



Hades, Sheol, Lake of Fire, the Abyss and ‘Soul Sleep’...

by

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Recently I had a request to explain the differences between ‘Hades’ and the ‘Grave’, ‘Hell’ and the ‘Lake of Fire’, and other terms such as ‘Sheol’ and the ‘Abyss’ as used throughout scripture. The topic of ‘Soul Sleep’ also came into the discussion. Indeed, there is a maze of terms used in scripture which describe various places and conditions of the body and soul after death.

The sure way of discerning the differences and avoiding confusion is to do a systematic *word study* of each term, isolate the *original words* in Hebrew and Greek, study the various *contexts* and then allow *scripture to interpret scripture*. Such a systematic study would more than likely avoid the many errors and the false or new teachings that are commonly taught with these terms.

‘Sheol’ and the ‘Grave’

‘*Sheol*’ in the Old Testament was considered by the Jews to be the abode of the dead. In the Old Testament Hell is ‘Sheol’ which corresponds to ‘Hades’ in the New (Ps.16:10; Hos.13:14 quoted in Acts 2:27; Acts 13:35; 1Cor.15:55).

The ‘grave’ in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word transliterated ‘qever’ and is used *only* when referring to the grave or burying place.

The body enters ‘qever’ but it is never said to enter ‘Sheol’.

It is confusion between these words that the doctrine of ‘soul sleep’ arises.

‘Soul Sleep’

Some confuse the Old Testament ‘Hades’ (‘*Sheol*’) with the ‘grave’ (‘*Qever*’) and thus cult groups (such as Seventh Day Adventists) teach the soul ‘sleeps’ until the resurrection. They quote Old Testament Scriptures such as Ecclesiastes 9:5 which speak of ‘*sleeping in the dust*’. However, this scripture is about the *body*, not the soul. If one reads on to chapter 12:7 any difficulty is sorted: ‘*Then shall the dust [the body] return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it*’.

The misunderstanding with ‘soul sleep’ occurs when, depending on the context, ‘Sheol’ is translated ‘Hell’ (30 times), ‘grave’ (31 times) and ‘pit’ (3 times). The Old Testament writers saw little more than a ‘place of the dead’. However, the Hebrew word transliterated ‘qever’ is used *only* when referring to the grave or burying place. The body enters ‘qever’ (Hebrew - Old Testament) and ‘*mnemeion*’ (Greek - New) but it is never said to enter Sheol.

A systematic study of each of the two Hebrew words (apart from the English words) shows the difference and quickly dismisses ‘soul sleep’.

In Job 17 we have in vs.1 the body in the ‘grave’ (‘qever’); and in vs.13 the ‘grave’ is ‘sheol’ referring to the soul. But the two Hebrew words are different:

‘My breath is corrupt, my days are extinct, the graves (‘qever’) are ready for me... 13 If I wait, the grave (‘sheol’) is mine house: I have made my bed in the darkness’.

There is actually little ‘doctrine’ on Hell in the OT. It is thus unwise to make a doctrine of either Hell or ‘soul sleep’ from the Old Testament, which the cults and those who teach ‘soul sleep’ invariably do. (It is also unscholarly to use books such as Ecclesiastes and Job where humans were giving wrong advice!). The cults and groups such as Seventh Day Adventists are biased when quoting heavily from the Old Testament and not from the New; and also grossly inconsistent when they fail to show the Old Testament scriptures for *consciousness* in Hell (‘sheol’): *‘The strong among the mighty shall speak to him out of the midst of hell [‘sheol’]’* (Ezek.32:21); *‘Hell [‘sheol’] from beneath is moved for you to meet you at your coming: it stirs up the dead for you, even all the chief ones of the earth; it has raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All they shall speak and say unto you, Are you also become weak as we? are you become like unto us?’* (Is.14:9,10; see also Ps.16:10).

