

UNDERSTANDING HELL

According to the word of God.

There is a riddle attributed to Abraham Lincoln that goes like this, “How many legs does a lamb have if you count its tail as a leg? Answer: “four, calling the tail a leg does not make it a leg.” Lincoln knew that changing the name of something can confuse the issue, but correctly identifying all aspects of a problem is the first step toward its solution.

Could there be a leg and tail issue with our understanding of the word “hell” as is variously taught from many pulpits? Why is there so much confusion and misunderstanding over the “hell” of the Bible? The definitions one hear are many and varied, and nearly all of them wrong. The misunderstanding of hell is mostly the result of one English word being used to define four different words with three totally different meanings as taken from the Hebrew or Greek language.

The English Word Hell

In old English it meant a covered up hole in the ground, a grave or a place of storage. In olden times people commonly used the term “to bury their vegetables in hell” to preserve them over the winter. It was originally used more as a place of preservation, safekeeping or burial than in association with fire or a place of burning.

So that we will not be guilty of counting a tail as a leg, let’s be sure we have a correct understanding of what words really mean and not change their meaning to fit our beliefs. When

looking up the word hell in most any dictionary, we find it can mean the abode of Satan, a place of physical anguish, or not a real place at all, but just a separation from God. It can also mean something extremely good, as in “a hell of a good time” or extremely bad, as in “a hell of a bad deal.”

The Popular Concept of Hell

Most religions teach that it is a place of eternal fire that burns forever, and that unrepentant souls go there immediately at death, and will be tortured throughout eternity in the flames of hell fire; never mind that immortality is given only to the saved, and even then only at the time of the resurrection (I Cor. 15:52-54).

Others hold that we make our own hell here on earth. So as far as the modern meaning of hell goes, it’s just about anything you want it to be. However, God’s word as originally written can and will give us God’s explanation of hell if we care enough to go there and believe what it tells us.

Considering that the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek and both were then translated into English, the importance of understanding the original meanings is essential.

As mentioned, whether by accident or by design, the English word “hell” can have vastly different meanings. Therefore, the true intent must be determined by the meaning of the word in the original language as well as by context.

Sheol, Hades, Gehenna and Tartaros are all translated into the one word 'hell' in the English Bible.

But they have three totally different meanings:

Sheol: (Hebrew, Strong's #7585) literally means a grave, pit, or a place of the dead described as a quiet, dark place, totally oblivious to anything, a deep sleep; silence. In the Old Testament sheol is variously translated as hell, grave or pit depending on the context.

Hades: (Greek, Strong's #86) The Greek equivalent of Sheol is usually translated as hell, except in I Corinthians 15:55 where it is translated as grave. Sheol or hades is never used when referring to the lake of fire in the Bible.

Gehenna: (Greek, Strong's #1067) The Valley of Hinnom, which was used as the city dump where fires were kept burning continually. Trash, refuse and dead bodies were dumped into this valley to be burned up. Jesus often used the word Gehenna when referring to the lake of fire and the second death.

Tartarus: (Greek, Strong's #5020) used only once in the New Testament and does not refer to mankind but to spirit beings. "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell (tartaros), and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment (II Peter 2:4)."

Jude may well have been speaking of the same situation in verse 6 where he said: "And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the

great day.” One wonders, are these the angels we will be judging in the resurrection (I Cor. 6:3)?

Common Sense

Is it good judgment to build one’s beliefs on a nice sounding popular concept, supported by statements of a seemingly authoritarian nature rather than relying on plain statements from the word of God? The danger in the former approach is the tendency to believe what is popular and acceptable instead of what the facts tell you. Would it not be more logical to allow the provable facts to verify a concept to be either true or false? Shouldn’t concepts be based on facts rather than popular beliefs or traditions?

Pagan Influence

Pre-Christian concepts from sources such as Hindu, Egyptian, Greek and other pagan beliefs, have had an overwhelming influence on much of Christian thinking. This is especially true with the prevalent Christian concept of Hell. Augustine and Dante Alighieri were two who had great impact on Christian thinking.

Augustine reasoned that there should be a place of temporary cleansing for imperfect souls before entering heaven; thus we have the concept of purgatory. This, of course, would imply that Christ’s sacrifice was not sufficient for salvation, and therefore something more must be done.

The teaching that the evil dead go immediately to Hell (or purgatory) led to Dante’s satire on hell, *The Divine Comedy*. Written as a mockery on the ridiculous beliefs taught by Plato

and Virgil as well as the church, it none-the-less became the basis of much of what is believed and taught today.

