

Hell, Sheol, Hades, Paradise, and the Grave

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There seems to be some confusion about the meaning of Hell and who goes there because of the way the Hebrew word *Sheol* and the Greek word *Hades* have been translated in our English Bibles. Since this confusion has led some into an erroneous understanding of what the Bible actually teaches about the intermediate state and the final state of the dead, we think that it is important that we address this subject here.

Sheol is found in the Bible sixty-five times. It is translated “the pit” three times, “the grave” thirty-one times, and “hell” thirty-one times. *Hades* is used eleven times, being rendered “hell” ten times and “grave” once. Adding to the confusion is that two other words are also translated hell in the New Testament. These are *Tartarus*, which is found once and *Gehenna*, which is used twelve times.

The term “Hell” is commonly understood to mean a place of torment where the souls of the wicked go after physical death. This is true. However, because Hades in the New Testament and Sheol in the Old are variously rendered hell or grave, there has been some misunderstanding about what hell and the grave are. Before looking at these words though, we should first give our attention to the Greek word *Gehenna*, which is always translated hell and used in reference to the Lake of Fire. It is found in Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; and James 3:6.

THE FINAL HELL

The Lake of Fire, or Hell, is a literal place of everlasting fire that was originally created by God as a place of punishment for Satan and the angels that followed him in his rebellion against God (Mat. 25:41).

Because it is referred to as the place of “*outer darkness*” (Mat. 8:12; 25:30), we believe that it is most probably located at the farthest reaches of the creation. Gehenna is described in Scripture as a “*furnace of fire*” (Mat. 13:42); “*everlasting punishment*” (Mat. 25:46); “*the mist [gloom] of darkness*” (II Pet. 2:17); the “*hurt of the second death*” (Rev. 2:11 cf. 20:6,14; 21:8); “*a lake of fire burning with brimstone*” (Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 21:8).

While Hell was created for Satan and the other fallen angels, the unsaved of humanity from all ages will be with them in this place of torment where “*there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth*” (Mat. 13:42). This is the “*everlasting reward*” of all that die in their sins.

While there is no one in the Lake of Fire at this time, it will one day hold a vast multitude. The first residents of this place of righteous retribution will be the Beast (Antichrist) and the False Prophet who, at the end of the Tribulation, will be “*cast alive into a lake burning with brimstone*” (Rev. 19:19-20). Joining them will be the unsaved of the nations who survive the Tribulation (Mat. 25:31-32,41-46). Also, at Jesus Christ’s return to earth, the rebel Israelites, i.e. unbelieving Jews, who survive the Tribulation, will be denied entrance into the Millennial Kingdom, no doubt to join their Gentile counterparts in the “*place of everlasting fire*” (Eze. 20:33-38; Mat. 7:21-23; cf. Mat. 24:29-31,45-51). Then, at the end of the Millennial Kingdom of Jesus Christ, Satan will be “*cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever*” (Rev. 20:10). And finally, the unsaved dead of all ages will be raised and judged at the Great White Throne by Jesus Christ and then cast into the Lake of Fire (see Rev. 20:11-15).

The name Gehenna comes from a deep narrow ravine south of Jerusalem where some Hebrew parents actually sacrificed their children to the Ammonite god, Molech, during the time of the kings (II

Kin. 16;3; II Chron. 28:1-3; cf. Lev. 18:21; I Kin. 11:5,7,33). This pagan deity is also referred to as Malcham, Milcom, and Moloch in the Bible. This valley later served as the city dump and, because there was continual burning of refuse there, it became a graphic symbol of the place of punishment for the wicked. It was named the "Valley of Hinnom," which translated into Greek becomes Gehenna. The passages where the word is found in the New Testament plainly show that it was a commonly used expression for Hell by that time. The word is found twelve times in the Scriptures, being used eleven times by the Lord Jesus and once by James. When we consider the context, it is clear the Lord used this word in reference to the place of everlasting punishment for the wicked dead and not to the city dump.

Gehenna, or the Lake of Fire, might be referred to as the future, or final, Hell because it is where all of the wicked from all ages will finally end up. Satan, the fallen angels, and all of the lost of mankind will reside in torment there forever and ever.

