

Hell, a Theological Construct

Written on the sign above the gate of Hell:
“Abandon all hope, you who enter here”
Dante’s *Inferno*.

Almost universally, humans believe that life extends beyond the grave. Furthermore, recent Gallop Polls have reported that 70% of Americans believe in the existence of Hell.¹ However, their definitions of “Hell” are widely varied, describing it to be a place of fire and torment, a place of deprivation, or a place of annihilation. Generally, most conservative Bible-believers have been taught that Hell is that place where a sinner goes immediately after death, to be forever separated from God and to experience everlasting punishment in fire and brimstone. The problem is that the concept of “Hell” is not biblical; it is a theological construct—there is no Greek or Hebrew word in the Bible meaning “Hell.”

The Concept of Hell

For centuries, the concept of Hell has been exploited in order to evangelize the world, providing motivation to sinners to escape this awful punishment. The theological concept of Hell started to germinate in the second century.² During this time, an infusion of Greek ideals and philosophy started to distort Christian theology, and did so even more after the ascendancy of the Roman Catholic Church. Finally, when the Bible was translated into English, the theology of Hell became rather fixed in its present state.

Truthfully, the place called “Hell” does not exist, neither has it ever existed in the past, nor will it exist in the future. It is not true that when a sinner dies, he is immediately sent to Hell for the rest of eternity, to be tormented in everlasting fire as punishment for all of his sinful works.³ According to the Bible, when a person who is not a believer in Christ dies, he goes to Hades to await final judgment before God, and only after this final judgment is he cast into the Lake of Fire. Of all the biblical words and phrases which describe punishment or everlasting fire, not one is referring to Hell.

The word “Hell” is not found in the original text of the Bible; more precisely, there is no word equivalent to the modern concept of Hell in the original languages of the Scriptures.⁴ Here is the problem: the concept of Hell is a theological construct, formed by taking diverse scriptural references to fire and judgment and rolling them into one, easy-

¹ “Hell” will be capitalized as will all proper names of places (“Sheol,” “Hades,” and “Gehenna”).

² The following are early examples in the development of this doctrine: “Eternal fire is prepared for sinners. The Lord has plainly declared this and the rest of the Scriptures demonstrate it” (Irenaeus, c. 180).

“We [Christians] alone make a real effort to attain a blameless life. We do this under the influence of . . . the magnitude of the threatened torment. For it is not merely long-enduring; rather, it is everlasting” (Tertullian, c. 197). “Gehenna . . . is a reservoir of secret fire under the earth for purposes of punishment.” (Tertullian).

³ This is not intended to lend support to the errant notions of universalism or annihilationism.

⁴ Some might argue that Hell is equivalent to the Lake of Fire. The problem with this suggestion is that there are distinctions between what is called “Hell” and what will be the Lake of Fire; one of these distinctions becomes evident in this statement: “death and Hell [Hades] were cast into the Lake of Fire” (Rev 20:14).

to-understand, all-inclusive term, “Hell.” In this theological construct, the words “Sheol,” “Hades,” and “Gehenna” have been combined with other descriptions, such as “everlasting fire,” “the furnace of fire,” and “the Lake of Fire,” with the result that the unique meanings of these diverse concepts have been minimized or lost. Certainly, the Bible teaches that there will be everlasting punishment, but it does not teach anything about a place called “Hell.”

The many diverse events and judgments recorded in the Old Testament are intended to be examples for New Testament believers. Accordingly, New Testament believers are also warned of the consequences of displeasing God and grieving the Holy Spirit. However, many believers are left bewildered when they read modern translations of the Bible, which seem to repeatedly warn them about “Hell” if they do not obey God’s will. How can a warning of the fiery judgment of Hell apply to a disciple who believes in Christ and has become a child of God? These apparent inconsistencies have led some to mistakenly conclude that a believer’s disobedience can cause the forfeiture of his status as a child of God or that a believer’s faith was not “genuine,” so he never truly was a child of God. Here is a prime example of a passage which seems to indicate that a disciple of Christ should cut off his hand to escape punishment in Hell:

If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.
It is better for you to enter into life maimed,
rather than having two hands, to go to *Hell*,⁵
into the fire that shall never be quenched—where
“Their worm does not die
And the fire is not quenched” (Mk 9:43-44).

One of the unfortunate results when notably diverse words are all translated “Hell” is that many of the assorted warnings in the Scriptures lose their significance. Translating these words as “Hell” glosses over the substantial distinctions between the various consequences of human disobedience and the associated divine judgments. Thus, this construct of human theology has created inconsistencies which muddy the waters of scriptural truth, making it difficult to ascertain between God’s explicit warnings of particular judgments and whether these distinct warnings are directed toward believers or unbelievers.

