

Fall 2016 Newsletter

Detroit Bible Students Ecclesia

P.O. Box 51, Southfield, MI 48037-0051
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GOD IS LOVE

"Let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD." Jeremiah 9:24

"**GOD IS LOVE,**" is the emphatic statement of the Apostle John. He says, "He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. ... Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ... God is love." (1 John 4:8,10,16)

God is the originator of love and all His actions are directed by love. "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning." (James 1:17) Jeremiah 31:3 (NKJV) says, "I have loved you with an **everlasting love**; therefore with loving kindness I have drawn you."

Jesus told us that if we wish to be the children of God, we must **love our enemies**. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matt. 5:44-48)

The Psalmist David said of God, "Thou, O LORD, art a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and plenteous in mercy and truth." (Psa. 86:15; 145:8; Exodus 34:6; Numbers

14:18) "For the LORD thy God is a merciful God" (Deuteronomy 4:31) "I am merciful, saith the LORD, and **I will not keep anger forever.**" (Jeremiah 3:12)

The Bible clearly states that God doesn't even enjoy a wicked person's death. God told Israel through the prophet Ezekiel, "As I live, says the Lord God, **I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked**, but that the wicked turn from his way and live." (Ezekiel 33:11 NKJV)

Most Christians are able to recite what is probably the best known Bible verse, John 3:16: "For God **so loved** the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him **should not perish**, but have everlasting life." How many have actually thought about what it means?

Since God's love for his human creation is everlasting, even for his enemies, and since he has no pleasure in the death of sinners, how could such a God prepare a place of torture for his creatures? It has been estimated that over 100 billion beings have lived on the earth. Today Christians make up only 1/3 of the world's population; past centuries had fewer and the millennia before Christ had none. How can the doctrine of a burning hell in which sinners are tortured eternally without any hope of repentance be compatible with a God of love?

Hell in the Old Testament

By consulting *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* we find that only one Hebrew word is translated hell in the Old Testament—the word, *sheol*. It appears 65 times and is rendered "hell" 31 times. It is also translated "grave" 31 times and "pit" 3 times. Therefore, in order to understand the Bible's teaching, we must also look at the scriptures where *sheol* is translated "grave," and bear in mind that "hell" and "grave" are interchangeable since they are in reality from only one Hebrew word. In fact, the translators of the Bible expressed their own bias by using the word "hell" when a wicked person was concerned or when suffering is implied, and "grave" when a good person was named or peace from trouble is described. But we must remember, it is the same word and the same meaning.

For example, Psalm 9:17; "The wicked shall be turned into hell [*sheol*, grave], and all the nations that forget God." "Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell [*sheol*, grave]: for wickedness is in their dwellings and among them." (Psalm 55:15)

Psalm 31:17, by contrast says, "Let the wicked be ashamed, and let them be silent in the grave [*sheol*, hell]." Righteous Job prayed to be hidden in *sheol* to have relief from the unbearable pain he was suffering. (Job 14:13) The Patriarchs whom the Apostle Paul holds forth as examples of faith all went into hell [the grave, *sheol*]. "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise" (Hebrews 11:39; Genesis 37:35) Although commended by God and called "friend," (James 2:23) Abraham did not go to heaven, but went into "hell." Jesus said of John the Baptist "there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matthew 11:11) Even he did not go to heaven.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 describes the condition of those in *sheol*; "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave [hell, *sheol*] whither thou goest." "The living know that they shall die: but **the dead know not anything.**" (Ecclesiastes 9:5) These scriptures teach us that *sheol*, the only hell of the Old Testament, is a state of complete unconsciousness.

Isaiah 38:18,19 also tells us, "The grave [*sheol*, hell] cannot praise thee, death cannot celebrate thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee." "For in death there is no remembrance of thee: in the grave [*sheol*, hell] who shall give thee thanks?" (Psalm 6:5)

Sheol is the only hell of the Old Testament—the only hell that the people of God were told about throughout a period of 4,000 years. What kind of place was it? It was a place of quietness, a condition of unconsciousness, to which, they were taught by the prophets, both the righteous and the wicked go when they die,

there to await the time when, by the power of the Creator, they would be restored to life in the resurrection.

The Prophet King David, with whom God was so pleased that he promised that a king from David's line would always reign upon his throne (2 Samuel 7:8-16; Isaiah 9:6,7), while expressing his confidence in the resurrection, also anticipated going to hell. He said, "For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [*sheol*]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption." (Psalm 16:10). The Apostle Peter, in his great sermon on the day of Pentecost, said that this statement of David's was really prophetic of Jesus. David was still in hell, "both dead and buried ... not ascended into the heavens," (Acts 2:22-36) It was Jesus who died and whom God resurrected from hell [*sheol-hades*, the grave].

Peter's sermon is important in that it is the key to the fact that the Greek word *hades* is the New Testament equivalent of the Hebrew word *sheol*.

Hell in the New Testament

Three words are translated "hell" in the New Testament. *Hades*, as already noted, is the equivalent for the Hebrew word *sheol*. and the same description as given in Ecclesiastes is applicable to it. The word *hades* is used in Revelation 1:18, where Jesus informs us that he has "the keys of hell [*hades*]." Chapter 20 verse 13 says that "hell" will give up its dead, and verse 14 tells us that "hell"--*hades*--will be destroyed. It will be "cast into the lake of fire, This is the second death." Tradition would have us believe that the lake of fire is hell, but according to this text **hell is destroyed** in the "lake of fire"—fire being a symbol of total destruction.