SHEOL/HADES: THE PRESENT HELL

Scripture passages in which Gehenna is used should be distinguished from those using Hades, which refers to a place of temporary torment that we might refer to as the immediate, or present, Hell. What we mean by this is that, at the time of death, the souls of the lost go directly to Hades, where they suffer in torment until the time of the Great White Throne Judgment when they will be resurrected and cast into the Lake of Fire. The souls of all the lost who have already died are presently there and those who die in their sins immediately go there to join them.

Hades is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament word Sheol. The Greek and Hebrew words speak of the same place, the present Hell. However, this is problematic because Sheol has been

translated “grave” as often as it has “hell” and some have mistakenly taught that Sheol and Hades are only references to the grave rather than Hell. This erroneous teaching leads to the denial of the existence of an immediate or present Hell. The false doctrine of soul-sleep, and other ideas that teach the unconscious state of the dead between death and resurrection, spring from this error.

The common word for “grave” in the Old Testament is *queber*. Of the sixty-four times it is used, it is translated “grave” thirty-four times, “sepulcher” twenty-six times, and “burying place” four times. *Queber* is used five additional times as part of a place name, Kibroth-hattaavah, which means “graves of lust.” As we said earlier, Sheol is found sixty-four times, being rendered “grave” thirty-one times, “hell” thirty-one times, and “pit” three times.

A comparison of how *Sheol* and *queber* are used reveals eight points of contrast that tell us that they are not the same thing.

1. *Sheol* is never used in plural form. *Queber* is used in the plural 29 times.
2. It is never said that the body goes to *Sheol*. *Queber* speaks of the body going there 37 times.
3. *Sheol* is never said to be located on the face of the earth. *Queber* is mentioned 32 times as being located on the earth.
4. An individual’s *Sheol* is never mentioned. An individual’s *queber* is mentioned 5 times.
5. Man is never said to put anyone into *Sheol*. Individuals are put into a *queber* by man (33 times).

6. Man is never said to have dug or fashioned a *Sheol*. Man is said to have dug, or fashioned, a *queber* (6 times).
7. Man is never said to have touched *Sheol*. Man touches, or can touch, a *queber* (5 times).
8. It is never said that man is able to possess a *Sheol*. Man is spoken of as being able to possess a *queber* (7 times). (These eight points of comparison are adapted from “*Life and Death*” by Caleb J. Baker, *Bible Institute Colportage Ass’n*, 1941).

From the differences between how *Sheol* and *queber* are used in Scripture, it is obvious that they are not the same thing. The Greek word *Hades* in the New Testament would fit into the *Sheol* column of our chart, strongly indicating that it is the same thing as *Sheol*. *Hades* is used eleven times, being rendered Hell ten times and grave once.

Words associated with *queber* are *quabar* and *qeburah*. *Quabar* is a verb meaning to bury or to be buried and *qeburah* is a noun meaning a grave or place of burial. The use of these related words helps to reinforce the difference between *queber* and *Sheol*, as they clearly have to do with the grave as a burial place, while *Sheol* does not.

EXAMPLES SHOWING THAT SHEOL IS NOT A BURIAL PLACE

1. After selling Joseph into slavery, his brothers stained his coat with blood and used it to convince their father that he had been killed by a wild animal (Gen. 37:26-36). Jacob’s sons and daughters tried “*to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, ‘for I will go down into the grave (Sheol) unto my son mourning’. Thus his father wept for him*” (v. 35).

From Jacob's words it is clear that he fully intended to eventually be reunited with his son in a tangible way. Obviously then, he did not simply have in mind the idea of joining him in burial as he believed that Joseph's body had not been buried at all, but was eaten by an animal (v. 33). This being the case, it was impossible for Jacob to think he would join Joseph in burial. Obviously, he looked forward to being reunited with him in the place of the departed dead, not in burial. The word rendered grave in this passage is *Sheol*, the abode of the souls of those who have died.