“Hell” is a Confusing Theological Invention

Warnings in the New Testament which refer to Hell leave many believers somewhat bewildered because “Hell” is a theological invention. Evangelical theology has rightly rejected the Catholic innovation of “purgatory,” referring to an intermediate state after death where sinners suffer to pay off their debt of sin before being promoted to Heaven. Likewise, the concept of “Hell” should also be rejected because it is a “frankendoctrine”⁶ in which diverse scriptural references to fire and judgment have been incorporated into a single confusing doctrine.

⁵ Here, the word “Gehenna” is mistakenly translated “Hell.”

⁶ The fictional monster Frankenstein was made from the combination of various human parts; and so, a “frankenslave” is a slave assembled from pieces of junk slaves, and a “frankenplane” is a plane made from spare parts from multiple airplanes.

The theological concept of “Hell” found fertile ground in the 4th century when the Greek word “Hades” was translated as “Halja”⁷ in the Gothic Bible, and then was translated as “Infernus”⁸ in the Latin Bible. Similar to the Greek “Hades” and the Hebrew “Sheol,” the words “Halja” and “Infernus” originally referred to the hidden underworld, specifically, the place of the dead. At least, these two early Bible translations maintained the distinction between Hades and Gehenna.

However, the early English translations failed to maintain any distinction between Hades and Gehenna. In the 10th century, the Wessex Gospels (Old English) translated both words as “Hel”; and in the 14th century, the Wycliffe Bible (Middle English) translated both words as “Helle.” In the 17th century, the Authorized Version translated all three words, “Sheol,” “Hades,” and “Gehenna,” as “Hell,” further minimizing their distinctions.⁹

The errant theology resulting from these inaccurate translations has diverted many of God’s warnings intended for believers and redirected them toward unbelievers. To alleviate some of the pressure caused by these inaccurate translations, theologians have created a new category of unbelievers, referring to them as “false” or “nongenuine” believers. Consequently, instead of advising believers in Christ that they are at risk of losing God’s blessings, many believers today are erroneously taught that all of God’s promises are unconditional and that all of His rewards and blessings are guaranteed to every “genuine” believer. According to some modern evangelicals, the only rewards which a believer’s disobedience might put at risk are his crowns.¹⁰

The truth is, Jesus taught often about the specific and everlasting consequences which will result if a believer is disobedient to the will of God. Otherwise, only on one occasion recorded in Matthew did Jesus teach about the everlasting punishment of unbelievers in the Lake of Fire (Mt 25:41). Throughout the New Testament, believers are repeatedly warned of the consequences of living in disobedience. Furthermore, to illustrate the severe consequences of disobedience, believers are directed to consider the example of the Israelites who, although redeemed from Egypt, failed to enter into God’s rest (1Co 10:1-11; Heb 4:11). However, because popular English translations mischaracterize the consequences of disobedience to God’s will and describe some of these consequences as the danger of “Hell” and “hell fire,” Christ’s warnings about the real consequences of a believer’s disobedience have become difficult to discern.

Biblical Places Confused with Hell

In the most popular English translation of the Bible, there are four biblical words/phrases describing three distinct places which are regrettably confused with “Hell.” The Hebrew word “Sheol” (שְׁאוֹל) and the Greek word “Hades” (ᾗδης) both describe the place where the dead go to await their final judgment, commonly referred to by the ancients as the

⁷ “Halja” is a proto-Germanic word which literally means “something covered up or hidden”; (Barnhart, Robert K. (1995) *The Barnhart Concise Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 348).

⁸ “Infernus” is a Latin word which means “coming from below, from the netherworld.” Dante’s title “*Inferno*” is an Italian word.

⁹ In the OT of the Authorized Version, Sheol is translated as “grave” (31 times), “hell” (31 times) and “pit” (3 times). In the NT, Hades is translated “hell” (10 times), and “grave” (1 time); and Gehenna is translated “hell” (12 times).

¹⁰ Losing one’s crowns is not counted such a great loss, since these theologians also wrongly teach that all believers will eventually cast their crowns at the feet of Christ anyway.

“underworld.” The third is the Greek word “Gehenna” (γέεννα) which describes a valley located outside the southern wall of Old Jerusalem which was the inheritance of the sons of Hinnom. The fourth is the Greek phrase “the Lake of Fire” (τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρός) which describes the place of everlasting punishment prepared for Satan and his evil angels; this is the final destination of all those who will not allow God to rule over them.

In the following pages, each of these words will be discussed in order to understand the place to which they refer, so that the reader can understand the divine warnings associated with each place. While reading, one must remember that Hell does not exist. Although some of these places might sound a lot like what is commonly taught to be “Hell,” this is only because the fictional place called “Hell” is a mixture of these three real places: Sheol/Hades, Gehenna, and the Lake of Fire.

