

# IS THERE A HELL FIRE?

*If hell does exist, where is it – and can those in hell leave it at the time of the resurrection – or are they confined eternally to hell, so that they shall be unable to take part in the resurrection?*

by Herbert W. Armstrong (1892-1986)

**W**HAT did Jesus mean when he said in John 5:28-29: "... the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth ... those who have done evil, to the RESURRECTION OF JUDGMENT" (RSV).

If "those who have done EVIL" – the UNSaved – shall come forth in the RESURRECTION of JUDGMENT, what is the connection between that resurrection of the UNSaved, and their being in an eternal hellfire?

It's about time we took this question out of hiding, and took a good look at it! What is the TRUTH?

## **Common Idea of Hell**

First, what is the generally accepted common belief in our Western world about hell? Here's the terse and brief summation of this popular belief, which I quote from the Encyclopedia Americana:

"... As generally understood, hell is the abode of evil spirits; the infernal regions ... whither lost and condemned souls go after death to suffer indescribable torments and eternal punishment .... Some have thought of it as the place created by the Deity, where He punishes with inconceivable severity, and through all eternity, the souls of those who through unbelief or through the worship of false gods have angered Him. It is the place of divine revenge, untempered, never ending."

Now where, and how, did this popular belief about hell originate? The Encyclopedia Americana states further: "The main features of hell as conceived by Hindu, Persian, Egyptian, Grecian and Christian theologians are essentially the same." The Western religious leaders from Roman times through the Middle Ages borrowed the doctrine of eternal torture from the pagan philosophers. Certain writers of the Middle Ages had such tremendous influence on the Christian-professing world, that their writings and teachings came to be generally accepted and believed, until it became the doctrine of the Christian-professing world. Among these influential writers were Augustine and Dante Alighieri.

Some years ago, I ran across a book in a large library, titled Dante, and His Inferno. It summed up the history of the Christian-professing doctrine of hell. This factual history is rather amazing! Dante lived A.D. 1265 to 1321. Dante, remember, wrote a tremendously popular book, titled Divine Comedy, in three parts – "Hell," "Purgatory" and "Paradise."

### **From the Pagans**

Now I quote from the aforementioned book of history: "Of all poets of modern times, Dante Alighieri was, perhaps, the greatest educator. He possibly had a greater influence on the course of civilization than any other man since his day .... He wrote, in incomprehensible verse, an imaginative and lurid account of a dismal hell – a long poem containing certain phrases which have caught the attention of the world, such as, 'all hope abandon ... ye, who enter here!' This had a tremendous impression and influence on the popular Christian thought and teaching. His Inferno was based on Virgil and Plato."

Dante is reported to have been so fascinated and enraptured by the ideas and philosophies of Plato and Virgil, pagan philosophers, that he believed they were divinely inspired. Here is an article on Virgil, from the Americana: "Virgil, pagan Roman poet, 70-19 B.C., belonged to the national school of pagan Roman thought, influenced by the Greek writers. Christians of the Middle Ages, including Dante, believed he had received some measure of divine inspiration."

Plato was a pagan Greek philosopher, born in Athens, 427 B.C., a student of Socrates. He wrote the famous book *Phaedo*, on the immortality of the soul, and this book is the real origin of the modern belief in the immortality of the soul.

There is the general statement of the popular belief about hell, and where that belief came from – actually from the imaginations of pagans who knew not God!

### **What About the Millions of Heathen?**

In spite of missionaries from the West, actually more than half of all the people on this earth have never so much as heard the only name by which men may be saved – the name of Jesus Christ! Now is there some other way by which men may be saved? The Bible says there is not!

That means that thousands of millions of people on this earth have lived, and DIED, without ever having known anything about Christian salvation – without SAVING KNOWLEDGE– never having heard the ONLY name by which men may be saved! Now think what that means! IF all unsaved go immediately to hell at death – the hell commonly believed in – then more than HALF of the people who have lived on this earth have been consigned there – and they are there, now, without ever having been given so much as a CHANCE to escape it!

Ask yourselves candidly, do you believe THAT is the plan by which an all-wise, all-merciful, loving GOD is working out his purpose here below?

Now what is the TRUTH?