2. After Jacob died, Joseph had his body mummified, a process that took forty days, then took him back to Canaan for burial (Gen. 50:1-14). When we add to that the thirty days of mourning (Gen. 50:2-4), and the time it took to travel to Canaan for the funeral (Gen. 50:5-13), we see that it was several weeks after Jacob was "*gathered unto his people*" (Gen. 49:33) before his body was placed in the cave that served as his burial place. Considering that he had been dead for well over two months before his body was buried and that the Scriptures state that at the time he died he was "*gathered to his people*" (Gen. 49:33) is telling. This shows that at the time of physical death, when "*he yielded up the spirit,*" his soul immediately departed his body to be with Isaac and Abraham. This cannot be a reference to his body being gathered together with their bodies, as that did not take place for over ten weeks. This is strong proof that *Sheol* does not mean a burial place for the body, but is the place where the souls of the departed reside.

3. That communication takes place in *Sheol/Hades* tells us that something other than a burial place is in view. In Isaiah 14:4-20, we find the prophet foretelling the eventual defeat and death of the king of Babylon. The nation that would eventually send Judah into captivity will itself be defeated and its mighty king will find himself among "*the chief ones of the earth...the kings of the nations*" (Isa. 14:9) who

preceded him in death. These are the kings of nations that he had conquered with the sword and ruled over with a cruel hand (Isa. 14:6). These same men will serve as a welcoming committee for this once great “world ruler” when he arrives in Sheol/Hades. In mock surprise, they will ask this once powerful king, “*Art thou also become weak as we? Are thou become like unto us?*” (Isa. 14:10). They then taunt him by pointing out that the pretentious display of magnificence that he had demonstrated as the king of Babylon now meant nothing (Isa. 14:11).

All of those who find themselves in this section of Sheol/Hades, like the king of Babylon and the kings who greeted him, will be faced with the reality of how helpless and hopeless they are. One of the boasts these kings make against him is that, while their bodies have been placed in their respective tombs, or graves, he was not honored by a respectable burial, “*But thou are cast out of the grave (queber) like an abominable (despised) branch...thou shalt not be joined with them in burial*” (Isa. 14:18-20). Obviously, if his body was not in any grave at all, he was not simply joining them in burial.

What we see here is this man going into Sheol, while at the same time his body is cast out of its grave. Obviously then, Sheol cannot be the grave here as the body and soul are in different places, the soul going to Sheol while the body remains unburied, or outside of the grave (vs. 20) to be infested by maggots (vs. 11). It is true that this is a prophetic passage; and there are various opinions as to the identity of the person in view here (verses 12-15 are commonly thought to refer to Satan, the power behind the Gentile kings). But, regardless of who this prophecy is about, or whether it has already been fulfilled or not, does not change the fact that Sheol and the grave are to be regarded as different places in this passage of Scripture.

4. In the case of Samuel and Saul, we find another example of the Scriptures making a distinction between Sheol/Hades and the grave. In his conversation with King Saul, Samuel, whom the Lord had sent back from the dead to deliver a message to Saul, said that Saul and his sons would be with him the next day (see I Sam. 28:15-19). As foretold, Saul and his sons did die the next day while in battle with the Philistines (see I Sam. 31:1-6). However, their bodies were not buried the next day, so they did not join Samuel in the grave but their souls went down to Sheol/Hades where the person, or soul, of Samuel was. As it is said that Samuel “came up” it seems obvious that he went back down after speaking with Saul (I Sam. 28:8,11,14). As for the bodies of Saul and his sons, their remains were not buried for several days. As Samuel had said, they died the next day (I Sam. 31:1-6). But it was the day after they died that their bodies were taken by the Philistines and hung on the wall of Beth-Shan (I Sam. 31:7-10). After hearing of this, valiant men from Jabesh-Gilead went by night and removed their bodies, took them to Jabesh, burned them, and then buried their bones. All this took place at least three days after Saul had died, and probably longer. Saul and his sons joined Samuel in Sheol/Hades the day they died and the flesh of their bodies was burned with only their bones being placed in a grave several days later. Obviously Sheol/Hades and the grave are not the same thing, nor are they in the same place.

