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Conducted by  
Alf Marsden

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**“Can you please tell me something about Hell? I do not often hear any preaching or teaching about this subject”?**

It seems to become unfashionable to make mention of Hell in lessons and sermons; perhaps this is because so **much** was made of the subject in the early years of this century: one could almost smell the brimstone when preachers of that era were in full flow. We now seem more concerned with social and philisophical problems, which, of course, is quite good, but nevertheless teaching about Hell should not be neglected because there are dire warnings in the Bible about the necessity for people **not** to be found there eventually. Perhaps it is because Hell is depicted as being so vile that we turn to talking about Heaven instead, and so the warnings are not heeded by people who should understand what Hell is like.

It is interesting to note that many people when questioned seem to have the idea that Hell and Heaven are not **places** as such; they seem to suggest that each person makes up his or her own personal Heaven or Hell while they are living here on earth. I suppose their difficulty lies in the fact neither place can be **located** geographically

on earth or astronomically in space. However, there are pointers in the legends and myths of ancient Greece and Rome, but more importantly, so far as the Christian is concerned, in the Biblical narrative.

### Classical Mythology

Webster's New International Dictionary defines a myth as, "a story that is usually of unknown origin and a least partially traditional, that ostensibly relates historical events usually of such character as to serve to explain some practice, belief, institution, or natural phenomenon, and that is especially associated with religious rites and beliefs". It seems that the Greeks and Romans wanted to perpetuate the memory of their heroes and their exploits by seeking to deify them, and so we have all their **mythological** gods, but seemingly based on **real** ideas of **real** people who had existed, even though the gods themselves were **unreal**. The sources I shall mention just briefly are the writings of Homer, Plato and Vergil, and these only insofar as they comment on the after-life. The writings pre-date Christianity, but it seems quite likely that they would have influenced Greek and Roman culture and thought well into the Christian era.

Homer's *Odyssey* tells the tale of Odysseus wandering about and trying to find his way back to his home in Ithaca after the Trojan Wars. Book XI tells of his visit to the underworld (Hades) to consult one Tiresias the seer, about his journey. They sailed to 'the limits of the world' and in a place that had been indicated to him Odysseus dug a pit with his sword 'a cubit in length and breadth'. He then made an offering to the dead, and killed some sheep whose blood then went into the pit; only then was he able to communicate with the dead, and only then after they (the dead) had drunk of the blood. Then the spirits of the dead came out of Erebus (Hades) one by one and Odysseus spoke with them. Then Achilles spoke with him, "How durst thou come down to the house of Hades, where dwell the senseless dead, the phantoms of men outworn"? Odysseus answered him, "Wherefore let not thy death be any grief to thee, Achilles". To which came the reply, "Nay, speak not comfortably of death, oh great Odysseus. Rather would I live on ground, with landless man who had no great livelihood, than bear sway among all the dead that be departed".

Homer's Hades, then, is a picture of spirits wandering around aimlessly, with no joy and in eternal gloom. All end up in the same place, and there seems to be no distinction between the great and the small.

Plato, in the last book of the *Republic*, talks about the myth of someone called Er. Evidently this man died in battle with others but only **his** body remained uncorrupted and he came back from the dead to tell the tale. While dead, he went to a place where he saw four openings; two went down into earth, and two went up into the sky. Between these openings sat judges; the just they sent to the openings which went into the sky, and the unjust were sent to the openings which went downwards. He also saw souls coming up from the earth covered with dust and dirt, and others coming down from the sky all pure and shining. They exchanged greetings and compared their experiences; the ones from below with weeping and wailing, and the ones from above told of sights of indescribable beauty. The mythical Er then saw lots cast before them and choices as to the next cycle mortal life had to be made. In the main, he said, they made their choices on the basis of their experiences of their previous lives. There were some so incurably wicked that they were hurled down into Tartarus, the deep abyss.

Evidently Plato's philosophy is of the trans-migration of souls, But the emphasis is on **two** places for the dead rather than one, with the addition of Tartarus for the incurably evil.