Sheol and Hades, the Place of the Dead

Since ancient times the idea of a grave has been a hole in the ground, a pit, or a cavern which swallows the dead. Literally, the words “Sheol” and “Hades”¹¹ can refer to an actual hole in the ground, the grave of a deceased person, or to the place where the deceased congregate while they are awaiting their final judgment. Sheol and Hades should not be confused with Hell since both the righteous and the unrighteous dead congregate within the confines of Sheol/Hades (Lk 16:19-31).

The Grave and the Underworld

The literal meaning of Sheol (and Hades) is evident in the story of Korah’s rebellion (Num 16:1-40). When Korah and others usurp the office of priest and burn incense before God, Moses prophesies concerning their judgment: “But if the LORD creates a new thing, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the grave [*Sheol*], then you will understand that these men have rejected the LORD” (Num 16:30). In fact, the earth does swallow them; thus, they enter their graves while still alive. However, if an author wants to refer narrowly to a grave or sepulcher, he might choose another word which refers only to one’s burial place.¹² In Korah’s case, they not only enter their grave, but also go to the place of the dead (Sheol).

In the ancient Hebrew mind, Sheol and Hades referred not only to the grave but also to what lies beyond the grave, more specifically, the abode of the dead (including both the righteous and the unrighteous). For example, when Jacob was misled that Joseph had been killed by a wild beast, he wept, expressing his sorrow: “For I will go down into the grave [*Sheol*] unto my son mourning” (Gen 37:35). Both Jacob and Joseph were righteous. Obviously, Jacob would not meet Joseph in a grave, but he expressed that he would continue to mourn until he met his son in Sheol, the abode of the dead.

Commonly, a grave is placed down in the ground where a man’s body returns to the dust of the earth (Gen 3:19; Ecc 12:5). Sheol is often described as a pit or a dungeon which holds the dead. The depths of Sheol are contrasted with the heights of the heavens: “It is as high as the heavens; what canst thou do? Deeper than [*Sheol*]; what canst thou know?” (Job 11:8; cf. Ps 139:8; Am 9:2). Sheol is described as a land of fire (Deu 32:22;

¹¹ “Hades” is used in the LXX as the equivalent of “Sheol.”

¹² Other Hebrew words for a grave or sepulcher are *qēbuwrah* (Gen 35:20; 47:30), *qeber* (Gen 23:4, 6, 9, 20; 50:5), or even *shachath* (Job 33:22). Other Greek words for a grave or sepulcher are “*mnēma*” (Mk 5:5), “*mnēmeion*” (Mt 8:28), and “*taphos*” (Mt 23:7, 9).

Job 10:21-22), having gates (Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps 9:13; Isa 38:10) and separate chambers (Pr 7:27) with uttermost parts (Isa 14:15; 32:23). Thus, all who died, the king along with the criminal, “the small and the great” (Job 3:13-19), are described as residing there, existing deep underneath the surface of the earth, some of them being held in lower parts of the netherworld than others (Deu 32:22; Ps 63:9; 86:16; Eze 31:14-18; 32:18-24).

Sheol is described as having an insatiable appetite, swallowing men before their natural time to die (Num 16:30, 33; Ps 55:15; Pr 1:12; 27:20; Isa 5:14). Once someone enters Sheol, he has no hope of adding to his essential being because his life on earth is over. Once dead, he cannot gain more of anything or earn additional rewards for his actions; he cannot have a new love, or hate a new enemy; he can no longer participate in any of the meaningful activities which he did while he was still alive above the ground (Eccl 9:5-6, 10). Moreover, returning from Sheol is not normally expected (1Sa 28:11-15; 2Sa 12:23; Job 7:9-10; 10:21), at least not until the Day of Judgment when “the heavens are no more” and “those who sleep in the dust . . . awake” (Job 14:10-12; Isa 26:19; Dan 12:2).

Interestingly, God’s authority includes Sheol: “Sheol and Abaddon [stand as servants] before the LORD” (Pr 15:11; Isa 7:11). Thus, God’s power reaches even into Sheol so that He is able to redeem the spirits of believers from death (1Sa 2:6; Ps 16:10; 49:16; Hos 13:14; Am 9:2).

The Chambers of the Dead

Ancient traditions and extra-biblical writings of the Jews concerning Sheol/Hades reveal many interesting ideas, some of which are not affirmed in the Scriptures. The best source of truth concerning the netherworld comes from biblical accounts, such as the story Jesus told about Lazarus and the rich man. The story of Lazarus can help to clear up some of the ambiguous information gleaned from various Old Testament passages about Sheol/Hades.

An important observation apparent from the story of Lazarus is that there are at least two chambers of the dead in Hades, separated from each other by a great, impassable gulf. The one chamber of Hades holding those who are believers was commonly called “Abraham’s Bosom.” The other chamber holding the unrighteous is described as a place of “torments in Hades.” Here is Luke’s record of the story of Lazarus:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

Then he cried and said, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” But Abraham said, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

Then he said, "I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment." Abraham said to him, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." But he said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead" (Lk 16:19-31).

