



The two interesting questions that I would like to consider this month have been sent by the same person, and as you will see, the questions relate to the same theme.

QUESTIONS:  
“What is the purpose of Hell?” And, “Can you please define eternal punishment?”



Let us begin with the question concerning the purpose of Hell.

Before we think about its purpose, we need to think about the meaning of the word ‘Hell’ itself, because a little thought will help us to clear up some of those misconceptions and erroneous theories which, for centuries, have been sources of needless confusion and unnecessary anxiety – (unnecessary that it, if one is a Christian!)

The Words.

There are, in fact *three Biblical words*, the meanings of which are often confused because people tend to use them very loosely. Two of the words are **N.T. GREEK** words. The third is an **O.T. HEBREW** word. For instance, in the N.T. we have:-

1. ‘**GEHENNA**’, which occurs 12 times, and, in the A.V., is always translated ‘hell’, and,
2. ‘**HADES**’, which occurs 10 times, and which is also always translated ‘hell’.
3. The third word is the word ‘**SHEOL**’, found in the Old Testament, and which sometimes is *erroneously* said to be the word that corresponds to ‘**GEHENNA**’.

You clearly see the confusion that has been created about the meaning of this word when you understand that, in the Authorised Version, out of the 65 instances it occurs, 31 times it has been translated ‘*hell*’ and 31 times it has been translated ‘*the grave*’! Now, although the word ‘*Sheol*’ literally means ‘*The Place of the Dead*’, you do not need much intelligence to recognize that *Hell* and the *Grave* are *not* the same place! When a body is placed in the grave, it has *not* been consigned to Hell!

But, there is a history behind this inconsistent rendering of the word ‘*Sheol*’. Whilst the translators of the A.V. believed Hell to be the place of punishment for the wicked, they recoiled from the idea of saying that **good people** *also* go to Sheol, and so in passages that related to the death of **good** people, they decided to translate ‘*Sheol*’ as ‘*the grave*’!!

Old Testament Ideas.

However, in Hebrew theology – and, in O.T. teaching - Sheol is described as the place to which *all* the dead go – both good and bad. It is defined as ‘*the place of departed souls*’. In the account of King Saul’s visit to the medium at Endor, the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel is recorded as saying to Saul, “**Tomorrow, you and your sons shall be with me.**” (1st Sam. 28:19).

Even the Oxford Dictionary is close to the truth as far as the meaning of the word is concerned. It says that Sheol is: - ‘*The abode of the dead*’.

Furthermore, in the O.T., Sheol is described as a gloomy place, in which an individual is farther away from God than he was during his lifetime. We are told that, **'the living know that they will die, but the dead do not to know anything'**, (Eccles. 9:5), and, according to Psalm 115:17, **"The dead do not praise Yahveh, nor any who go down into silence."**

New Testament Teaching.

Of course, this is all very different from what the N.T. teaches, but we must bear in mind the fact that in O.T. times, the Hebrews had no clear doctrine concerning the future after death – either of good people or bad people. In early Hebrew times, they never even considered life after death as a possibility. That is why we hear the inconsolable Jacob say, in Gen. 37:35, when he believes that his beloved son Joseph has been killed by wild animals, **"I will go down into the grave to my son mourning"**.

And Job also, in chapter 14:vv 7-14 says, **"There is hope of a tree, if it is cut down that it will sprout again... but man dies and wastes away: yes, man gives up the ghost, and where is he?"** He continues, **"Oh! that thou wouldst hide me in the grave."** So far as the early Hebrew knew, it all ended in the grave - at death.

It was later that the truths of *continued existence* after death, and a *judgment* of the righteous and the wicked were gradually revealed through the later prophets. But, even then, the full truth was not brought to light until the Lord Jesus Himself **"brought life and immortality to light, through the Gospel."** (2nd Tim. 1; 10)

So, back to the word 'HELL'

The word 'GEHENNA', from which it originates, has a *historical origin*. In the Old Testament we read about a valley on the western side of the city of Jerusalem, which was known as 'The Valley of Hinnom'; that is, "Ge Henna". We know nothing about *Hinnom*, except that he owned that valley and must have lived very early in Old Testament times, probably even before the time of Joshua, because **"the valley of the SON of HINNOM"** is mentioned in Josh. 15: 8.