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus that is found in Luke 16:19-31 gives us the record of a remarkable conversation that took place in Hades between the Rich Man and Abraham. Obviously, these two men could not have had this conversation at all if Sheol/Hades is only a place where dead bodies are buried. First, there could be no communication between lifeless, decaying corpses and second, Abraham’s body, which was buried in the cave of Machpelah over 1800 years earlier, had long since decayed. Also, the rich man’s body, regardless of whether it had decayed or not, would not have been

buried in the burial cave of Abraham. From the context, it is obvious that these men were in the place of departed souls rather than a burial place.

There are some that contend that this is a parable that never actually took place and deny that it could have ever taken place. To these, who usually hold to a position of soul-sleep or the eradication of the soul at death, we answer; the Lord said that it did take place. Besides, as we have already pointed out, a parable by definition is a “true to life” story. To have meaning, it must be a story that could have actually taken place whether it ever did or not.

DEATH AND SHEOL

Death and Sheol/Hades are linked together at least thirty-three times in the Scriptures. In these, we see a general distinction between the “outward man,” which is the body and the “inward man,” which is the soul (cf. II Cor. 4:16). In this sense, death, or the grave, claims the physical part of man, the body, while Sheol/Hades claims the separated, spiritual part of man, the soul. This is exactly the meaning of Psalm 16:10: *“For Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hell (Sheol); neither will Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption.”* In his Pentecostal address, Peter left no room for doubt that this was a prophetic pronouncement concerning the time between the Lord Jesus Christ’s death on the Cross and His resurrection. First, he quoted Psalm 16:8-11 (Acts 2:25-28) and then made direct application of verse 10 to Christ (Acts 2:31). Not only was the Lord Jesus’ soul not left in Sheol/Hades, but neither was His body left to rot in the grave. That Peter used Hades, the place of Sheol, in this quotation shows that they are identical in meaning.

Of course, the Lord Jesus Christ is exceptional because He had the power not only to lay down His life on our behalf, but also to take it up

again (Jn. 10:17,18). This is not so of any other man, as the Psalmist points out when he asks, rhetorically, *“What man is he that liveth and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave (Sheol)?”* (Ps. 89:48). Because of the curse of sin, all of mankind faces the reality of physical death. None can evade it by their own power, nor can any man or woman escape from Sheol/Hades on their own. We know that since the Cross the souls of those who die “in Christ” do not go to Sheol/Hades, but to heaven. However, this is through the merit of Jesus Christ and His power, not their own. For those “in Christ,” death has no sting and Sheol/Hades has no victory because their body and soul will be united in a resurrection unto life (see I Cor. 15:19,20,51-57). This is as certain as the fact of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. This is not so for those who die without Christ for they face a resurrection unto judgment, which is referred to as the *“second death”* (Rev. 20:13,14; 21:8).

Psalm 89:48 speaks of the time when the soul is separated from the body. The body is given over to death where it will decay, while the soul is assigned to Sheol/Hades to await the final judgment. It is clear that the body and soul of the lost will be reunited at the time of the Great White Throne Judgment of the unsaved dead, when *“death and Hades”* will deliver up the dead that are in them. That is, their bodies will be raised from the grave, or death, and reunited with the soul, which will come out of Sheol/Hades to be judged by Jesus Christ at the Great White Throne (see Rev. 20:11-15; cf. Jn. 5:28,29).

When the Lord Jesus said that *“as Jonah was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth”* (Mat. 12:40), He was saying that He would spend the time between His death and resurrection in Sheol/Hades. We know from Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:25-32 that the Lord’s soul, which was made an offering for sin (Isa. 53:10), was in Sheol/Hades, and we know from Matthew 12:40 that He was in the

heart of the earth, which is where we believe that Sheol/Hades is located.

