 31 with Psalm 16:10.

Thou wilt not leave my soul to hades, nor wilt Thou give Thy Kind One to see corruption. .... having foreseen, he did speak concerning the rising again of the Christ, that his soul was not left to hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. (Acts 2:27, 31 YLT)

For Thou dost not leave my soul to Sheol, nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption. (Psalm 16:10 YLT)

The verses in Acts 2, which refer to the Lord Jesus and His death, are a direct quote of the verse in Psalm 16; thus, *sheol* and *hades* have the same meaning. Given this understanding, all one must do is understand what *sheol* means in order to understand what *hades* means.

The *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998) by David H. Stern acknowledges the sameness of these two words by using the word *sheol* (*Sh'ol*) in place of *hades* throughout the new testament.

### Ask, Unseen

In Hebrew, the primary word from which *sheol* is derived signifies "ask." *Ask* refers to something that is *unseen*. One asks: Where has it gone? And the answer comes: To the unseen! In other words, *sheol* refers to *the unseen* (*imperceptible*). Every place in scripture that *sheol* appears is in relation to the state of death where the life of the person ceases and is no more. Some (many?) scholars on this subject believe that *sheol* and *hades* simply refer to the grave.

There is another test that can be applied. Taking the word *hades* and looking at the Greek words from which it is derived reveals that it too means "un-perceive" or "not to perceive," which is the same as "unseen." Thus, approaching *sheol* and *hades* from two angles yields the same result. They simply mean "the unseen." Obviously, this is a far cry from the modern-day view of the word *hell*.

Adding to this, in his treatise on *The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (1855), Thomas B. Thayer wrote:

"The word *Hell*, in the Old Testament, is always a translation of the Hebrew word *Sheol*.... The word *sheol*, "hell," makes nothing for doctrine of future unending punishment as part of the Law penalties. It is never used by Moses or the Prophets in the sense of a place of torment after death; and in no way conflicts with the statement already proved, that the Law of Moses deals wholly in temporal rewards and punishments. This position, also, I wish to fortify by the testimony of Orthodox critics, men of learning and candor. They know, and therefore speak. "

1. CHAPMAN. "Sheol, in itself, has no connection with future punishment." *Cited by Balfour, First Inquiry.*
2. DR. ALLEN, quoted above, says: "The term *sheol* does not seem to mean, with certainty, anything more than the state of the dead in their deep abode."
3. DR. CAMPBELL. "Sheol signifies the state of the dead without regard to their happiness or misery."
4. DR. WHITBY. "Sheol throughout the Old Testament signifies not the place of punishment, or of the souls of bad men only, but the grave only, or the place of death."
5. DR. MUENSCHER. This distinguished author of a Dogmatic History in German, says: "The souls or shades of the dead wander in "*sheol*," the realm or kingdom of death, an abode deep under the earth. Thither go all men, without distinction, and hope for no return. There ceases all pain and anguish; there reigns an unbroken silence; there all is powerless and still; and even the praise of God is heard no more."
6. VON COELLN. "*Sheol* itself is described as the house appointed for all living, which receives into its bosom all mankind, without distinction of rank, wealth, or moral character. It is only in the mode of death, and not in the condition after death, that the good are distinguished above the evil. The just, for instance, die in peace, and are gently borne away before the evil comes; while a bitter death breaks the wicked like as a tree."

"These witnesses all testify that "*sheol*", or "*hell*," in the Old Testament, has no reference whatever to this doctrine; that it signifies simply the state of the dead, the invisible world, without regard to their goodness or badness, their happiness or misery. The Old Testament doctrine of hell, therefore, is not the doctrine of endless punishment. It is not revealed in the Law of Moses. It is not revealed in the Old Testament."

As an aside—in past writings, I spent much print discussing whether there is an afterlife in some spiritual form for believers prior to resurrection and the redemption of the body. I have come to a new place regarding this issue. Simply, it is no longer of any interest to me—I believe scripture does not provide much to go on, almost to the point of silence. I recognize that theologians have their key verses they believe prove there is an afterlife. All I know is that scripture tells us the soul returns to *the unseen* (Psalms 16:10; 30:3; 49:15; 86:13; 89:48; Proverbs 23:14; Acts 2:27, 31); the body, which is the earthen vessel of man, came from the soil and at dissolution returns to the soil to become dust (Ecclesiastes 12:7); and the spirit, which is the breath that is blown into the body and which is described as *the imperceptible power of life, action, and intelligence*, came from God and at dissolution returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). This is as far as I now go with this subject. Beyond this, I leave it for others to sort out.

Now, in the new testament, the *unseen* is used in relation to the Lord's soul not being forsaken in the unseen (Acts 2:27); Capernaum subsiding in the unseen (Matthew 11:23); the rich man residing in the unseen (Luke 16:22-23); the Lord Jesus having the keys of the unseen (Revelation 1:18); death being followed by the unseen (Revelation 6:8); death and the unseen giving up the dead (Revelation 20:13); and finally, death and the unseen being cast into the lake of fire, the second death (Revelation 20:14). Of particular note is the personification of death and the unseen, as if they are a specific authority or power.

If we desire to hold to what scripture teaches, then we must hold that *sheol* and *hades* refer to the *unseen*, which speaks of death (however one views it)—*not* a living hell of endless torment and torture. To rectify this corruption of scripture, I submit that the word *hell*, as it is conceptualized in our day, needs to be expunged from scripture and from Christian doctrine.