Jesus reveals a lot of interesting information in this story. He indicates that the good side of Hades, here called "Abraham's Bosom," is visited by God's angels. Evidently, angels carry the spirits of just men to the good side of Hades. Clearly, since Lazarus is now being comforted in Abraham's Bosom, the good side of Hades is more pleasant than the bad side. No longer does Lazarus need to beg for food; in this chamber of the dead, his needs are being met.

The other side of Hades is a place of flames and torments. Apparently, there is no water nor other provisions available in this awful chamber of the dead. Thus the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus with a drop of water to cool his parched tongue. Here the rich man is in distress; he can no longer enjoy the good things he had during his lifetime; now he is deprived of even the most basic necessities, including water.

However, even if Lazarus were desiring to do so, he would be unable to show any mercy to the rich man; he is unable to cross the gulf in Hades which separates Abraham's Bosom from the place of torments.

The rich man does not protest the unfairness of his accommodations. In the end, he worries about the fate of his brothers. Apparently, he does not have any knowledge about their current state and fears that, when they die, they also will end up in the same awful place, being tormented like him. So, he begs that Lazarus would be sent to warn them. Abraham informs the rich man that his brothers have the Word of God given through the prophets. If they will not heed the prophets, neither will they heed the Word of God proclaimed by one who rises from the dead.

Apparently, in Hades the dead exist in a conscious state; they do not just sleep the time away. Also, the dead have cravings similar to the physical needs of the living. The righteous in the good chamber of Hades have water to drink (and logically, food to eat). Although these are not necessary for their existence, they are pleasantries provided to comfort the righteous. However, the other chamber of Hades, holding the unrighteous, is a place of deprivation, lacking even water. The torments do not consist only of thirst and flame, but the unrighteous also suffer anguish thinking of their loved ones coming to the same dreadful place.

However, these chambers holding the dead are not final destinations. Certainly, since believers were also held in Hades, Hades is not Hell. After Christ's death, He visits Hades and leads those who are believers out of this "dungeon" (Eph 4:8-9; 1Pe 3:18-19). On the other hand, unbelievers will remain in the dungeon named Hades until the end of the age, when they will stand before God, their Creator, and face their final judgment.

Paradise, temporarily located in Hades

A Bible student also must discern that Paradise is not equal to Heaven. Although Paradise is presently located in Heaven, it has not always been so. After certain monumental events in human history, the location of Paradise has been changed. Originally, Paradise was located in the Garden of Eden. After man sinned and righteous men began to die,

Paradise was relocated to the good side of Hades. After Christ's resurrection, Paradise was relocated to Heaven. Furthermore, the location of Paradise will come full circle, finally being relocated to the New Earth, where the New Jerusalem (the Kingdom of God) becomes the everlasting Paradise.

According to Jewish tradition, the concept of "Paradise" describes the dwelling place of righteous men. This is why the Garden of Eden was the original Paradise. Accordingly, the word "paradise" (παράδεισος) was used in the Septuagint to describe the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:8-3:24; 13:10; Isa 58:3; Eze 28:13; 31:8-9; Jl 2:3). After Adam's disobedience, which brought about man's fall, sinful humans were excluded from Paradise by the cherubim who guarded its entrance. At some point, the good side of Hades, later described as "Abraham's bosom," became the first temporary location of Paradise (Lk 16:22-23; cf. 23:43). The relocation of Paradise requires further explanation.

The Scriptures provide evidence that Paradise remained in Hades until Christ's resurrection from the dead. After Christ's resurrection, the righteous spirits residing in Hades were relocated to Heaven, and Heaven became the second temporary location of Paradise (Ac 2:27-31; 2Co 12:4). Remember the thief on the cross who finally believed in Christ? Christ told him, "Today, you shall be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). According to Christ's promise, when the thief died later that day, he met Jesus Christ in Paradise, specifically, in the part of Hades which held the spirits of the righteous called "Abraham's Bosom." Certainly, the thief did not meet Jesus Christ in Heaven on the day of His death, since Christ did not go back to Heaven until three days after His resurrection. Remember, on the day of His resurrection, Christ told Mary "I have not yet ascended to My Father [in Heaven]" (Jn 20:17).

Before His death, Jesus had prophesied that He would spend three days in Hades, "the heart of the earth" (Mt 12:40). While Christ was dead, He stayed in Hades until the first day of the week, the day of His resurrection. Paul records that Christ "first descended into the lowest parts of the earth," that is, to Hades, then He "ascended far above all the heavens" (Eph 4:9-10). Peter writes that, while Christ was in Hades, He preached unto the spirits in prison (1Pe 3:19).¹³ When Christ came up from Hades, He led the spirits of the righteous who had been held captive there out of their "captivity" (Ac 2:27; Eph 4:8; cf. Lk 4:18). After Christ's resurrection, some of these saints who were raised out of the grave walked about the city of Jerusalem, being seen by many before they were eventually taken up to Heaven (Mt 27:51-52). Ever since Christ's resurrection, whenever a righteous person dies, he does not go to Hades, but goes directly to be with Christ in Heaven, the current location of Paradise (2Co 5:8; 12:4).