We face this alternative: Either the Holy Bible is the inspired WORD OF GOD, BY WHICH THE CREATOR reveals the TRUTH on the subject, or else we must fling up our hands and confess WE JUST DON'T KNOW – we are ignorant on the question – because no one has ever COME BACK from such an ever-burning hell to tell us about it,

and SCIENCE knows nothing about it. We must believe what the BIBLE says, or we can believe nothing, if we are rational and honest!

### **Hell Fire in the Bible**

Jesus said, in the passage most often quoted: "And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. For every one shall be salted with fire, and every sacrifice shall be salted with salt" (Mark 9:47-49).

Now exactly what is this hell fire? This word "hell" is an English word. Mark wrote, originally, in the Greek language. The word originally inspired, which Mark actually wrote, was the Greek word *geenna*, which certainly does refer to FIRE.

But in most passages in the New Testament where the English word hell is found in our English translations, the original Greek word was a different word, *hades* – which does NOT refer to FIRE at all, but has an altogether different meaning.

### **Incorrectly Translated "Hell"**

Remember we merely read a translation of the Bible from its original languages. A leading Bible dictionary, called *A Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by James Hastings, says this:

"In our Authorized Version the word 'hell' is unfortunately used as the rendering of three distinct words, with different meanings. It represents, (1) the 'sheol' of the Hebrew Old Testament, and the 'hades' of ... the New Testament .... It is now an entirely misleading rendering, especially in the New Testament passages. The English revisers, therefore, have substituted the original Greek word 'hades' for 'hell' in the New Testament. In the American revision the word 'hell' is entirely discarded in this connection .... The word 'hell' is translated (2) as the equivalent of the Greek word *tartaros*, (2 Peter 2:4; compare with Jude 6), and, (3) as the equivalent of the Greek word '*geenna*.' "

The original Hebrew word *sheol* and the Greek *hades* mean the same – the GRAVE, and these original words are so translated in many places. Hell is an old English word, and 370 years ago, when the Authorized Version was translated, the people of England commonly talked about putting their potatoes in HELL for the winter – a good way of preserving potatoes – for the word then meant merely a hole in the ground that was covered up – a dark and silent place – a GRAVE.

The Greek word *tartaros* occurs only once in the New Testament and does not refer to a place for humans, but the place designed for fallen angels. Its meaning, translated into English, is "darkness of the material universe," or "dark abyss" or "prison." (See 2 Peter 3:20.)

And now the Greek word *geenna*. According to Hastings Dictionary: "Gehenna: the word occurs twelve times in the New Testament. This term '*gehenna*' represents 'the Valley of Hinnom' (Nehemiah 11:30, 2 Kings 23:10, etc.). The place was ... a deep narrow gorge in

the vicinity of Jerusalem, understood to be on the south side. It is repeatedly mentioned in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 19:6, etc.). It became an object of horror to the Jews, and is said to have been made the receptacle for bones, the bodies of beasts and criminals, refuse and all unclean things. The terrible associations of the place . . . the fires said to have been kept burning in it in order to consume the foul and corrupt objects that were thrown into it, made it a natural and unmistakable symbol of dire evil ... ABSOLUTE RUIN. So it came to designate the place of future punishment."

### **Hell – a Place of Destruction**

Gehenna was a place of DESTRUCTION and DEATH – not a place of living torture! Jesus was talking to Jews who understood all about this Gehenna or Valley of Hinnom. Utter DESTRUCTION by fire was complete. NOTHING was left, but ashes!

Every text in the Bible translated from this Greek word gehenna means complete destruction – not living torture – NOT eternal LIFE in torment! THE Bible says, in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death" – not ETERNAL LIFE in torture. The PUNISHMENT revealed in the BIBLE is DEATH – the cessation of life. Eternal life is the GIFT OF GOD!

Then WHY have we been believing that PUNISHMENT is LIFE in fire? And WHY have we been believing we already have eternal life and don't NEED to come to God through Christ to receive it as HIS GIFT?

The PUNISHMENT is DEATH. It is the second death, from which there shall be no resurrection! The PUNISHMENT is for ETERNITY – DEATH for eternity – ETERNAL punishment – but nowhere does THE BIBLE say anything about the PAGAN teaching of eternal punish-ING. It's eternal punishMENT, not eternal punishING!

When Jesus spoke of being cast into "gehenna fire," he was using this expression as an illustration of the lake of fire, which the Bible BIBLE reveals is to be the place PLACE of this final punishment – this second death. He referred to Revelation 20:14: "And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."