### **Gates of the Unseen—Not the Gates of Hell**

Now, it is rather common to hear many quote the following verse, proclaiming that the dark forces of this world, which they call *hell*, shall not prevail against the *ecclesia*, making hell the domain of the devil. This is based on the fact that some translations use the phrase *gates of hell*, which is not the correct translation of the Greek. It should be the *gates of hades* or *the unseen*, as noted below.

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:18 KJV)

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church [ecclesia]; and the gates of Hades [the unseen] will not overpower it." (Matthew 16:18 NASB [CLV])

"Now I also say to you, that you are Peter [a stone], and on this solid rock I will build my Assembly [or, Church], and [the] gates of the realm of the dead [Gr., hades] will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18 ALT)

For a moment, stop and consider the implications of the word *hell* as held by many today. On one hand, *hell* is depicted as the authority (gates) of the wicked forces of darkness, which is supposedly the devil's domain; yet, on the other hand, it is depicted as an eternal place of torture and torment for the lost, including the devil and its angels.

How can the devil be cast into *hell* as eternal punishment, if hell is also its natural element or realm? Casting it into its natural element would be a pleasure for the devil, not a torment. According to John's Patmos vision, the devil will be cast into the lake of fire, which most people also call *hell*, to be tormented forever and ever (Revelation 20:10). This is a good example of *interpretative bias*.

This does not mean that the *ecclesia* is not in a battle with unseen dark forces. This is not being challenged. What is being challenged is the use of Matthew 16:18 to make the point.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 NASB)

This is an undeniable truth, and, without any doubt, these forces will not prevail against the Lord as He builds His *ecclesia*; but this was not Jesus' message to Peter. He was referring to the *gates of death* and not the *hell* that many hold to in our day.

The word *gate* refers to a physical structure that controls (allows or denies) entrance into or exit from a place. Ancient city walls had gates to keep out intruders. Also, gates can be taken figuratively to refer to the *authorities* or *powers* of a place. In the ancient cities, the authorities and powers of the city sat in the gates. In this case, the power or authority pertains to the unseen. Thus, *the gates of the unseen* simply mean *the authority or power of the unseen*, which is the realm of the dead.

Again, the unseen refers to *sheol*, that is, death. The comparable word in the Greek is the word *hades* or *unseen*. As already presented, this is easily proven by comparing Psalm 16:10 to Acts 2:27, 31, where the verses in Acts are a direct quote of the verse in the psalm: *For Thou does not leave my soul to Sheol, nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption*. The word *corruption* refers to *death* (see 1 Corinthians 15:53-55).

In other words, the state of death will not prevail against His *ecclesia* because Christ died for the sin of the world, was buried, and then was raised from among the dead. Jesus declared that because He was about to overcome death, so would His *ecclesia* overcome death. The proof that Jesus had His death, as well as His victory over death, in view is discovered three verses later; a fact His disciples had a difficult time grasping, especially Peter.

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (Matthew 16:21 NASB)

Paul reinforces this truth in his Colossians letter.

And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (Colossians 1:18 ESV)

One day, I was puzzling over why Paul went from Jesus as the head of His body to Jesus being the firstborn from the dead, when it hit me—Paul was reiterating Jesus' proclamation that the gates of the unseen or the gates of death will not prevail against His *ecclesia* that He is building. Why? Because He is the firstborn from the dead—He has conquered death and so will His body. His promise and our expectation are life.

Another way to prove the point is through the use of the phrase *the gates of the unseen* or similar wording, particularly its first mention, which, sometimes but not always, sets its meaning for all scripture, both old and new.

Such a phrase was first used by Hezekiah, king of Judah, when he was ill and literally about to die. He cried out: *"I, yea, I say: In the height of my days am I going into the gates of the unseen, made to miss the rest of my years"* (Isaiah 38:10 CLV).

Given the context of Hezekiah's cry and God's response of lengthening his days, there is no doubt that the king was referring to his death and returning to the unseen. His life was about to be cut short, and he was going to the place of the dead. Hezekiah was simply stating the truth that all know from experience. There is no way for man to rise from the dead based on his own power.



Mankind has no power over death, for death passed through into all mankind (Romans 5:12). When man dies, he has no power to give himself life to rise out of the grave.

The psalmist asks: *What master could live and not see death? Could his soul escape from the hand of the unseen?* (Psalm 89:48). The answer is that no one is exempt from dying and no one can escape from the unseen.

David also cried out to the Lord as he was in much anguish and faced possible death from those who hated him: *Show me favour, O Yahweh! Behold my humiliation due to them who hate me, lift me on high out of the gates of death; that I may recount all thy praises...* (Psalm 9:13-14 REB). Notice that David specifically referred to the *gates of death*. He was not physically dead at this point, but he thought he might die if his enemies persisted. In a sense, it seems that he likened his state of mind to death, as well, as all his enemies sought for his life. The point is that he joined gates with death.

Why will *the gates of the unseen or of death* not prevail against the Lord's *ecclesia*? The answer is in the resurrection. The disciples did not understand that their Master had to be killed and be raised up on the third day, as evidenced by Jesus' rebuke of Peter (Matthew 16:21-23), the very one who declared that Jesus is the Christ (Israel's Messiah), the Son of the living God (Matthew 16:16). Because Jesus was resurrected, meaning He overcame death, so too will His *ecclesia*, which is His body, one day be resurrected and overcome death in His life, putting on immortality. As believers, this is our grandest hope, and Jesus was and is today telling us to hold to this hope. Death shall not prevail! Paul confirms this fact.