What we *can* say with certainty is that the 'Valley of Hinnom' was the valley in which, by N.T times, there was a place known as '**Tophet**' that was used as the refuse dump for the city of Jerusalem. And not for refuse alone, but also for the bodies of criminals who had been executed and those of beggars who had died.

Jerusalem had its fair share of beggars who lived – and died – on its streets, and, in the early morning before the city came to life, it was the custom to send a cart around the city to pick up the corpses of any who had died overnight and take them and dump them in the *Valley of Hinnom* – at Tophet - where they were burned. It was here, in the valley, that fires burned constantly, in order to consume corpses and anything else that was thrown there.

Why was the valley used in this way?

It was used in this way because, in O.T. times, during a period when the Israelites were unfaithful to their God, they worshipped the idol, 'Moloch', and such idolatrous worship involved the offering of human sacrifices – particularly of children. Jer. 7: 31 records this evil practice.

The particular idol involved was a huge, hollow figure of brass or bronze, in which a fire was lit so that the idol became red hot. It had outstretched arms on which the human sacrifice was laid, and the screams of the victim were drowned by the beating of drums. In the Old Testament, '*Tophet*' is a word that means '*tablet*', or '*drum*'.

It was the good king JOSIAH who put an end to this evil practice, by scattering the bones of dead men in the valley, thus defiling it and making it permanently unfit for the purpose of worship. You may read about this in 2nd Kings. 23. From that time, GeHENNA had been used as a rubbish dump and a place of constant burning. This explains the words of Jesus, when He says, in Mark 9:48, "**The worm does not die and the fire is not quenched**". Remember, also, that it is Jesus Himself, alone, who speaks of GeHENNA in all of the 12 passages where the word occurs, and he uses it *symbolically* to speak of the punishment and suffering that awaits the wicked.

Remember, also, that Jesus is *not* saying that, after death, there is a place that *literally burns with fire and brimstone*, waiting for the wicked.

A few centuries ago, priests, preachers and parsons often put 'the fear of death' into their congregations, by telling them about the fires of the 'Hell' that awaited them, if they continued to be wicked. They even vividly described the *rattling of the chains and the smell of brimstone!* And, of course, Old Satan was always said to be there, with his *Pitchfork*, to make sure they all received a good roasting

The second question is: "Can you define Eternal Punishment?"

This is, I suggest, answered by the last passage mentioned, 2nd Thess. 1: 9-10. The N.T. clearly describes the destination of the wicked after the Judgment and their place of punishment, as '*eternal banishment from the presence of God*'. The wicked will be denied the fellowship and blessing of everlasting life – '*the life of the ages*' – and, there will be no need for fire and brimstone, for they will *know* that their banishment is something they have deserved because of their rejection of God's offer of forgiveness.

What will add to the pain of banishment will be the knowledge that it ***could have been so very different***. No fire! No burning! But the pain and suffering of experiencing the loss of what might have been will be pain enough.

This means that the future of those who reject the Gospel and refuse to accept the Lordship of the Christ is *not annihilation* and *not extinction*. In other words, it is *not the cessation of being*. It is *exclusion from the Presence of God* and all the redeemed; those faithful souls who have accepted His offer of forgiveness.

The *alternative* to this enjoyment of the bliss of salvation should not be overlooked, because it is horrible to contemplate. Eternal punishment involves spending eternity in the presence of all those who have chosen to reject God's Grace and His love. In other words, the unforgiven.

This means the immoral, murders, liars, and all the vicious, cruel and evil in the history of the world.

Surely *that* is the most appalling punishment imaginable!

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