In Prison until Judgment Day

So what has happened to the other chamber of Hades, where the wicked are in torments? The bad side of Hades still exists; the rich man from the story of Lazarus is still there. In fact, the rich man and all unbelievers will remain in the prison of Hades until the Day of Judgment, when they will stand before God to be judged.

¹³ Various false doctrines have arisen from the event of Christ's descent into "Hell" (instead of Hades). Some teach that Christ preached to lost spirits in Hell, and took those He converted with Him to Heaven. Luther taught that Christ went to Hell to destroy its power and conquer the Devil. Calvin taught that Christ had to go to Hell to complete the atonement for human sin which was begun on the cross.

The prophet Daniel looked forward to the resurrection of the dead:

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake,
Some to everlasting life,
Some to shame and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:2).

Jesus explained the nature of God's judgment of men. Those who believe in Christ, being children of God (Jn 1:12), will be resurrected to everlasting life. On the other hand, those who do not believe in Christ will be resurrected to everlasting condemnation:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation (Jn 5:24-29).

On the Day of Judgment for all unbelievers, the earth and its heavens will be dissolved, and every dead, unrighteous human who was not raised with believers in the first resurrection will stand before the Great White Throne of God for final judgment (Rev 20:11-12). For this judgment, the books recording the actions of men will be opened as evidence. Accordingly, men will be judged by their works, and because their works are sinful, each unbeliever will be found guilty (Rev 20:12). Then, these unbelievers will be judged by God's grace: the Book of Life will also be searched, and anyone whose name is not found written in the Book of Life will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:15). At the same time, anything which remains of Hades and Death will also be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:14).

By the way, after the Day of Judgment, after sin has been judged and death and Hades have been destroyed, God will then create the New Earth (Rev 21:1). Then God will permanently relocate Paradise, along with the Tree of Life, on the New Earth (Rev 2:7; 22:2). As God promised, He will swallow up death and wipe away the tears of His people (Isa 25:8: cf. Rev 21:4).

The Lake of Fire

The Lake of Fire should not be confused with Hell, nor Hades. Even though the concept of Hell most resembles the Lake of Fire, translations should maintain the logical distinction between them. While many theologians teach that when the wicked die they immediately go to Hell, the Lake of Fire is a different place because the Bible does not indicate that anyone, men nor angels, is currently in the Lake of Fire. At present, if the Lake of Fire already exists, it is empty because the Final Day of Judgment has not yet occurred.¹⁴

In Matthew, Jesus spoke about the Lake of Fire only once (Mt 25:41). The Lake of Fire is the place of everlasting punishment for all those who reject God's rule. However, a most important point, which is usually missed, is that the Lake of Fire is

¹⁴ The first occupants of the Lake of Fire will be sent there after the Tribulation (Rev 19:20).

prepared for Satan and his angels—it was not intended to be a place for humans (Mt 25:41). God desires that every human would live with Him on the New Earth, where He is the righteous and loving Ruler. Nonetheless, at the end of the age, all those who do not want God to rule over them will eventually have to go someplace; and there will be only one place to go away from God’s rule, the Lake of Fire.

God is the consummate gentleman: He offers forgiveness to anyone who will believe in Christ, but He does not force anyone to love Him or to become His child by believing the gospel. He is “longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2Pe 3:9). Therefore, God often draws individuals to Himself by giving them the good things of this life (Mt 5:45; Rom 2:4). In any case, God does not force His salvation upon a human being. However, an individual must choose to accept God’s Christ during this lifetime, or else he rejects “the will of God” (cf. Lk 7:30).

As previously mentioned, on Judgment Day, every human who has not accepted God’s forgiveness will stand before the Great White Throne of God for final judgment (Rev 20:11-12). The books recording the works of men will be opened. Every unbeliever will be judged according to his works, and all will be found to be sinners (Rev 20:12). Then, mercifully, God will have the Book of Life searched, in case one of their names is found written in the Book of Life; sadly, none of their names will be found, and thus all of them will be cast into the Lake of Fire and experience the “Second Death” (Rev 20:14-15).

On Judgment Day, even the elements of the universe will rise up and bear witness against those who have rejected the gospel of Christ. Jesus said that the dust from the feet of the messengers of the gospel will protest against those who have rejected Christ and His Kingdom. Also in that Day, those who have rejected Christ’s words will be held more accountable than the residents destroyed in the judgment of Sodom (Lk 10:10-12). Thus, the greater the sin, the greater the punishment.