When we speak of the heart of something, we are not referring to that which is superficial or only skin-deep. Symbolically, the heart signifies the innermost character, feelings, or inclinations of a man. The heart is also used when referring to the center, or core, of something. For example; it is sometimes said, “the heart of a watermelon is the best part,” meaning that the center part of the watermelon tastes better than the part closer to the rind. If we say that we have a “heart-felt desire” for a particular area of ministry, we would be speaking of a yearning to do the Lord’s work that comes from our innermost being as opposed to a superficial desire based on the emotions of the moment. When used figuratively in the Scriptures, the word “heart” is used in a similar fashion, thus the heart of the earth gives reference to something much deeper than a simple place of burial for a man’s body barely under the surface of the earth. That it is said that before His ascension the Lord Jesus first descended “*into the lower parts of the earth*” (Eph. 4:9) affirms this. In a Psalm of thanksgiving for being delivered from death, David makes reference to this by distinguishing between Sheol/Hades (rendered grave in the KJV) and Queber (rendered pit in this passage) (Ps. 30:1-3).

In Ezekiel we find prophecies against the kings of Assyria (Ezek. 31) and Egypt (Ezek. 32) that indicate that Sheol/Hades is in the center of the earth. In these two chapters it speaks of the fall of these mighty kings, who in death ended up in the underworld with those who have gone before them. We do not have the space here to give extensive commentary on these two chapters. But we do want to point out that in regard to both kings it is said that in death they would go “*to the nether parts of the earth...with them that go down into the pit*” (see Ezek. 31:14,16,18; 32:18,24), the “*nether parts*” being the lower regions of the earth. We should take note that in chapter thirty-one it is

being pointed out to Pharaoh that just as the king of Assyria, who was greater than he was, had died and gone into the underworld, so would he.

In chapter thirty-two we find a prophecy, given in the form of a lamentation, foretelling Pharaoh's defeat by the king of Babylon (Ezek. 32:1-16). This is followed by a lamentation over the multitude of Egyptians who would be slain by the Babylonians (Ezek. 31:17-31). We have pictured for us those of the nations who preceded them, welcoming Pharaoh and his host as they arrived in Sheol/Hades by taunting them. They point out that the Egyptians had thought themselves to be invincible because of their strength and fame among the nations. But now they were just like the great nations who had gone before them, their individual souls being confined to Sheol/Hades while their bodies decay in the grave.

“The strong among the mighty shall speak to him out of the midst of hell (Sheol)...” (Ezek. 32:21). The “strong among the mighty” spoken of here refers to the men who had been the kings and leaders of the different nations that are mentioned in this passage: Asshor, or Assyria (v. 22), Elam (v. 24), Meshech and Tubal (v. 26), Edom, her kings and her princes (v. 29), the princes of the north and the Zidonians (v. 30). This passage shows that while those of each group mentioned are in their respective burial places, their *quebers*, they are at the same time all together in “the pit,” which is an expression that is sometimes used for Sheol/Hades (vv. 18,25,29). These are similar examples as that found in Isaiah 14, which we have previously looked at.

While we have not exhausted the subject by looking at every passage that Sheol is found in, it is clear from these examples that Sheol is not simply the grave but is located at the center of the earth and is the abode of the souls of the unrighteous dead who are awaiting their

resurrection unto condemnation. It is equally clear that those in Sheol/Hades are not in an unconscious state of existence but are quite aware of what is going on around them. There is memory, recognition, and communication there.

TARTARUS

The Apostle Peter used the word *Tartarus* in reference to “*the angels that sinned*” that God delivered to Sheol/Hades to await judgment (II Pet. 2:4). This word, which is translated “hell” in the KJV, was used in Greek mythology to refer to the place of punishment for the most wicked. It is not clear if Peter was using this word in reference to Sheol/Hades in a general way or if he was referring to a specific compartment of Sheol/Hades where a certain class of fallen angels are confined awaiting final judgment. Either way, this passage teaches that there is a place of confinement in which a particular group of beings are being held until the time of their judgment. This is consistent with the overall Biblical teaching about the existence and purpose of Sheol/Hades.

PARADISE

While Paradise is not now a part of Sheol/Hades it will be mentioned here because it was located in Sheol/Hades at one time. Before the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ everybody who died went to Sheol/Hades, which was at that time divided into at least two compartments. One was a place of torment while the other was a place of blessing, which was referred to as Abraham’s Bosom (Lk. 16:22-25). As we mentioned before, Tartarus may be a specific place in Sheol/Hades.