In the New Testament ‘soul sleep’ is most clearly dismissed. In Matthew 17 Moses and Elijah are speaking in the presence of God; in Luke 16 a *‘certain rich man’* in Hades speaks and feels; in Luke 23:43 the penitent thief is promised *‘this day’* to be with Jesus. Paul says in 2Cor.5:6-8: *‘...knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord... We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.’* The tenses in vs.8 and the parallelism between vs.8 and vs.6 indicate that being present with the Lord occurs the moment one dies. Also Phil.1:21-23: *‘For I am in a strait between two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better’.* The English translation here is obviously against ‘Soul Sleep’, but further proof is this: The Greek infinitives ‘*einai*’ (‘*be*’) and ‘*analusai*’ (‘*depart*’) have one construction, one grammatical thought and connected by one definite article (‘the’) in the Greek - Paul’s desire to ‘*depart*’ and to ‘*be*’ with Christ is the same and instant in time. If ‘*departure*’ here was not instantly being with Christ, another Greek construction would be used.

Some also confuse the word ‘*sleep*’ for ‘soul sleep’. But ‘*sleep*’ is a euphanism for death, not ‘soul sleep’. Stephen is said to have fallen ‘asleep’ when he died after stoning (Acts 7:60). In John chapter 11 when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead the two understandings of ‘*sleep*’ are shown by the use of different Greek words (different Strong’s numbers - see vs.11-13). In many places ‘*sleep*’ is obviously death (Acts 13:36; 1Cor.11:30; 15:51; 1Thess.4:14).

Hell: Hades; Tartaros; the Lake of Fire

There are three different Greek words translated 'Hell' in the New Testament:

1. '**Hades**' (ten times 'Hell', once 'grave') - literally 'not'/'to see'. In the Old Testament it was 'Sheol' a place of the unseen dead. It is now an intermediate place of darkness containing the spirits of the unsaved. 'Hades' is eventually cast into 'Gehenna' (the 'Lake of Fire') in the end (Rev.20:14).

This 'Hell' is a 'place' - a '*place [tópos] of torment*' (Lk.16:28). The Greek word '*tópos*' is where we get the English word 'topography'. Judas also went to his own 'place' (Acts 1:25).

Hades has '*torments*'. Jesus said a certain rich man in Hades '*...being in torments...*' begged Abraham to have mercy '*that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame...*' (Lk.16:23-25). The pain here too is that the rich man sees Lazarus being '*comforted*' but is told of the '*great gulf*' between them and is reminded that Lazarus '*is comforted while you are tormented*' (vs.23).

Many believe that 'Hades' had two compartments - one for the righteous and one for the unrighteous. Some refer to Luke 16:26 where there is the separation ('*a great gulf*') between one compartment and 'Abraham's bosom'.

2. '**Gehenna**' (12 times) - The Greek word is derived from the Hebrew '*Valley of Hinnom*' (2Chron.28:3), a place southwest of the gate of Jerusalem and associated with the evil of idolatrous and human sacrifices, formerly including sacrificing children to the god Molech (Jer.7:31). The fires in this valley were kept alight day and night. It essentially became a great garbage dump. 'Gehenna' was always conceived of as a place of physical and spiritual punishment. In the New Testament it is the final Hell after the judgement, commonly referred to as the 'Lake of Fire', with fire that is 'unquenchable' (Mk.9:45,48).

The '**Lake of Fire**' is synonymous with 'Gehenna' (Is.30:33; Rev.19:20). In Revelation 20:14 Hell ('*hades*') is cast into this final 'Hell' - the 'Lake of Fire'.

The Devil, the anti-Christ and the false prophet are all found in the '*lake of fire*' being '*tormented day and night forever and ever*' (Rev.20:10).

3. '**Tartaros**' (translated '*Hell*' 2Pet.2:4) - was originally a Greek mythological place where demigods were punished. Peter used it as a dungeon where angels are kept bound. (Some believe it is linked with 'Hades').

The ‘Bottomless Pit’

The ‘abyss’ or ‘pit’ is believed to be synonymous with ‘Tartaros’. The phrase ‘*bottomless pit*’ is the Greek word *ábussos*’ where we get ‘abyss’ from. It literally means ‘very deep’. It is mentioned nine times: Rom.10:7 - the abode of the dead; Luke 8:31 - the prison destined for evil spirits; in Rev. 9:1, 2; 11:7; 17:8; 20:1, 3 - it is a prison in which evil powers are confined but which can be let loose at times.