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55 NASB)

But here are the crowning proofs that Jesus referred to the gates of hades or death.

"Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. (Revelation 1:17-18 NASB)

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.... (Hebrews 2:14 NASB)

By the way, the *ecclesia* can bind and loose things on earth as in heaven (Matthew 16:19) because the Son of God has appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). The keys of the kingdom of the heavens are part of the *ecclesia*'s arsenal of spiritual weaponry.

Thus, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus announced to Peter and the other disciples that He was going to conquer not only death but the devil (all adversaries, including the carnal flesh) as well; therefore,

death would not prevail against His ecclesia. Why? Because He is alive forevermore and, will ultimately abolish the last enemy of humanity—death in all its forms.

When, through His complement, His body, He has summed up all things in the heavens and on the earth, Jesus will have accomplished all that the Father gave Him to do for all mankind—that is, to save them from death and to give life to ALL.

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. (Romans 5:18 NASB)

There is one more meaning of *sheol* and *hades* that will lead into the matter of *gehenna*.

### **National Judgment unto Destruction, Death**

In Hebrew scripture, the word *sheol* is used for national judgment when a nation ceased to be due to God's judgment. Isaiah 14:13, 15 state that Babylon would go to *sheol*, and it did; according to history, a day came when the nation was no more. Likewise, Tyre ceased to exist as a nation according to Ezekiel 26:19-21. In Greek scripture, Jesus declared that Capernaum and other cities would cease to be (Matthew 11:23; 12:41; Luke 10:15, 11:29-32); it was going to *sheol* or *hades*. In all cases, these nations and cities did not go to a particular place under the earth; they simply disappeared through temporal destruction.

Thus, it is vital that we understand the proper meaning of the words *sheol* and *hades* as either the unseen (death) or national judgment (death to a nation or city) and not think in terms of the pagan Egyptian and Greek underworld. These two words do not convey any meaning associated with a place called *hell* where people are endlessly tormented or tortured.

In his essay on *Jesus' Teaching on Hell*, Samuel Dawson quotes Edward Fudge who wrote:

"In Greek mythology Hades was the god of the underworld, then the name of the nether world itself. Charon ferried the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx or Acheron into this abode, where the watchdog Cerberus guarded the gate so none might escape. The pagan myth contained all the elements for medieval eschatology: there was the pleasant Elysium, the gloomy and miserable tartarus, and even the Plains of Asphodel, where ghosts could wander who were suited for neither of the above...The word "hades" came into biblical usage when the "Septuagint" translators chose it to represent the Hebrew "sheol," an Old Testament concept vastly different from the pagan Greek notions just outlined. "Sheol," too, received all the dead...but the Old Testament has no specific division there involving either punishment or reward. (Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 205)

Samuel Dawson's essay is at: <http://www.tentmaker.org/articles/jesusteachingonhell.html>

Now, with this understanding, we can proceed to the word *gehenna*, which is most often translated in most English Bibles as the word *hell*.

## Gehenna of Fire

When people engage in a discussion of hell, it is not uncommon for many to state that Jesus spoke on hell more than anybody else; therefore, hell is real. They are correct that Jesus did speak on it more than anyone else; in fact, He was the only one to refer to it, but not as hell. He referred to it as the *gehenna of fire*.

It is rather telling that only Jesus referred to the *gehenna of fire* (aka *hell*); His disciples never did. Peter used the word *tartarus*, not hell, and James used the word *gehenna* in reference to the tongue, not in reference to an endless existence of torture. Paul, the apostle of the nations, never once used the word *gehenna* or referred to *hell* as a place of torment or torture. If hell, as it is taught today, were so important, don't you think that the apostles would have mentioned it in some manner as a warning? Of course, John saw the *lake of fire*, which is the *second death*, and many call this *hell*; but this is not hell in the sense that it is viewed today.

See *Second Death—Lake of Fire* — <http://www.kingdomandglory.com/art/art61.pdf>

Now, eleven of the twelve references to *gehenna* are directly attributed to Jesus (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). The twelfth citation is found in the book of James (3:6) in reference to the tongue. Here are the Jesus verses.

Yet whoever may be saying, 'Stupid!' shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire [fiery gehenna].  
(Matthew 5:22 CLV [REB])

'But, if thy right eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to gehenna. (Matthew 5:29 YLT [CLV, REB]; similar in Mark 9:47)

'And, if thy right hand doth cause thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to gehenna. (Matthew 5:30 YLT [CLV, REB]; similar in Mark 9:43)

'And if thy foot may cause thee to stumble, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into the life lame, than having the two feet to be cast to the gehenna, to the fire—the unquenchable—where their worm is not dying, and the fire is not being quenched.' (Mark 9:45-46 YLT)

'And be not afraid of those killing the body, and are not able to kill the soul, but fear rather Him who is able both soul and body to destroy in gehenna. (Matthew 10:28 YLT [CLV, REB])

'And I say to you, my friends, be not afraid of those killing the body, and after these things are not having anything over to do; but I will show to you, whom ye may fear; fear him who, after the killing, is having authority to cast to the gehenna; yes, I say to you, fear ye Him. (Luke 12:4-5 YLT)

'And if thine eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee; it is good for thee one-eyed to enter into the life, rather than having two eyes to be cast to the gehenna of the fire [fiery gehenna] (Matthew 18:9 YLT [REB]; similar in Mark 9:47)

'Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye go round the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte, and whenever it may happen—ye make him a son of gehenna twofold more than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15 YLT [CLV, REB])

'Serpents! brood of vipers! how may ye escape from the judgment of the gehenna? (Matthew 23:33 YLT [CLV, REB])

These are taken up individually later.