Going immediately to hell, heaven or purgatory at death would mean that judgment had to have been rendered, otherwise how could a determination be made as to where one was to go? But, doesn't this contradict the Bible's teaching that the dead must be resurrected first, and then the judgment takes place, and that won't be until the time of the end (John 5:28-29; II Pet. 2:9; Rev. 20:11-15)?

A Tail and Leg Issue

Again, using Lincoln's wisdom, if a word's meaning has changed to mean something different than what it originally meant, should we allow that to change the intent of the author? If you open that door you may wind up believing a tail is a leg.

As mentioned, our English Bible has variously translated the word "Sheol" or "Hades" as hell, grave or pit. Grave is defined as a trench dug for the burial of a corpse, a tomb or any place that receives the dead. A pit is defined as a deep hole in the ground. Neither grave nor pit is used to describe the "lake of fire."

Wherever the word hell was translated from "Gehenna," it was always referring to the lake of fire. When translated from the word Sheol or Hades it usually meant nothing more than the grave, a place of the dead.

King Solomon, who God gifted with more wisdom than any man, made some clarifying points about death and the grave.

His understanding was that at death man and beast all go to the same place and that in death there is no preeminence of one over the other (Eccl. 3:19-20). He is obviously talking about the place of the dead (sheol), which the Bible calls hell. Since the prevalent understanding of hell is a place of eternal torment, one might ask, why would animals be required to go to hell and suffer forever? Are we missing something here?

Solomon also said that the dead know nothing and that everything about them and their ability to affect the living in anyway is now gone (Eccl. 9:5 & 10). Job spoke of the grave (sheol) as being a dark place and the corruption and decay as being his next of kin (Job 17:13). David considered the grave (sheol) as a place where there was no remembrance or praise of God (Ps. 6:5). Neither has David been resurrected nor has he ascended to heaven (Acts 2:29 & 34).

Jesus often compared death to sleep, as in John 11 where He described Lazarus's death as sleep. Did you notice that Lazarus said nothing about being in heaven when he awoke from death? The same can be said of any of the resurrected dead mentioned in the Bible. It was obvious that he awoke from an unconscious state, as in sleep, which completely agrees with all the biblical references to sheol and hades.

There Will Be A Resurrection from Hades (Or Sheol), But Not From Gehenna (Lake Of Fire).

Job knows when he will live again, "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave (sheol), that thou wouldest keep me secret, until thy wrath be past, that thou wouldest appoint me a set time, and

remember me! 14) If a man die, shall he live again? All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come. 15) Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the work of thine hands” (Job 14:13-15).

Isn't Job expressing a belief in a physical resurrection in chapter 19 verse 26? “And though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God.” Consider the resurrection described Ezekiel 37.

The New Testament Use of Hades

The first use of the New Testament equivalent of the word sheol is in Christ's condemnation of Capernaum. The hell that they were to be brought down to was hades, not Gehenna. He makes plain that there will be a resurrection from the hell He is referring to here (Matt. 11:23-24).

In Matthew 16:18 the hell that the gates of hell will not prevail against is also hades, the grave or the place of the dead. The third use of the word hell for hades is in Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:23) where the rich man is found lifting up his eyes in hell, again indicating a physical awaking (resurrection) from the grave.

Some other uses of the word hades for hell are found in Acts 2:27, Acts 2:31, Rev. 1:18, Rev. 20:13 and Rev. 20:14. All of these refer to the place of the dead, a quiet dark place where there is no thought, no activity, where man returns to the dust from whence he came.

The Resurrection From Hades and Sheol

Although there is no thought or remembrance in Hades, there is a remembrance of them by the Lord, for the Lord has prepared a book, called the book of remembrance where He records the name of those who speak often of His name (Mal. 3:16). Perhaps that is the same as the book mentioned in Revelation 20:12-15.

There is a future resurrection of all mankind to come, for we read in John 5:28-29, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming in which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice. 29) And shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation.”

Jesus is plainly speaking of two separate resurrections as in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. One is when Lazarus is to be resurrected, which is the resurrection of the righteous. The other is at the time of the final judgment and the lake of fire, which is the time that the rich man will hear His voice and wake up from the sleep of death.

Keep in mind that Jesus, being the first fruit of many to follow was the first to be resurrected as a spirit being with a glorified body. There has never been nor will there be any other spiritual awakenings (resurrections) until He comes (Rev. 20:5-6).