That fire will be much hotter than Dante's imaginary hell!

### **What Happens to "Hell"?**

Do people go at death to the fictitious hell of Dante's imagination to be tortured by flames of fire forever – and then are they to be brought out, to go into a judgment, to see if God had made a mistake in having punished them so long in this "hell"?

Notice Revelation 20:13-15: "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire." The lake of fire which Jesus referred to is a place of death, not of eternal life – the second death – eternal punishment!

Notice what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28: "... fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in [GEHENNA]." Here in plain language Jesus said the soul could be destroyed – and that it would be destroyed in this gehenna that has been falsely translated by the English word hell! Gehenna is a place of destruction!

Again Jesus used this word gehenna as quoted in Matthew 23:33: "Ye serpents," he said to the Pharisees, "... how can ye escape the damnation of [gehenna]?" – the second death – eternal punishment!

The ancient rebellious cities Sodom and Gomorrah suffered, as we read in Jude 7, the vengeance of eternal fire. But they are not still burning. They were burned up forever – eternal destruction!

Now what happens in this "hell" – derived from the Greek word geenna? Let the Holy Word of GOD answer: "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch. But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall. And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 4:1-3).

### **God Is Love – and Justice!**

God is a God of love – or mercy, as well as a god of absolute justice! If he were the vain, angry, unjust god pictured by the pagans who invented this popular conception of heaven and hell, then, according to the common belief of the illustration of Lazarus and the Rich Man, saved mothers up in heaven are hearing the shrieks, seeing the indescribable agony, writhing, of their own lost children down in hell – actually able to carry on a conversation with them – yet unable to help them.

Would that be the heavenly bliss it is generally represented? Psalm 37 ought to make plain to us this matter of heaven and hell. Notice!

"For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the Lord, they shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. But the wicked shall perish, and the enemies of the Lord shall be as the fat of lambs: they shall consume; into smoke shall they consume away. For such as be blessed of him shall inherit the earth; and they that be cursed of him shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever" (Ps. 37:9-12, 20, 22, 29).

And now, Psalm 104:35: "Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more."

And now, Isaiah 66:24: "And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh."

### **Never to Be Quenched?**

"... Neither shall their fire be quenched." Does that mean burning forever and never burning up? Try this test: Put a piece of paper in a pan. Light it with a match. Now, don't quench that fire! Don't put it out – for that's what "quench" means. Very soon the paper will burn up. Then put it down on the floor and step on it! Now it's merely ashes under the sole of your feet – precisely as the Bible plainly says the wicked shall be! In Jeremiah 17:27, God warned the Jews that Jerusalem would be burned, and the fire would not be quenched – unless they repented. In Jeremiah 52:13, you read the account of the burning of Jerusalem. That fire was not quenched! It is not still burning!

The Bible teaches the resurrection of all who die. The apostle Paul said his hope was the hope of the resurrection! As the resurrection is true doctrine, then the pagan myth of an eternal torture, beginning at death, is as deceptive as Satan himself! If all UNSaved – even all who never heard the only name Jesus Christ – are roasting, screaming, in such a hell, and can never get out, how can there be a resurrection!

Thank God! – there is to be a resurrection to judgment, as well as a resurrection to eternal life of the dead in Christ! Yes, thank God, he so loved the world – we need not perish, but through Christ we may have everlasting life!

---

### **Disclaimer**

Through this website you are able to link to other websites which are not under the control of the Bible Fund. Also, we may refer to other sources on the Web. The inclusion of any link does not necessarily imply a recommendation or endorsement of the views expressed within those sites.

Our policy is based on the principle given by Jesus Christ when He said to His disciples: "And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand.... freely ye have received, freely give." (Matthew 10:7-8.) Readers may download articles from the Bible Fund website. When doing so, we request that readers using our articles elsewhere, please include the name, address and disclaimer seen at the end of our articles.

We also honor the principle mentioned by Christ Himself: "For he that is not against us is on our part" (Mark 9:40).

Please respect our policy of not selling any of the material placed on our website.

If anyone notices the use of our material on other sites, he/she may check its fidelity to the original by comparing with the material on our website.

---

---

A Bible Fund publication,  
distributed free of charge

[Contact page link](#)

*Send your literature requests to:*

The Bible Fund  
P.O. Box 547  
Altadena, CA 91003  
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA