

Toward A Biblical Understanding of Hell

Part One—Contemporary concepts of hell

- 1) Outside Christianity
 - a) Casual—“It will be a place to hang with my friends.”
 - b) Denial—Used as a figure of speech, but it does not really exist. It is simply a state of mind.
 - i) Robert Schuler argued that hell describes someone who has lost their self-esteem. (*Self-Esteem: The New Reformation*, 14-15)
 - c) Uncertainty—A place where really bad people might go, maybe.
 - d) Used in various expressions:
 - i) Dictionary.com lists 20 different meanings to the word “hell”.

- 2) Inside “Christianity”
 - a) Denial
 - i) Some within the larger umbrella of “Christianity” deny its existence
 - ii) Simple/Immediate Universalism—everyone goes to heaven after death
 - b) Annihilation
 - i) Simple/Immediate—annihilation takes place immediately after death
 - ii) Postponed/Ultimate—annihilation takes place after suffering for a period of time
 - (1) Socinius (1539-1604), Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Christadelphians, John Stott, Philip E. Hughes, John Wenham
 - iii) Possible/Postmortem Evangelism—only those who reject Christ after they are resurrected will face annihilation
 - (1) Clark Pinnock
 - iv) Problems with annihilation (Pettegrew, MSJ 9:2)
 - (1) It reduces God’s nature to love and sentimentalizes love.
 - (2) It depreciates the value of the human soul.
 - (3) It devalues the nature of sin.
 - (4) It minimizes the completed work of Christ on the cross.
 - c) Acceptance
 - i) Orthodox Christianity has consistently embraced the reality of hell
 - d) Confusion
 - i) The Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory teaches that the vast majority of believers must suffer after death until their sin is purged away, after which they are transferred into heaven.
 - ii) The time in purgatory may be reduced by gifts to the church, prayer by priests, Masses provided on behalf of the deceased, service for the church, etc.
 - iii) This doctrine is based in part on the apocryphal book of 2 Macc. 12:39-45.

Part Two—The intermediate state, temporary punishment of the wicked before the resurrection of Christ

- 1) Misunderstandings
 - a) Because of mistranslating the Hebrew word *sheol*
 - i) KJV uses “hell” 31 x, “grave” 31x, and “pit” 3x
 - ii) NKJV uses “hell” 19 x, “grave” 24 x, “pit” 2x, and “Sheol” 18x,
 - iii) Most other English translations do not use “hell”

- (1) Some opt for “grave”, “pit”, or simply the transliteration of Sheol
- b) To acknowledge the error of the translation is not the same as denying the existence and reality of hell itself.

2) Understanding **Sheol**

- a) The Hebrew word is used @ 65 x in the OT; the LXX (Greek OT) translates this as *hades* 61x
 - i) The Law—7 x—Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Num. 16:30, 33; Deut. 32:22;
 - ii) The Prophets—22 x—1 Sam. 2:6; 2 Sam. 22:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Isa. 5:14; 14:9, 11, 15; 28:15, 18; 38:10, 18; 57:9; Ezek. 31:15-17; 32:21, 27; Hos. 13:14; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Hab. 2:5
 - iii) The Writings—34 x—Job 7:9; 11:8; 14:13; 17:13, 16; 21:13; 24:19; 26:6; Ps. 6:5; 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 30:3; 31:17; 49:14-15; 55:15; 86:13; 88:3; 89:48; 116:3; 139:8; 141:7; Prov. 1:12; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11, 24; 23:14; 27:20; 30:16; Ecc. 9:10; Song 8:6
- b) Theologically
 - i) Negatively
 - (1) It is not identical or necessarily interchangeable with death.
 - (2) It is not simply the grave.
 - (a) There is a distinct Hebrew word for “grave” [*geber*]
 - (b) A person may not be in a grave yet be in Sheol—Is. 14:9, 15
 - ii) Positively
 - (1) Sheol is the place of the departed dead.
- c) Biblically
 - i) Yahweh is present there and knows everything about it—Job 26:6; Ps. 139:8; Prov. 15:11
 - ii) Yahweh brings people to Sheol and raises them up—1 Sam. 2:6
 - iii) Yahweh’s grace and mercy alone can deliver us from Sheol— Job 7:9; Ps. 49:15; 86:13; 89:48; 1 Sam. 2:6
 - iv) It is a place of terror, distress and sorrow—2 Sam. 22:6; Ps. 116:3
 - v) It is a place without thankfulness, praise or hope—Ps. 6:5; Is. 38:18
 - vi) The inhabitants of Sheol
 - (1) The wicked—Ps. 9:17; 31:17; Is. 14:9, 15
 - (2) The righteous—Gen. 37:35; Job 14:13; Is. 38:10; Ps. 16:10; 49:15; Hos. 13:14
 - (a) With the exceptions of Enoch and Elijah
 - vii) The compartments of Sheol
 - (1) Prior to the resurrection of Jesus Sheol was divided by a great chasm—Luke 16:26
 - (2) Lowest/Deep Sheol—Deut. 32:22; Ps. 86:13; Prov. 9:18; Is. 14:9
 - (3) Paradise/Abraham’s Bosom—Luke 16:19-31 (see the notes to follow)

3) Understanding **Hades**

- a) The Greek word *hades* is found 11 x in the NT (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Cor. 15:55; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14)
- b) It was a place of conscious torment (extreme pain)—Lk. 16:19-31
 - This is the only description of the intermediate state by Jesus
 - i) The rich man was conscious, able to experience pain, observe certain details, etc.
 - ii) No one is able to leave once they arrive
 - iii) To avoid Hades, one must respond appropriately to God’s Word

- (1) God's Word is better than hearing the words of someone who has already died.
 - (2) God's Word is better than seeing someone rise from the dead.
- 4) Summary of Sheol/Hades (McCune, *Systematic Theology*, 3:319-321)
- a) The condition of those in Sheol/Hades
 - i) Conscious
 - (1) The dead greet the Antichrist when he arrives in Sheol—Is. 14:9-11
 - (2) The rich man was conscious of the condition of himself and others—Luke 16:23-25
 - ii) The wicked are in torment and punishment
 - (1) God's anger burns there—Deut. 32:22
 - (2) The rich man was in torment—Luke 16:23-24
 - (3) Capernaum and other Galilean cities will experience punishment—Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15
 - iii) The righteous are in rest and comfort
 - (1) Samuel—1 Sam. 28:15
 - (2) The righteous enter peace and rest—Is. 57:1-2
 - (a) No rest for the wicked—Is. 57:21
 - (3) Daniel—Dan. 12:13
 - (4) Job—Job 14:13
 - (5) Lazarus—Luke 16:25
 - b) The location of Sheol/Hades
 - i) Down—Gen. 37:35
 - ii) Below—Prov. 15:24
 - iii) The lower world/underworld—Ezek. 32:18
 - iv) The depths/lower parts of the earth—Ps. 63:9
 - v) The heart of the earth—Matt. 12:40

Part Three—The intermediate state, temporary punishment of the wicked after the resurrection of Christ

- 1) Understanding Hades
 - a) The Greek word *hades* is found 11 x in the NT (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Cor. 15:55; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14)
- 2) In the present
 - a) Hades is not able to conquer the church, either through the death of Christ or his apostles or other saints—Matt. 16:18
 - b) Hades has no final victory over the true Christian—1 Cor. 15:55
 - c) Christ has all authority over death and Hades—Rev. 1:18
- 3) In the future
 - a) Hades is the temporary holding place of the wicked until the final judgment at the Great White Throne—Rev. 20:13
 - b) Hades will be thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death—Rev. 20:14
 - c) During the Millennium Hades will be a place of outer darkness and gnashing of teeth—Matt. 8:12; 13:42; 22:13; 25:30; Lk. 13:28

Part Four—The eternal punishment of the wicked

- 1) Misunderstandings
 - a) Because of confusing the Greek words *geenna* and *hades*
 - i) KJV uses “hell” 23 x; NKJV uses “hell” 13 x (once for the Greek word *tartaroo*)
 - ii) Other English translations occasionally use “hell”
- 2) Clarifications
 - a) Understanding **Gehenna**—the eternal state
 - The Greek word *geenna* is used 12 x in the NT (Matt. 5:22, 29-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6)
 - i) The **location** of Gehenna
 - (1) Gehenna was a literal place near Jerusalem
 - (a) Valley of Hinnom/Tophet (“place of fire”)—Josh. 15:8; 18:16; 2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Neh. 11:30; Jer. 7:31-32; 19:2, 6; 32:35
 - (b) A place of the worship of the false god Molech—Jer. 32:35
 - (i) Including child-sacrifice by fire
 - (2) Gehenna is revealed to be a place (lake) of fire—Matt. 5:22; 18:9; Mark 9:43; Rev. 19:20; 20:10, 14, 15; 21:8
 - ii) The **purpose** of Gehenna
 - (1) Gehenna is a place of judgment (destruction)
 - (a) Matt. 23:33—Sentence of judgment
 - (b) Matt. 25:46—Eternal punishment
 - (c) 2 Thess. 1:8, 9—Penalty of eternal destruction (ruin)
 - (d) Heb. 9:27—Judgment is appointed for mankind
 - (e) Jude 1:13—reserved forever
 - (2) Gehenna is a place of death—Rev. 20:14; 21:8
 - (a) Note that true believers are not part of the second death—Rev. 2:11; 20:6
 - iii) The **duration** of Gehenna
 - (1) Eternal fire
 - (a) Is the fire literal? It is an accepted law in language that the figure of speech is less intense than the reality. If the fire is a figure of speech, then the punishment would be worse than fire! But consider Matt. 13:36-43 where Christ does not explain the fire which consumes the tares. He explains the meaning of everything else except the fire!
 - (b) Matt. 25:41—eternal
 - (i) It now stands prepared for the devil and his angels
 - (c) Mark 9:43—unquenchable (our word “asbestos”)
 - (d) Mark 9:44, 46, 48—not quenched or extinguished [root word for “asbestos”]
 - (2) Eternal punishment—Matt. 25:46
 - (3) Eternal torment—Rev. 14:10-11; 20:10
 - (4) Eternal (undying) worms—Mark 9:44, 46, 48; Is. 66:24
 - (5) Eternal disgrace/blame and contempt/abhorrence—Dan. 12:2; Is. 66:24
 - iv) The **inhabitants** of Gehenna
 - (1) Gehenna is a place for the whole body and soul—Matt. 5:29, 30; 10:28
 - (2) Gehenna is a place for sinners—Rev. 21:8
 - (a) People whose lives are characterized by these traits: cowardly, unbelieving, sinners [Majority text], abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, liars

- b) Understanding the punishment of evil angels
 - i) Understanding **Tartaros/Tartarus**
 - (1) 2 Pet. 2:4—a prison-like location for extremely wicked angels
 - ii) Understanding the **Abyss**
 - Used in Luke 8:31; Rom. 10:7; Rev. 9:1, 2, 11; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3
 - (1) The potential abode of demons—Luke 8:31
 - (2) The temporary residence of demons during the Tribulation—Rev. 9:1, 2, 11 [note Abaddon]
 - (3) The temporary residence of the Beast during the Tribulation—Rev. 11:7; 17:8
 - (4) The temporary residence of Satan during the Millennial Kingdom—Rev. 20:1, 3

Part Five—Principles concerning hell

- 1) The PURPOSES of hell
 - a) Hades is the **temporary** holding cell and place of punishment for all human unbelievers until it is emptied into Gehenna (Rev. 20:14)
 - b) Gehenna is the **eternal** prison and place of punishment for all human and demonic rebels.
 - The following ideas are summarized in *Biblical Doctrine*, 845
 - i) It is a place of punishment—Luke 12:47-48
 - ii) It is a place of destruction—2 Thess. 1:9; Matt. 7:19
 - iii) It is a place of banishment—Rev. 22:14-15
- 2) The SEVERITY/DEGREES OF PUNISHMENT in hell
 - a) Evidence of varying degrees of punishment
 - i) Places where the ministry of Jesus' disciples was rejected will be worse off than Sodom and Gomorrah—Matt. 10:15; Luke 10:12
 - ii) Jewish cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum who rejected Christ will have it worse than Gentile cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom—Matt. 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-16
 - iii) Jesus reveals varying degrees of punishment—Luke 12:45-48
 - iv) Religious leaders who reject Christ will receive a harsher verdict—Luke 20:45-47
 - b) The two fundamental criteria for the final judgment and damnation of the lost: the amount of light they had and the number of sins they committed.
 - i) See Romans 3:5-6; Rev. 20:12-13
- 3) The MOTIVATION of hell
 - a) Jesus used the reality of hell as a motivation concerning one's attitude and behavior in Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5.