We know that Jesus Christ went “*into the lower parts of the earth*” (Eph. 4:9), that is to Sheol/Hades, “in the heart of the earth,” for three days and nights while his body was in the grave (Mat. 12:40). The

Lord Jesus told the repentant thief that he would join Him in Paradise that same day (Lk. 23:42,43). This tells us that Paradise was located in Sheol/Hades at that time. We believe that this was the same place referred to as Abraham's Bosom in Luke 16. However, after Jesus Christ rose from the dead He ascended to the Father, taking the saints who were in Abraham's Bosom to heaven with Him. Thus, He took "*captivity captive*" (see Eph. 4:8-10).

That Paradise was moved to heaven is confirmed to us by the Apostle Paul who speaks of a man who was "*caught up into Paradise*" where he "*heard unspeakable words*" (II Cor. 12:3,4). With Jesus Christ's work complete, the believers who had been confined to Sheol/Hades were now taken to Heaven to wait in God's presence until the time of their resurrection to enter His Kingdom on Earth. Since that time, at death all believers go to Paradise in Heaven to await the time of their resurrection. This is true whether they belong to the Kingdom Church of the future or the Body of Christ Church of the present Dispensation of Grace.

THE GRAVE

We have already looked at the word *queber*, the most common word for grave, or a burial place, in the Old Testament, and have shown that it is not the same as Sheol. As previously stated, of the sixty-four times it is used it is rendered "grave" thirty-four times, "sepulcher" twenty-six times, and "burying place" four times. Two other words that are used for a burial place in the Old Testament are *Shah-ghath* and *Qeburah*.

Shah-ghath: This word is translated "grave" once (Job 33:22). It is rendered "ditch" twice, "destruction" twice, "corruption" four times, and "pit" thirteen times. This word speaks of something that man can dig (Ps. 94:13; Prov. 26:27) and is used in reference to a hole into which a

man can fall (Ps. 7:15; Prov. 26:27), and a hole used as a trap (Ps. 35:7). It is a place where the physical body suffers destruction through the corruption of decay (Ps. 16:10; 49:9; 55:23). The basic meaning is that of a hole of some kind that man digs for a particular purpose. Generally, it is used of a burial place, i.e., a grave.

Qeburah: This word is related to *queber* and means a grave or burial place. It is used of various types of graves and is found fourteen times and is translated “grave” four times, “sepulcher” five times, “burial” four times, and “burying place” one time.

In the New Testament we find three more words that refer to the grave, *taphos*, *mnema*, and *mnemeion*.

Taphos is used seven times and is translated “sepulcher” six of those and “tomb” once.

Mnema is used seven times, being rendered “tomb” twice, “grave” once, and “sepulcher” four times.

Mnemeion is the most common word for grave in the New Testament. It is used forty-two times, five times as “tomb,” twenty-nine times as “sepulcher,” and eight times as “grave.”

The grave is a place where the physical remains of those who have died are deposited. It can be a hole in the ground, a cave, or a specially prepared vault or other place used for interment. The soul and spirit having departed the body at death, there is no consciousness of life in the grave. It is a place of corruption that serves to point out man’s need of a Savior. The soul of man lives on after physical death and will always remain in a conscious state of being. The unsaved go to Sheol/Hades to await their resurrection unto

condemnation while the redeemed go to heaven to await their resurrection unto life (see Jn. 5:25-29).

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR TODAY

A proper understanding of what the Bible teaches about Hell, Sheol, Hades, and the Grave dispels confusion over what happens to the soul at the time of physical death and guards against being led astray by those teaching the false doctrines of soul-sleep, eradication of the soul, the universal reconciliation of mankind, and the annihilation of the lost. All of these erroneous doctrines are of Satan, used of him to dishearten believers and blind the lost to the reality of the cost of spurning the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our thinking, and therefore our life on a day-to-day basis, is influenced by what we believe. While some of the false doctrines mentioned above are diametrically opposed to each other, they still have one thing in common. They subvert the truth of the immortality of the soul.

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