### Garbage Dump

In Jesus' day, *gehenna* referred to a garbage dump outside the city walls, south of Jerusalem, where refuse, including dead human bodies, especially those of criminals and beggars, was burned day and night and where worms consumed the organic matter, such as human flesh, that was not consumed by fire. It was a place of death, not a place of torment. One had to be physically dead to be thrown into *gehenna*, and, if one were cast into this dump and not given a proper burial, it was a sign of disgrace.

The dead cannot be tormented, for they are dead! It was a literal place of death that all could see and smell as the smoke of its burning went up day and night. Thus, when He spoke of *the gehenna of fire*, Jesus referred to something that most Jews living in Jerusalem would have easily understood in a physical and literal sense. They would have also understood the historical significance of this dump, for *gehenna* was synonymous with *the valley of Hinnom*. One of the worst chapters in the history of Judah was played out in *the valley of Ben-Hinnom* or *the valley of the sons of Hinnom* (Joshua 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Nehemiah 11:30; Jeremiah 7:31, 32; 19:2, 6; 32:35) that led to severe judgment of God's people.

According to Joshua, the valley ran south of Jerusalem, marking the territories of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The *Dung Gate*, which was on the east side of Jerusalem, had a common sewer that ran to the brook *Kidron* and the valley of *Hinnom*. Within the valley of *Hinnom*, there was a place called *Topheth*, which means "a place that burns" (2 Kings 23:10; Isaiah 30:33; Jeremiah 7:31, 32 (twice); 19:6, 11, 12, 13, 14).

One of the lowest points in the history of Judah occurred at the high place called *Topheth* when God's people committed great acts of idolatry as they offered human sacrifices to the false gods of Baal and Molech (Jeremiah 7:30-31; 32:35). They had fallen away from the Lord by committing gross sin more in line with what would be expected of heathen nations. They were *idolatrous* and *apostate*. Consequently, the Lord spoke through Jeremiah of a pending slaughter of these idolatrous Jews.

"Therefore, behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of the Slaughter; for they will

bury in Topheth because there is no other place. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky, and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away." (Jeremiah 7:32-33 NASB)

Please take special note of the fact that the Lord referred to their dead bodies as food for the birds and the beasts. This was not a place of torment for so-called *living souls* but a place of dead bodies. Undoubtedly, when He spoke of *gehenna*, Jesus not only had the prophetic words of Jeremiah in mind but also those of Isaiah.

And they will go forth and see the corpses of the mortals who transgressed against Me, for their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched, and they will become a repulsion to all flesh. (Isaiah 66:24 CLV)

An unquenched fire means it will do its job fully and completely. Worms are also found in garbage dumps, for they feed off organic matter. Both will outlast the flesh, for their purpose is to consume all flesh. Notice that the fire and worms are associated with the consumption of corpses, which means the person is dead and not alive in some fiery torment. The Lord prophesied of the corpses of mortals, ones who are not beyond death. Contextually, Isaiah speaks of the fate of apostates that are denied entrance into the kingdom of Christ. The fact of the matter is they are dead.

When there is no more material to serve as fuel for the fire to consume and no more organic matter to serve as food for the worms to consume, what do you think happens to the fire and the worms? When their source of food is exhausted, the fire and worms cease as well. This should dispel any notion that *the gehenna of fire* is a living hell, as held by so many.

It is worth repeating. *Ge-Hinnom* or *the valley of the sons of Hinnom* was where the Jews who worshipped Baal sacrificed their children to Molech (Jeremiah 32:35), an act that was an abomination to the Lord that led to His divine judgment by death. Through Jeremiah, the Lord declared that it would become *the valley of slaughter* in which the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the earth (Jeremiah 7:32-33; 19:6).

By the way, the law of God requires that the victim of a crime be made whole by the perpetrator. Only the victim can forgive and show mercy to the perpetrator; however, if the victim is murdered, he or she cannot exercise this right. Consequently, the law demands death for premeditated murders, and judgment on the part of the victim is put on hold until the final judgment of all, at which time God's perfect and loving justice is meted out based on the crime.

### **Jerusalem—A Broken Jar**

Within this same context, the Lord directed Jeremiah to break the jar in the sight of the men and declare.

Just so will I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot again be repaired; and they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place for burial. (Jeremiah 19:10-11)

Once an old jar is broken, it is of no further value because it cannot be repaired. According to the word of the Lord, there is only one place to dispose of the broken jar, and that is in Topheth. In other words, Jerusalem was going to be broken and cast aside like garbage thrown into a city dump. Jerusalem was going the way of *gehenna*. Jeremiah was commanded to speak a death sentence to the city of Jerusalem and its people because they had turned away from the Lord, no longer trusting Him, but instead had turned to false gods, becoming so morally corrupt that their actions were an abomination to the Lord.

In the short term, this prophecy of divine judgment was fulfilled when the Babylonians captured and destroyed Jerusalem. However, it was later rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah, only to be destroyed again in 70 AD by the Romans. Like a cat with nine lives, Jerusalem was rebuilt again, and it is now the religiously divided city of the nation Israel.

But take note that this sentence has finality to it. The potter's vessel was to be broken, which cannot *again* be repaired. I once thought that this meant the present Jerusalem was destined for destruction, but I am not so sure of this anymore. Even though ancient Jerusalem has been rebuilt many times and exists as a city in Israel today, since 70 AD, it has never been repaired to its former glory—notably it lacks the temple which was the centerpiece of Jewish life where heaven and earth came together and God presenced Himself. Even Herod's remodeled temple (the second) fell short of the first temple. After all, the glory did not fill it. Thus, I have concluded that Jeremiah's word still stands—the potter's vessel continues to be broken!