When Jesus taught about this “everlasting fire,” called the Lake of Fire, He clarified that it is “prepared for the Devil and his angels” (Mt 25:41). The Greek word translated “prepared” is the same word that John the Baptist used when he heralded the coming of the Messiah and His Kingdom, saying, “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4). Apparently, the Lake of Fire will be “prepared” to become the kingdom of Satan.

Certainly, the Lake of Fire is not the same place as Hades. Before Christ’s resurrection, both the believer and the unbeliever went to Hades after they died. The Lake of Fire is unlike Hades in that, when unbelievers are judged, only unbelievers will be condemned and cast into the Lake of Fire. Also, the Lake of Fire is larger than Hades; this fact is evident because, on Judgment Day, Death and Hades will be cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:14). Furthermore, the Lake of Fire is a permanent, everlasting place, whereas Hades is described as a dungeon which temporarily holds its prisoners captive until the Day of Judgment. Finally, the Lake of Fire is “prepared” to be a kingdom for Satan; once there, inhabitants are permanently separated from God. Therefore, those who experience the “second death” will have their “share” (inheritance) in the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:14; 21:8).

Gehenna

Before discussing the place called “Gehenna,” everyone should understand that every believer will live someplace on the New Earth; certainly, no believer will ever live in the Lake of Fire. In any case, Gehenna is a literal place outside the walls of Jerusalem. The Greek word “Gehenna” is a compound of the phrase “valley [*Ge*] of Hinnom [*Henna*]” (Neh 11:30). When Jesus spoke about Gehenna, He was referring to the valley outside the southern wall of Jerusalem where city residents regularly burned their trash.¹⁵

History and Warnings in the Old Testament

After Joshua’s conquest of the Promised Land, this valley to the south of Jerusalem became the inheritance of the sons of Hinnom (Jos 15:8; 18:16). Later, the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom became a place where idolatry was practiced and where children were sacrificed (“passed through the fire”) to the god Molech (2Ki 23:10; cf. 1Ki 11:7; Jer 32:35). Eventually, a high place named Tophet was built in the Valley of Hinnom, and some of the kings of Judah sacrificed their children there (2Ch 28:3; 33:6; Jer 7:31-32). God directed Jeremiah to prophecy against Judah’s kings and the inhabitants of Jerusalem on account of their idolatry to Molech and Baal at Tophet in the Valley of Hinnom:

“Behold, I will bring such a catastrophe on this place, that whoever hears of it, his ears will tingle. Because they have forsaken Me and made this an alien place, because they have burned incense in it to other gods whom neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known, and have filled this place with the blood of the innocents (they have also built the high places of Baal, to burn their sons with fire for burnt offerings to Baal, which I did not command or speak, nor did it come into My mind), therefore behold, the days are coming,” says the Lord, “that this place shall no more be called Tophet or the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter. . . .”

“Even so I will break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter’s vessel, which cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury them in Tophet till there is no place to bury. Thus I will do to this place,” says the Lord, “and to its inhabitants, and make this city like Tophet. And the houses of Jerusalem and the houses of the kings of Judah shall be defiled like the place of Tophet, because of all the houses on whose roofs they have burned incense to all the host of heaven, and poured out drink offerings to other gods” (Jer 19:3-13).

Thus, the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) will one day be known as the “Valley of Slaughter,” when all the idolaters are judged, executed, and buried there until there is no more room for their bodies.

Years before Jeremiah, when Isaiah prophesied about God’s re-creation of the earth, Isaiah also prophesied against idolaters, warning them that outside of Jerusalem [Gehenna] would become a monument to their abomination. In the final chapters of Isaiah, God promises to “create new heavens and a new earth; so that the former shall not be remembered or even come to mind” (Isa 65:17; cf. 66:22). God also promises to “create Jerusalem as a rejoicing and her people as a joy. . . . [so that] the voice of weeping shall no longer be heard in her, nor the voice of crying” (Isa 65:18-19).

However, God warns that, outside the walls of Jerusalem, there will be a monument made of the bodies of idolaters. And so, whenever the worshippers from all

¹⁵ Jesus spoke of Gehenna in Mt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15; 23:33; Mk 9:43, 45, 47; Lk 12:5.

the nations bring their offerings to Jerusalem, they will look at this horrible monument and see the idolaters who transgressed God's Law:

And they shall go forth and look
Upon the corpses of the men
Who have transgressed against Me.
For their worm does not die,
And their fire is not quenched.
They shall be an abhorrence to all flesh (Isa 66:24).

How can one be certain that, in this passage in Isaiah, God is referring to Gehenna? Three times, Jesus quoted this passage from Isaiah when He warned His disciples about Gehenna:

Where "their worm does not die,
And the fire is not quenched" (Mk 9:44, 46, 48).