This ‘bottomless pit’ is not the Lake of Fire since Satan is bound in the pit for a time only (1,000 years) and then cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev.20:1-10).

The Descriptions of ‘Hell’

Depending on which Greek word is used, nevertheless ‘Hell’ is described as the following:

Hell is a real place

Hell is a place of ‘*outer darkness*’ and where there is ‘*weeping and gnashing of teeth*’ (Matt.8:12; 22:13; 25:30); it is place ‘*without*’ (outside of) the gates of the New Jerusalem (Rev.22:15); a place where ‘*the worm dies not*’ and the ‘*fire is not quenched*’ (three times in Mark 9:44,46,48). In Jude 4 and 13 false teachers are said to be assigned to a ‘*blackness of darkness for ever*’.

Hell contains ‘*everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels*’ (Matt.25:41). Eventually, the devil and his ‘false prophet’ will be thrown into Hell (Rev.20:10).

Hell is Punishment

Hell is not remedial. Sin is not paid for in Hell. Sin can only be paid for on the cross by Jesus Christ. ‘...*but now once in the end of the world has he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself... Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many...*’ (Heb.9:26-28).

Hell exists to show God’s wrath and for the glory of God. God created Hell and foreknew that ‘*many*’ people would go there. Christ has the ‘keys’ to Heaven and Hell (Rev.20:3). The Puritans and the Reformers taught that in Hell God’s authority, holiness and justice will be exhibited. Hell is a place where God’s wrath will be demonstrated. ‘*What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory*’ (Rom.9:22,23). Because of sin God is ‘willing’ to show his anger. He will ‘make His power known’ to show his authority and justice. By punishing people

in Hell He will show the *contrast* of his ‘*riches of His glory on the vessels of honour*’ which he predestined (vs.23 ‘*afore prepared unto glory*’).

What Happens in Hell? In Hell there is the ultimate loneliness, separation from God - perhaps the worst kind of punishment being no comfort, no hope (1Thess.4:13; Pr.10:28), no mercy (Jn.5:29) and with a bowing of the knee to almighty God (Rom.14:11; Phil.2:10). Edward Payson (1783-1827) a Congregational preacher in USA, wrote: ‘*There the sinner will see what a God he has offended, what a saviour he has neglected, what a heaven he has lost, and into what a hell he has plunged himself*’. (1)

There is no Holy Spirit to restrain evil.

It is arguable there are degrees of punishment. Those that had more opportunities to repent of sin could suffer more judgement (Matt.11:21-24). (It does appear that some will be ‘*beaten with many stripes*’ and some with ‘*few stripes*’ - Lk.12:47,48). The punishment will be just and unchallenged.

The Bible says the ‘*worm does not die*’ (mentioned 3 times and with the same phrase ‘*the fire is not quenched*’ (Mk.9:44,46,48; Is.66:24). People will have immortal bodies (some believe the ‘worm’ also refers to memory).

The ‘torment’ will include ‘*wailing*’ and ‘*weeping and gnashing of teeth*’ (mentioned 6 times (Matt.8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk.13:28).

In the end times people who take the ‘mark of the beast’ shall ‘*drink of the wine of the wrath of God...and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: And the smoke of their torment ascends up forever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night...*’ (Rev.14:10,11).

Hell is Eternal.

Hell is spoken of as being ‘*everlasting*’, ‘*eternal*’ and ‘*forever and ever*’. The Bible clearly teaches that those who do not ‘*know Jesus Christ*’ and ‘*obey the Gospel*’ ‘*shall be punished with everlasting destruction...*’ (2Thess.1:9). The fire that destroys is ‘*everlasting fire*’ (Matt.25:41). If such phrases and words are not proof enough of Hell being eternal and never ending, then the following verse is irrefutable: ‘*And these shall go away into everlasting*’ (‘*aionion*’) *punishment: but the righteous into life eternal*’ (‘*aionion*’)’ (Matt.25:46). The words here for ‘*everlasting*’ and ‘*eternal*’ are the same in Greek (‘*aionion*’). The structure of the sentence means that if Hell is not ‘*eternal*’, then Heaven is also not ‘*eternal*’! The Greek ‘*aionios*’ clearly is showing a state that is perpetual, abiding, endless in duration. This same word is used of the punishment of the wicked and of fire (Matt.18:8; 25:41,46; Mk.3:29; 2Thess.1:9; Heb.6:2; Jude 1:7). If the punishment in Matthew 25:46 was not