Adding to this, Paul wrote about the present Jerusalem and what had to be done to it.

See *Cast Out the Bondwoman* — <http://www.kingdomandglory.com/art/art25.pdf>

The fact of the matter is that God is now building New Jerusalem, not an earthly city of bricks and mortar but a celestial city of soon to be glorified and immortal people, the body of Christ. Those in Christ are the temple of God where heaven and earth come together in God's Son.

Now, why was it necessary for Jerusalem to face the divine judgment of *gehenna*?

'Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye build the sepulchres of the prophets, and adorn the tombs of the righteous, and say, If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets. So that ye testify to yourselves, that ye are sons of them who did murder the prophets; and ye—ye fill up the measure of your fathers. Serpents! brood of vipers! how may ye escape from the judgment of the gehenna?' (Matthew 23:29-33 YLT)

"Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify.... (Matthew 23:34 NASB)

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. =Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!" (Matthew 23:37-38 NASB)

Jesus is the Prophet who came to fulfill the prophets (Matthew 5:17; 21:11, 46; Mark 6:4); and the very ones who should have accepted Him and believed in Him, for they knew who He was (Matthew 21:37-39), were the ones who rejected Him, even demanded His crucifixion (Mark 15:13, 14; John 19:15). The Jews both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets (1 Thessalonians 2:14-15).

Jesus spoke many parables to hide the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens from the unbelieving Jews. His parables often spoke of those who would enter His kingdom because they believe in Him and those who would not enter because they were enemies of God—that is, enemies of the cross, because they did not believe on God's Son. Excerpts from two of His parables prove the point.

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son. ... and the rest seized his slaves and mistreated them and killed them. But the king was enraged, and he sent his armies and destroyed those murderers and set their city on fire." (Matthew 22:1-2, 6-7 NASB)

"But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.' ... "But these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them in my presence." (Luke 19:14, 27 NASB)

The enemies and citizens who refused His reign were unbelieving Judahites who lived in Judea and the city of Jerusalem, a fact that was not lost to Paul when he wrote to the Philippians.

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.... (Philippians 3:18-20 NASB) [Note the difference between enemies and citizens.]

Why would Paul weep over these enemies? Because they were of his kindred flesh; that is, they were Jews who rejected Israel's Messiah (Romans 9:1-3).

These few points are enough to make it clear that the valley of *Hinnom* signified the death of God's ancient people, not the heathen nations; and when Jesus spoke of *gehenna*, He spoke to Jews, not to gentiles (the nations).

In the context of ancient Israel's apostate history, *gehenna* refers to the judgment of death and destruction due to moral corruption of the highest order, in the same vein as the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah. They had failed miserably to obey God's law as given to them through Moses.

Consequently, when He walked among the Jews of that day, Jesus put His finger on the pulse of the condition of the Judahites. They were in danger of *the gehenna of fire*, which could be likened to capital punishment (judgment by death), because they had sunk to a low moral state in which

they, as ones called of God through the fathers, refused to believe His word, which led them to profanely demand the death of God's Son.

In 70 AD, they faced *the gehenna of fire* as Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed and many Jews were killed by the Romans. Thus, in the immediate context of Jesus' day, *gehenna* referred to God's divine judgment that came upon ancient Jerusalem and its unbelieving, apostate citizens.

### Eleven Gehenna References

Now, to seal the fate of hell as an endless place of torture, let us consider the eleven references to *gehenna* made by Jesus, starting with a set of similar verses.

'But, if thy right eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to gehenna. (Matthew 5:29 YLT [CLV, REB]; similar in Mark 9:47)

'And if thine eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee; it is good for thee one-eyed to enter into the life, rather than having two eyes to be cast to the gehenna of the fire [fiery gehenna] (Matthew 18:9 YLT [REB]; similar in Mark 9:47)

'And, if thy right hand doth cause thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to gehenna. (Matthew 5:30 YLT [CLV, REB]; similar in Mark 9:43)

'And if thy foot may cause thee to stumble, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into the life lame, than having the two feet to be cast to the gehenna, to the fire—the unquenchable—(46) where their worm is not dying, and the fire is not being quenched.' (Mark 9:45-46 YLT)

Does it make sense to you that Jesus is telling people to literally pluck out an eye, or cut off a hand or a foot in order to enter heaven? If it were so, then, in heaven, there will be a lot of people without eyes, hands, and feet. Without doubt, some would say this is ridiculous, for all will have new spiritual bodies in heaven. Precisely—this makes the point. It is all ridiculous if taken literally.

However, if this is viewed as a national, temporal judgment, it makes a lot of sense. Jesus was telling the Jews that were in His midst that they needed to be willing to cast off the members of the Judahite nation that were rejecting Him as Messiah. It was better for the nation to cast off the apostates so the rest of the nation could enter the kingdom of the heavens, the kingdom of the Messiah. John the Baptist gave a similar warning.

But seeing many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, Offspring of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore, bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. And do not think to say within yourselves, We have a father, Abraham. For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. But already the axe is even laid at the root of the trees; therefore, any tree



not bringing forth good fruit is cut off and is thrown into fire. I indeed baptize you in water to repentance; but He who is coming after me is stronger than me, of whom I am not able to lift the sandals. He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire, whose fan is in His hand, and He will cleanse His floor and will gather His wheat into the storehouse. But He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire. (Matthew 3:7-12 LITV)

John warned both the individual and the Judahite nation. Later, Jesus repeated the same warning; however, He centered the coming wrath on the elite Jewish leaders that were rejecting Him and His kingdom.