Warnings in the New Testament

Why did Christ use Gehenna to illustrate His warnings to His disciples? First of all, Gehenna was a literal place located outside of Jerusalem, where worthless things were burned up in a messy, smelly fire which never stopped burning. If you look at a detailed map depicting the ancient walls of Jerusalem, you will see the Valley of Hinnom outside the "Dung/Refuse Gate" of the southern wall.

At least since the reign of King Josiah, refuse has been carried out of the city through the Dung Gate to the garbage heap located in Gehenna (Neh 2:13; 3:13-14).¹⁶ After King Josiah destroyed the places of idolatry from the Valley of Hinnom (2Ki 23:10-14; 2Ch 34:3-5), this valley became Jerusalem's garbage dump, with a haphazard fire burning there continually.¹⁷ Gehenna continued to exist as a garbage dump even during the lifetime of Christ.

Second, Gehenna helps to illustrate the judgment of worthless things. In the Scriptures, the words referring to "dung" and "dunghill" become figurative expressions describing worthless things, as well as worthless people who are brought down in judgment.¹⁸ When Christ warned His disciples about Gehenna, they understood that He was referring to the garbage dump outside Jerusalem, where everyone carried worthless things to be burned up in a fire which never stopped burning. Through the well-known illustration of Gehenna, Jesus was teaching them about the future judgment of believers. Jesus taught that those disciples who serve Him will receive His rewards; but those disciples who have wasted opportunities, have stumbled into sin, or have caused others to stumble will be cast out to Gehenna with all the other worthless things (Mk 9:41-42).

Every believer will experience the consuming fire of God's presence (Heb 12:29), and everyone will be judged according to his works (Rom 2:6; 1Co 3:9-15). If a believer does not act as a servant of God, he is a servant of sin (Jn 8:34; Rom 6:16). At the

¹⁶ Based on God's prophecy of judgment, the Dung gate on the southern wall of Jerusalem, leading to the Valley of Hinnom, was also called the Potsherd Gate (Jer 19:2).

¹⁷ "Dung Gate," *The Jerusalem Post* (available on the internet at <https://www.jpost.com/travel/around-israel/sites-and-insights-gates-of-jerusalem>).

¹⁸ The words referring to "dung" describe worthless things (Lk 14:35; Php 3:8) and judgment (1Ki 14:10; 2Ki 9:37; Ezr 6:11; Job 20:7; Ps 83:10; Isa 25:10; Jer 8:2; 9:22; 16:4; 25:33; Lam 4:5; Dan 2:5; 3:29; Zep 1:17; Mal 2:3).

believers' judgment, if a believer has not served God well, he will have all his worthless works burned up and lose his rewards; but even so, "he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire" (1Co 3:15).

Third, Gehenna is more than just a place of judgment; it is the inheritance of worthless disciples. Therefore, Jesus said to His disciples, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to Gehenna, into the fire that shall never be quenched" (Mk 9:43). Jesus then repeated a similar warning two more times, recommending that it would be better to lose a foot or an eye rather than to be sent to live in Gehenna (Mk 9:45, 47; cf. Mt 5:27-30).

[Gehenna:] Where their worm does not die,
And the fire is not quenched (Mk 9:44, 46, 48).

Certainly, Jesus was not teaching that an unbeliever should cut off his hand to be justified by faith and escape the Lake of Fire. Neither was He teaching that a believer must cut off his hand which causes him to sin or lose God's gift of everlasting life and no longer be a child of God. No, the context of Christ's discussion with His disciples concerns the matter of rewards (who would be "great" or "first," Mk 9:34-35) and punishment (for causing a little one to stumble, Mk 9:42). In light of the context, Christ is warning His disciples that it is better for one to enter into the Kingdom of God and receive his rewards with only one hand intact, than to have both hands intact, be disqualified, and not enter the Kingdom of God at all because of living sinfully.

In His final statements in this passage, Christ informs His disciples that "everyone will be seasoned with fire and every sacrifice will be seasoned with salt" (Mk 9:49). "Everyone" includes His disciples who are believers. God's judgment will come upon all men, but it will begin with believers: "For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God" (1Pe 4:17; cf. 1Co 3:9-15).

Christ's judgment of believers is sometimes called the Bema Seat Judgment. The reality of this judgment is why Christ taught His disciples so often about rewards and warned them about Gehenna. Once someone becomes a child of God, he is an heir of the Kingdom of God and is expected to become a profitable servant and produce good fruit. The profitable servant will experience the joy of his Lord and Master and receive many generous rewards for his faithful service. However, if he does not become a profitable servant and produce good fruit, his judgment by Christ will bring devastation.