truly eternal as many today teach (e.g. Seventh day Adventist and many cults) and instead ‘annihilation’, then other Greek words could have, and would have, been used. The word eternal (‘aionios’) is also used of the Holy Spirit (Heb.9:14), salvation (Heb.5:9), the Gospel (Rev.14:6), the new covenant (Heb.13:20) and the resurrected body (2Cor.5:1). If the eternal punishment in Hell is not unending than the above things are also not ‘eternal’!

Yet still some cult groups teach that Hell is ‘annihilation’ because of associated words used such as ‘perish’ or ‘destruction’. But these words do not mean annihilation. The Greek here ‘*appollumi*’ is also translated ‘lose’, ‘die’, ‘destroyed’, ‘marred’, etc. The various contexts where ‘*appollumi*’ is used will quickly show that it does not mean a literal annihilation: In Matthew 9:17 a wine bottle is ‘lost’ (‘*appollumi*’), not ‘annihilated’; there are ‘the lost’ (‘*appollumi*’) sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt.10:6), ‘the son of man comes to seek and save that which was lost’ (‘*appollumi*’) - not annihilated (Matt.18:11). The parables also speak of things that were ‘lost’ (‘*appollumi*’) yet are found again (not annihilated); the demons plead not to be ‘destroyed’ (‘*appollumi*’) - they are not ‘annihilated’, but later put in Hell (Mk.1:24); we are told not to ‘destroy’ (‘*appollumi*’) a brother by being a ‘stumblingblock’ (Rom.14:15; 1Cor.8:11) - the brother is not ‘annihilated’; and the ‘world...perished’ (‘*appollumi*’) in the flood’ (2Pet.3:6) - not ‘annihilated’.

There is simply no changing the meaning of the words ‘everlasting’, ‘eternal’ and ‘forever and ever’. How clear does the Bible have to be when people will not accept that ‘*forever and ever...no rest day nor night...*’ means what it says? (Rev.14:10,11).

Some might logically question how bodies can be *eternally* tormented by fire without being consumed? But cannot God have a body that is not consumed? In Exodus chapter 3 there was a burning bush not consumed and in Daniel Chapter 3 there were men not consumed in a fiery furnace.

In Mark chapter 9 this truth of eternal punishment is relentlessly *repeated* for emphasis: ‘*the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched...the fire that never shall be quenched: Where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched. Where their worm dies not, and the fire is not quenched*’ (Mk.9:43-48).

How can this be - because the fire is ‘*prepared*’ by God (Matt.25:41)!

Jonathan Edwards wrote: ‘*Be entreated to consider attentively how great and awful a thing eternity is...Do but consider what it is to suffer extreme torment forever and ever; to suffer it day and night, from one year to another, from one age to another, from one thousand ages to another, and so adding age to age*

and thousands to thousands, in pain, in wailing and lamenting, groaning and shrieking, and gnashing your teeth; with your souls full of dreadful grief and amazement, with your bodies and every member full of racking (pain) without any possibility of getting ease; without any possibility of moving God to pity by your cries; without any possibility of hiding yourselves from Him; without any possibility of diverting your thought away from your pain; without any possibility of obtaining any manner of mitigation, help, or change for the better.’ (2)

Emotionally and logically our finite minds may not be able to comprehend or accept an eternal Hell of punishment and torment. But Scripturally the fact of eternal Hell remains.

A study of the various words for Hell and its descriptions should only urge us to spread the Gospel more! ‘Eternal life’ rather than ‘eternal damnation’ must be offered to all regardless, that many would repent of their sins, believe on the Lord Jesus who offered payment for sin on the cross, and life forever with Him.

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(1) ‘*Sermons*’ by Edward Payson (1783-1827) P.487

(2) ‘*The Works of President Edwards*’ Vol.4, P.278

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