The second word translated "hell" in the New Testament is *gehenna*. The word literally means "the Valley of Hinnom," which is outside of Jerusalem and was used as the garbage dump for the city. The history of the area gives the reason why the area was assigned so ignoble a use. It was here that the Israelites burned their children to the god Molech. (Jer. 32:35; 7:31) God warned the children of Israel not to copy the way the heathen nations around them worshipped their gods. "Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for **every abomination** to the LORD, **which he hateth**, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters **they have burnt** in the fire to their gods." (Deuteronomy 12:30,31) Would God do himself what he has declared is an abomination to him?

A fire was kept burning in the valley of Hinnom to consume the refuse of the city that was thrown there. What the fire did not destroy was consumed by maggots which were always present in the filth. (Mark 9:48) Nothing alive was ever thrown into *gehenna*, but the bodies of executed criminals who were considered unworthy of a resurrection were thrown there for destruction.

To the Jews, Jesus' allusion was clear. Being thrown into *gehenna* meant total destruction, ignominy, and the end of all hope for a future life. Jesus' advice to his followers to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes rather than risk being cast into *gehenna* (Matt. 5:29,30) emphasized the seriousness of the matter. Regardless of their position on eternal torture, no one understands this scripture as advocating self-mutilation. Why then take *gehenna* literally if Jesus' advice on how to avoid being cast there is not literal?,

The third word translated "hell" is *tartaroo*. This is used only one time and does not refer to man, but to the angels that sinned prior to the flood. (Genesis 6:1-5; 2 Peter 2:4) [*The book Where Are the Dead? examines every one of the occurrences of these words as well as other texts purported to teach eternal torment such as the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.*]

Throughout the scriptures death is described by the term "sleep." The most important use of this term came from Jesus. When Lazarus died, he told his disciples "Lazarus sleepeth." When they failed to understand his meaning "Jesus said unto them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead.'" (John 11:11-14) Stephen, the first martyr of Jesus "fell asleep" in death. (Acts 7:60) David "slept with his fathers" and was buried. (1 Kings 2:10) Followers of the Lord are spoken of as "them also which sleep in Jesus." (1 Thessalonians 4:14) In fact, the whole world is "asleep in Jesus" because Jesus bought them by his own precious blood.

Paul wrote, God "will have **all** men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4) Notice the order—salvation comes first so that mankind can be taught the truth. The Apostle John wrote, "He [Jesus] is the propitiation [atoning sacrifice] for our sins, and not for ours only, **but also for the sins of the whole world.**" Speaking of his mission, Paul told Timothy, "Therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is **the Saviour of all men**, specially of those that believe." (1 Timothy 4:10) Even the enemies of God partake of his mercy.

Death is termed sleep because in it there is unconsciousness and there is to be an awakening. The Bible's hope for all mankind is a resurrection out of death. The general resurrection of the dead is described in Revelation 20:13 as a returning from hell [*hades*]. When Jesus died as the world's Redeemer he purchased the "keys of hell" and will set the captives free. Jesus told his disciples, "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which **all** who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life [the faithful followers of Jesus in this age], those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28,29 *New American Standard Bible*) [Note: Although the King James Version uses the word "damnation," the Greek word—*krisus*—is the same word translated "judgment" in verse 22 of this passage and should be understood as a trial for life.] "For when [God's] judgments are

in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness." (Isaiah 26:9)

Life or death are the two alternatives presented to us in the Word of God, not bliss in heaven or torment in hell. God warned Adam that death would be the penalty for disobedience, so when he disobeyed he was sentenced to death. It was Satan, the serpent, who said "You shall not surely die." (Genesis 3:4) The Apostle Paul wrote that "the wages of sin is death,"—not torment." (Romans 6:23)

Because death is our universal experience, many think it is a natural part of being human. Not so. Man was created to live, but death was pronounced upon him as a penalty for sin. "By man came death," wrote Paul, and "by man came also the resurrection of the dead." Jesus bought the race by his faithful sacrifice. Therefore, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall **all** be made alive. ...For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death." (1 Cor. 15:21-26)

God invites us "Come now, and let us reason together." (Isaiah 1:18) Is a place of eternal torment consistent with the character of a **God of love**? Are all the statements of Scripture with regard to the condition of those in death just lies? Did Jesus lie about Lazarus? The truth is that the concept of a hell of torment came out of the superstition of the Dark Ages.

Hell is not a place of torment; it is the condition of oblivion. The Bible hope for man is that God will restore all the dead to life upon the earth in the Kingdom of his beloved Son, Christ Jesus. Let this be our hope and our strength in this time when the world is falling down around us. God has his own world coming, a new world "wherein dwelleth righteousness." (2 Peter 3:13) In that world all will meet their loved ones who have died and will forever rejoice in God's lovingkindness, mercy, and love in sending his Son to be the Redeemer of all who were dead in Adam.

"For in him [Christ] is the 'yes' that affirms all the promises of God."
2 Corinthians 1:20 (Moffatt)

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