Yet whoever may be saying, 'Stupid!' shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire [fiery gehenna]. (Matthew 5:22 CLV [REB])

Jesus was not simply warning about some form of verbal abuse. He was pointing to the fact that the religious Jewish elite looked down upon the people as inferior. Rather than expressing love and mercy to their fellow countrymen, they looked at them with contempt. They were breaking the law of brotherly love or loving your neighbor—but there was more to it, for they were hindering their countrymen from entering the kingdom of Messiah as seen in the next *gehenna* verses.

'Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye go round the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte, and whenever it may happen—ye make him a son of gehenna twofold more than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15 YLT [CLV, REB])

'Serpents! brood of vipers! how may ye escape from the judgment of the gehenna? (Matthew 23:33 YLT [CLV, REB])

The answer to Jesus' question was that they would not escape the wrath that was coming upon Judah and Jerusalem. We could say that the last nail was put in the coffin, so to speak, because their hardened hearts were not going to turn. Jesus clearly made the point to them that they faced a physical death, as seen in Luke.

'And I say to you, my friends, be not afraid of those killing the body, and after these things are not having anything over to do; but I will show to you, whom ye may fear; fear him who, after the killing, is having authority to cast to the gehenna; yes, I say to you, fear ye Him. (Luke 12:4-5 YLT)

Given the way this is written, some might think this proves there is some form of afterlife (after being killed by God) in which there is torment. This is not what Jesus meant. Jesus simply made the point that their burial would not be according to the norm of the day. Instead, their dead bodies would be cast into a garbage dump as if they were common criminals or, even worse, no different from any other organic refuse (i.e., garbage). Think about the condemnation that Jesus heaped upon the Jews of that day who thought they were the chosen of God, as if they could get away with anything. Jesus gave them no such assurance.

But this verse can also apply to the national level as well. The body in view was the nation of Judah, what could be called the bad fig tree of Judah (see Jeremiah 24). God was able to kill the entire nation to the point that nothing would be left of it. It would be so consumed by the wrath of God that the fire and worms of His judgment would not be quenched until nothing was left of all that they held dear to their hearts, including their very religion that God had given them and then made obsolete.

Now, there is one more *gehenna* verse, similar to the above verse from Luke; however, this one deals with the question...

### **Is the Soul Immortal?**

In my studies, I have discovered that there is no universal understanding or agreement of the meaning of soul. Some equate it to the spirit and others equate it to life. However, according to Paul, there is spirit, soul, and body—implying there must have been a common understanding of the soul in his day that differentiated the soul from the spirit and the body.

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23 NASB)

Jesus Himself injected both body and soul in relation to *gehenna*.

'And be not afraid of those killing the body, and are not able to kill the soul, but fear rather Him who is able both soul and body to destroy in *gehenna*. (Matthew 10:28 YLT [CLV, REB])

What did Jesus mean?

On one level, He was stating the obvious that God can do what man can also do, kill the body and soul. Taken at face value, this means no one is alive in hell, for they (soul and body) are destroyed (killed). On another level, it is possible Jesus was challenging the Greek (pagan) teaching on the immortality of the soul without directly propounding a doctrine that refuted it. He knew what was taught in that day and what some of the Jews, even His disciples believed. They knew the body died but believed the so-called *immortal soul* went on to some afterlife in death. Jesus cut right to the heart of the matter that the soul and body die.

The message Jesus conveyed was about fearing God who judges through the *gehenna of fire*, which is divine judgment unto death or God's capital punishment. Ones killed by *gehenna* will rise up to be judged before the great white throne. The soul is included because it too dies with the body. Likewise, in the *gehenna of fire*, the dead (body and soul) do not know anything either. There is no knowledge because death is the cessation of life; take the body away, and the soul ceases to exist, for it is the experience of the body (as far as I understand it).

Consider these few points.

First, soul comes forth when the breath of the spirit of life is breathed into an inanimate body. When spirit enters the body, it becomes animated as *a living soul*. By the way, soul is more a phenomenon than an entity; therefore, it could be called *soul* without the article *the*.

Second, if soul only comes into being when body and spirit are joined, then it only follows that soul does not exist prior to the body becoming a living soul. It only becomes *soul* when the breath of the spirit of life enters the body. This is an important point, for it shows the soul is not immortal, at least on the front end or before life comes into the body. In other words, it does not exist in some mystical state that has conscious awareness prior to birth that no one has recollection of when they take on a body. Another way of stating this is that it is not eternal in the sense of existing before birth.

Third, *soul* is the animation of the body and its relationship and interaction with the environment in which it lives and partakes. It is not life per se but the human experience of living in a body that sees, touches, tastes, smells, etc. We could define *soul* as the experience of life in a body as experienced through the sensations and feelings of seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling. As such, soul could be likened to a phenomenon and a capacity.

Fourth, the soul [*nephesh*] of the flesh is in the blood (Leviticus 17:11 DNT), which means that soul is intimately joined to the blood of the body. Take away the blood, and what happens to the soul? Herein lies the answer to the question of whether soul is immortal or not. If the blood is drained out of a body, what happens to the body and the blood? Obviously, the body dies and returns to the soil and so does the blood, except the blood dries up and is absorbed back into the soil much faster than the bones of the body. Pour out (drain) the blood, and both the blood and the body die, meaning the living soul dies. So, if the soul of the flesh, that is, of the body, is in the blood, and death ensues when the blood is poured out, then logic dictates that soul dies too. Death brings an end to the experiences of the body. The body is no more, and surely its experience is gone as well.