God's servants who produce worthless works will lose their rewards, and their works will be burned like the worthless trash burnt in a fire, like the fire of Gehenna. Worthless believers will be treated like the Jewish idolaters whom Josiah had judged in the Valley of Gehenna. Instead of walking in the Spirit and serving God, these idolatrous believers have served their own bellies (Rom 16:18). Thus, walking in the flesh and pursuing worldly passions and desires, these believers become worthless servants. If they have produced any fruit at all, it likely is small or corrupt fruit. Paul warns that a believer who has walked in the flesh will not inherit the Kingdom of God (Gal 5:19-21, 24). Paul admonishes Timothy:

Be diligent to present yourself to God as one approved,
a workman who does not need to be ashamed
and who correctly handles the word of truth (2Ti 2:15).

Believers judged to be unapproved and unprofitable servants will be cast outside into the darkness. After they realize that they have traded their inheritance in the Kingdom of God for an inheritance in Gehenna, disobedient believers will experience great anguish.

Therefore, in Christ's warnings, Gehenna is a literal garbage dump outside the city walls. Jesus relates the fire of Gehenna to a believer's worthless works which will be burned up in a fire. When Christ refers to Gehenna, He is warning believers who transgress God's will that, if they are judged to be worthless servants, then they will be thrown outside the Kingdom of God, like trash, and will not have an inheritance inside its walls. After being cast outside into the darkness, when these unprofitable servants come to understand all that they have lost, they will suffer great anguish, described as "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 8:12; cf. 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Lk 13:28).

On the other hand, at Christ's judgment of believers, those who have been good servants of Christ, who have walked in the Spirit and produced good fruit (Rom 6:22; Gal 5:16-18, 22-25), Christ will reward and welcome to their inheritance in the Kingdom of God (2Pe 1:11).

Exhortations to Overcome

Today, many believers are overcome by worldly things, living to please themselves and their desires. When these believers are judged by Christ, their worthless deeds will be burned up with fire. Repeatedly, believers are admonished to overcome the world. In fact, Jesus has promised special blessings for those who overcome.

First of all, remember that the Bible teaches that when someone believes in Christ, he is justified by faith and becomes a child of God. Based on the fact that one has become a child of God, he begins his spiritual life in a new position: being in Christ and having overcome the world (1Jn 2:12-15; 4:4; 5:4-5). However, a believer must abide in Christ to maintain his position as an overcomer. "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1Jn 2:15). A believer who loves the things of this world is no longer abiding in Christ. Jesus warned that those disciples who stop abiding in Him will become withered, worthless branches, bearing no fruit, and eventually they will be cut off and burned outside the gate (Jn 15:1-8).

Secondly, to those believers who do overcome this world and its lusts, Jesus has made these special promises to be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God:

To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (Rev 2:7).

He who overcomes shall not be hurt by the second death (Rev 2:11).

To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it (Rev 2:17).

He who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations (Rev 2:26).

He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels (Rev 3:5).

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go out no more. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which comes down out of heaven from My God. And I will write on him My new name (Rev 3:12).

To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Rev 3:21).

Only those believers who, like Christ, overcome the world and its lusts will enjoy these privileges in the Kingdom of God.

Summation

Although these specific places involving imprisonment, fire, and judgment are described in the Bible, none of these are the theological construct commonly called “Hell.” Christ provided an excellent description of Hades in the story of Lazarus. In this story, two chambers of dead are portrayed: the chamber where the spirits of the righteous were comforted and the other chamber where the unrighteous experience torments. Not once does any mention of Hades refer to the imaginary place called “Hell,” because “Hell” is a theological invention which, in reality, does not exist. In the Gospel records, Christ referred to the Lake of Fire one time, describing the judgment of unbelievers (Mt 25:41). On the other hand, whenever the fire of Gehenna is mentioned, it is in the context of the judgment of Christ’s disciples and their works as His servants. The specific location of Gehenna and its fire can be identified, being located outside the southern wall of Jerusalem. Thus, the judgment of worthless servants is described as happening “outside” the city, where their worthless works will be burned with the other trash in the fire of Gehenna.

As always, credibility is an important issue. Colin J. Smith, a great teacher and friend, encouraged, “we need to do more than merely show people truths from the Bible. We should show the logical development of theology: how theology begins in Scripture, how it hangs together with Scripture, and how it influences the way we do things.”¹⁹ Certainly, everything we teach must begin with the truth revealed in the Bible. In this case, when a concept or doctrine is not found in the Scriptures, one must not teach it as truth and definitely should not build other theology upon it. The Scriptures reveal everything man needs to know about God and His salvation. To add anything to God’s Word is foolish and can undermine one’s ministry as God’s messenger; like a house built on unstable sand instead of on the rock, its fall will be great.

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter:

Fear God and keep His commandments,
For this is man’s all.
For God will bring every work into judgment,
Including every secret thing,
Whether good or evil (Ecc 12:13-14).

¹⁹ Colin Smith, “Where’s the ‘C’ in the Baptist Distinctives?” (*Baptist Bulletin*, June 2008), available online at <http://baptistbulletin.org/?p=1155>.