Jesus often compared death to sleep, which is certainly a good description of those that are in the grave (hades). But, He also

spoke of a different death, which He compared to being thrown into Gehenna. This is referred to as the second death in Revelation 2:11, 20:6, 20:14, 21:8.

The Real Hell Fire

Gehenna, remember, was a dumping ground for Jerusalem, where dead bodies, garbage and refuse of all types were thrown and totally consumed. Some translations state that those fires were unquenchable, yet those fires are not burning now. The fires were kept burning and never quenched so that the combustible trash would burn up, and it did. Also, they mention worms that never die; they did not die because they became flies and continually bred more worms. Are the worms that never die there now? They're not there now simply because there is nothing left for them to feed on.

Words have meaning but context and inflectional forms of a verb (conjugation) are often times overlooked. For instance, everlasting punishment does not mean the same as everlasting punishing. Punishing means 'ongoing', while punishment being past tense means 'over and done with'. Also, note that the eternal fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are no longer burning. Obviously, eternal does not always mean what we might think it does but must be compared to other texts of the same or similar subject. Precise synonyms don't always match up to intended meanings when translated from other languages.

Revelation 20:12-13 describes the resurrection of the dead as they stand before the Great White Throne for their final

judgment; and those whose names were not found written in the book of life were cast into the lake of fire.

The book of Matthew speaks of those who will be weeping, wailing and gnashing of their teeth at that time (Matt. 13:42; 50; 24:51).

A Very Scary Warning

In Luke 13:26-27 Jesus has a message for fair weather Christians who, though while thinking they were saved, had chosen the broad easy way. In verse 28 He describes how they will actually be permitted to see into God's Kingdom, but will not be allowed to enter. "There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrust out." For verse 28 to be as described it would have to be a physical resurrection while those in the kingdom are spiritual.

How to Identify the Difference between a Tail and a Leg

By studying the meaning of the word hell in the original languages, we can now understand that both Sheol and Hades mean a grave, where all the dead (both good and bad) are in a coma-like state. Jesus described it as sleep, because sleep closely resembles death and is often used throughout the Bible to describe death. Although they are in every sense of the word dead, God keeps a book of remembrance (Mal. 3:16) and, as Job said, "you will call and I will answer" (Job 14:13).

Things We Can Know By Not Counting A Tail As A Leg

That beasts as well as mankind go to the same place, sheol (Eccl. 3:19-20).

That there is no consciousness, activity, thought or knowledge in Hades or Sheol (Eccl. 9:5 Isa. 38:18).

That all mankind will be resurrected from death, but each in his own order (I Cor. 15:23, Rev. 20:4-6, 12-15).

That the dead can have no effect at all on the living (Eccl 9:6 and 10).

That any supposed contact with the dead is more likely to be demons posing as the dead.

That just before being cast into the lake of fire, the unrighteous will be able to see the righteous in the Kingdom of God, but not be allowed to enter (Luke 13:26-27).

That the unrighteous will be cast into the lake of fire and perish (be consumed) and will be ashes under our feet (Mal. 4:1-3).

That the damned will not live in an ever-burning hellfire throughout eternity but simply cease to exist, since they were never given immortality as were the saved (2 Cor. 15:53-54).

That Jesus compared Gehenna to the lake of fire, because worthless things were thrown in there and burned up.

That Sheol and Hades represent a grave from which there will be a resurrection,

That Gehenna represents the lake of fire from whence there will be no resurrection. In Gehenna both soul and body will perish which is referred to as the second death (Matt. 10:28).

That by not allowing the change of a word or its original meaning to be corrupted, we are not subjecting ourselves to thinking a tail is a leg.

The Bible describes God as a God of justice, mercy, forgiveness and the epitome of righteousness. Would a God that fits that description sentence those who have never had a fair opportunity to know Him, or anyone for that matter, to an ever-burning hell fire?

Wisdom and knowledge can be found in the eighth-day of the Feast of Tabernacles for those who earnestly seek answers. (Lev. 23:36, John 7:37, Ezk. 37, Rev. 13, Rev.20:4-6).

Could there be some entity that would like to paint God as being unfair, cruel and sadistic? Of course, Satan, the one who has deceived the whole world (Rev. 12:9)!

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You may have questions; these booklets can point toward answers.

IF A MAN DIE - LIFE AFTER DEATH 1 AND 2 – ANGELS -- BEINGS FROM ANOTHER WORLD -- THE AWARDS CEREMONY AT THE THRONE OF GOD -- THAT ROARING LION

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