If we accept these few thoughts on the body and the soul, what about the spirit? Is there a spiritual meaning to the *gehenna of fire* that applies to today or the future? In other words, is there something that could be likened to spiritual *gehenna*?

### **Spiritual Fire**

On a spiritual level, *God is a consuming fire* speaks of God, who is spirit and holy, purifying the sinful flesh of man, burning up the carnal nature, not through fire as we know it in the natural realm but through spiritual fire. In type, this is seen in the account of Moses and the burning bush (Exodus 3:2). We are like the prickly thorn bush. In a sense, all humanity, believer and unbeliever alike, must be purified through God's spiritual fire. The difference between the two groups is the timing and severity of the fire. Thus, in reviewing verses that deal with fire, we need to be aware of the recipients that are in view, for they could be the righteous (the Lord's people) or the wicked (the unbelievers).

Holy spirit fire purifies the spirit and soul of man, leaving nothing untouched. It is likened to removing the chaff, the unwanted hull, by threshing. The chaff is the husk of the wheat or any grain. In a figurative sense, it refers to anything *worthless*. Metaphorically speaking, the threshing is done by God's fire until the chaff is all consumed.

In reference to His people, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit and fire and burning of the chaff.

"As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." (Matthew 3:11-12 NASB)

The same concept is seen elsewhere, except it is referred to as the furnace of fire that is reserved for the wicked lawless.

"The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:41-42 NASB)

"So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:49-50 NASB)

Again, this must not be viewed as a literal furnace but rather *holy spirit fire* that consumes the sinful nature, the carnal flesh. God who is love is not out to annihilate man, as if to wipe him out completely and forever. He is after man's sinful, carnal nature and the works that emanate from this nature. Again, to emphasize, it is not a place, such as a literal furnace; it is an action that is the work of the spirit of God.

But I tell you the truth, it is advantageous for you that I should go; for if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come to you. But if I go, I will send Him to you. And having come, that One will convict the world concerning sin, and concerning righteousness, and concerning judgment. Concerning sin, because they do not believe into Me; and concerning righteousness, because I am going to the Father, and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged. (John 16:7-11 LITV)

As recorded by Matthew, Jesus established for His disciples a standard of righteousness that was higher than what was demanded under the Law given to Moses. Notice that in each case, Jesus referred to *gehenna*.

Yet whoever may be saying, 'Stupid!' shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire [fiery gehenna]. (Matthew 5:22 CLV [REB])

'But, if thy right eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to

gehenna. 'And, if thy right hand doth cause thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast from thee, for it is good to thee that one of thy members may perish, and not thy whole body be cast to gehenna. (Matthew 5:29-30 YLT [CLV, REB])

'And be not afraid of those killing the body, and are not able to kill the soul, but fear rather Him who is able both soul and body to destroy in gehenna. (Matthew 10:28 YLT [CLV, REB])

'And if thine eye doth cause thee to stumble, pluck it out and cast from thee; it is good for thee one-eyed to enter into the life, rather than having two eyes to be cast to the gehenna of the fire [fiery gehenna]. (Matthew 18:9 YLT [REB])

Obviously, Jesus was not telling His disciples to maim themselves in order to enter the kingdom of God or to avoid a place called *gehenna* (aka *hell* according to many). He was telling them that they needed to judge themselves in this life rather than face the judgment of God, either in this life or later at the judgment seat of God. Another way of stating this is—allow the fire of God to judge the part of you that is in sin now, so that your whole being will not have to face God's fire at the final judgment, that is, be condemned or be "judged against" with the unbelieving world. And He will cut him (servants) apart and will put his portion with the unbelievers (Luke 12:46).

Paul took up this theme in his epistles. Notice Paul's use of three Greek words: *diakrino*, which means "to separate thoroughly, discern"; *paideuo*, which means "to train children, chasten, correct"; and *katakrino*, which means "to judge against."

But if we judged ourselves rightly, we would not be judged [*diakrino*]. But when we are judged [*diakrino*], we are disciplined [*paideuo*] by the Lord so that we will not be condemned [*katakrino*] along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:31-32 NASB [added for clarity])

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned [*katakrino*] sin in the flesh.... (Romans 8:3 NASB [added for clarity])

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing [*paideuo*] us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11-14 NASB [added for clarity])

Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is to be revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. (1 Corinthians 3:12-15 NASB)

Again, Paul simply elaborated on what Jesus had taught His disciples. Although he did not use the word *gehenna*, Paul did inject *fire* into the judgment of the works of the believer. Notice that Paul has the believer being judged in this life and in the day, which speaks of standing before the *bema* of Christ as the fire of God judges works. For this reason, we must deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age. Why? Because of the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus!

Obviously, there is much more that could be said about these verses, but the point is that Paul's teaching, as given to the saints, mirrors Jesus' teaching, as given to His disciples; therefore, the message applies to all of us who believe in this age. The other point is that fire is involved in the judgment of God's people, and, since Jesus tied His message to His disciples, it could be likened to (but not quite the same as) the *gehenna of fire*. After all, putting aside the concept of a place of eternal torture, believers who do not conquer in this life could have a part in the second death or the lake of fire. He who conquers will not be hurt by the second death (Revelation 2:11).