Vergil's journey to the Underworld, as told in the *Aeneid*, speaks of souls being transported across the dark and turbulent river Styx by Charon the ferryman. On the

far shore they come to the fields of Mourning, and further along to where the road divides; one path going to Tartarus, and the other to Elysian Fields. Sins committed while on earth and for which punishment is due, move men along the road to Tartarus, described as a most awful place, with flaming rocks and raging torrents. One punishment is to attempt to carry water in order to alleviate the heat, but the effort is in vain because the buckets have no bottoms. The ones who travel the other road need to have a period of purification because they are stained with this world's ills; something like Purgatory, I suppose. They then move on pure to the Elysian Fields (Paradise, no doubt).

This, then, is a very brief comment on these myths, but there are excellent books in most Reference Libraries for anyone wanting to read more.

### Biblical Teaching

In most places in the N.T. Hell should be more correctly rendered **Hades**; it corresponds to **Sheol** in the O.T. W. E. Vine defines it as **"the region of departed spirits of the lost (but including the blessed dead in periods preceding the Ascension of Christ)"**. In Matt. 5:22 and 18:8,9 the Greek word **GEENA** is used and represents the Hebrew **GE-Hinnom** (the valley of Hinnom); this word is the one used by the Lord Himself on most occasions. It seems to be the place of eternal punishment. See Mark 9:43-47. It is known as **GEHENNA**.

Another scripture to look at is 2 Pet. 2:4. Samuel Bagster in his Englishman's Greek N.T. renders this verse, **"For if God the angels who sinned spared not, but having cast them to the deepest abyss to chains of darkness delivered them for judgment having been kept"**. This refers to the region of **TARTARUS**, the place of the 'deepest abyss'. This seems to be the place referred to by the devil-possessed man to whom Jesus spoke. See Luke 8:31. Bagster has this verse, **"And he besought him that he would not command them into the abyss to go away"**. This, of course, refers to the devils that Jesus was going to cast out.

One of the most striking scriptures (to me anyway) is found in Luke 16:19-31. Many refer to this as a parable, but I am not persuaded. In any case it would seem to matter very little whether it is parabolic or not, the situation seems to be clear enough. Two men die, one goes to Hades which is obviously a place of punishment and torment; one goes to Abraham's Bosom, which is obviously a place of **PARADISE**. You will do doubt recall that Jesus said to the repentant thief **"this day thou shalt be with me in Paradise"**. Now when Peter spoke to the people on the first Pentecost he spoke about the patriarch David and said, **"He (David) seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ that His soul was not left in Hell (Hades), neither his flesh did see corruption"**. Acts 2:31. If then, Jesus went into Hades when He died, then Paradise must have been a region of Hades at that time. But Jesus was resurrected from among the dead and subsequently ascended into Heaven to be at the right hand of God, because Heaven is where God is. In Vergil's mythology, one had to journey through Hades, as it were, in order to reach the Elysian Fields which, I suppose, equates with our Paradise. So we either accept that there is an intermediate region in Hades into which those who die in Christ go, or we look upon Abraham's Bosom as Heaven to which place those who die in Christ go. The only other explanation is that Paradise is a separate place altogether where the dead in Christ go awaiting the Second Coming of Christ. See John 14:1-4. A striking point from the Luke 16 narrative is that Paradise could be seen from the place of torment: I wonder if that is part of the punishment.

Well, these are only a very few thoughts but I hope they will help a little. The most important point to remember was made by the Lord Himself when He said to His disciples, **"And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I forewarn you whom ye shall fear;**

**Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast you into Hades, yea, I say unto you, Fear him". Luke 12:4,5. But thinking of things we can understand now, can you imagine what it would be like to be in a place where there was no light, where murders, muggings, robbery, rape, and all other evil actions were the order of the day and every day. Where there was no love, compassion, understanding; where no child, trustingly, puts its hand into yours. Where there was no laughter and one could not feel the warmth of fellowship. That's HELL. And if that weren't enough, there's the torment continually. Well might the rich man want Lazarus to go to earth and warn his brothers.**

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