This should cause serious doubt in the minds of those holding to the present-day concept of *gehenna-hell* as an eternal place of torture, for it means that Christians could be faced with the possibility of an eternal *hell* just as the world is; a most untenable idea. Think about it!

Now, returning to Jesus' teaching, He spoke to the unbelieving religious elite of the day that rejected Him.

'Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because ye go round the sea and the dry land to make one proselyte, and whenever it may happen—ye make him a son of gehenna twofold more than yourselves. (Matthew 23:15 YLT [CLV, REB])

'Serpents! brood of vipers! how may ye escape from the judgment of the gehenna? (Matthew 23:33 YLT [CLV, REB])

The hypocritical unbelievers of Judah were under the judgment of *gehenna*. Again, their national judgment by fire came in 70 AD when God's Roman army destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, thus, making Judaism obsolete.

### **Life After Life**

Before concluding, I want to very briefly inject a thought that is based on a phrase I came across in some of my recent readings. The phrase is *life after life*. Without doubt, most Christians are taught and strongly believe that salvation is mostly about having a life in heaven after they die—walking on golden streets, eating fruit from the trees, etc. Of course, if you die in unbelief, you end up in hell forever, being tortured. This is what could be called *the heaven-hell gospel*, which I contend is not really the good news. Consequently, an afterlife becomes the good news. Regardless of how one views the afterlife (and true to form, there are various views on what this looks like—I call them theories, not facts), what often gets lost in the gospel message is the absolute necessity of resurrection and transformation, being conformed to the image of Jesus (Philippians 3:21). Without this, there is no good news, contrary to all the various doctrines about afterlife.

So, here is my thought on the matter, and it is found in the expression *life after life*—No matter what one believes about an afterlife, what is of the utmost and essential importance is to know that the afterlife (if it exists, as many believe) is not the end point, nor is it the vital part of the good news. The vital part is knowing that there is life that is immortal, and this only comes through resurrection and transfiguration of the body, not through death. Death does not lead to immortal life, only resurrection does. Resurrection is the deliverance of our body, and when this occurs, we truly are transformed into sons of God, in the image of the Son of God. Thus, life after life!

Yet not only so, but we ourselves also, who have the firstfruit of the spirit, we ourselves also, are groaning in ourselves, awaiting the sonship, the deliverance of our body." (Romans 8:23 CLV)

### Conclusion

In conclusion, as stated earlier, the word *hell*, at least as it is defined in our day, really has no place in scripture or Christian doctrine. It is not even a transliterated word from the Greek. In English translations, it is simply a word that has been substituted for several Greek words that do not have the same meaning as the pagan hell that is so grossly taught to Christians. We don't have to use a word that pagan mythology and even some modern-day religions readily teach or acknowledge. If you agree that hell, as it is understood today, is a pagan concept, don't you think it should be discarded entirely?

God's judgments take on many forms, most of which occur in this life. To be sure, we all must appear before the judgment seat of God. But and this is a huge but, God's judgments are never eternal nor are they torture. They are eonian, and they are for chastening. Undoubtedly, experiencing God's judgments or, even, His wrath can be torment to the soul, as in weeping and gnashing of teeth, and ultimately bring death to the body and soul, but this is as far as it goes. It can go no further than death of the individual or of nations and cities, as evidenced throughout scripture.

One of the passages most often cited as proof that judgment is eternal is found in Matthew 25 with the judgment of the sheep and goats. One traditional (NASB) and two literal (WED, CLV) renditions of these verses are presented.

"Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.... 'These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.'" (Matthew 25:41, 46 NASB)

He will then also say to those at his left hand, 'Depart from me, you cursed ones, into that aionian fire [fire eonian], which is prepared for the adversary and his messengers.... And these shall go forth to the aionian cutting-off [chastening eonian]; but the righteous to aionian life [life eonian].'" (Matthew 25:41, 46 WED [CLV])

The Greek word translated as *eternal* is more properly translated as *eonian* or *aionian* (same words, just different spellings), meaning it signifies something that lasts for an age. The Greek

word translated as *punishment* is more properly translated as *chastisement* or *cutting-off*, as in pruning. It is best translated as *eonian chastisement*.

See *Eternity or Ages?—Eternal or Eonian?* — <http://www.kingdomandglory.com/art/art57.pdf>

The key to understanding this verse is discovered in the Greek word *kolasis* and its root word *kolazo*. The *New Englishman's Greek-English Concordance & Lexicon* (Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1982) defines *kolasis* as "penal punishment," and is most often translated as *punishment*, although other translations use the words *pain* (BBE; WNT) or *torment* (DNT; KJV) instead of *punishment*. *Kolasis* is derived from the Greek root word *kolazo*, which means "to curtail; thus, to prune; figuratively to chastise, restrain." Take special note of "to prune" that implies a process of removing or cutting back so that new growth can come forth. "*Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit*" (John 15:2).

This speaks more directly to the heart of God is love, the heavenly Father who prunes His vineyard so that it grows and produces fruit fit for His kingdom. Is not His vineyard all of His creation, especially mankind created to be in His image?

***God is love ... Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth*** (1 John 4:8; 1 Timothy 2:4 KJV).

How will God do this if eternal punishment and the pagan hell are real?

After all, isn't the cross of His beloved Son an absolute, 100% success in the rescue of all humanity? Anything less than 100% is failure. The good news is that God does not fail, for His love does not fail. Jesus took away the sin of the world and conquered death for all. Let us glory in this good news!