
THE FATE OF THE WICKED

By Kenneth N Higgs

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil." (2 Cor 5:10)

"For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil." (Ecc 12:14)

"And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment" (Heb 9:27)

The Bible makes it clear that, after death, each person is destined to a conscious "afterlife" in which they will personally experience divine judgement on their earthly life.

1. MAN'S IMMORTAL SOUL ⁱ

Man is a spiritual being, comprising both body and soul. The human soul (spirit) is "immortal": it comes from the breath of God and cannot be destroyed:

"then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." (Gen 2:7)

Emily H. Bancroft explains that: "Unending existence is an inescapable part of man's heritage as a creature made after the image and likeness of God. He is indestructible. He cannot be annihilated." ⁱⁱ When we die:

"the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecc 12:7)

Louis Berkhof wrote: "Physical death is the separation of body and soul and marks the end of our present physical existence." ⁱⁱⁱ The body then decays but our soul continues to exist as an individual, conscious being. "The soul as a spiritual entity is not composed of various parts, and is therefore incapable of division or dissolution. Consequently, the decomposition of the body does not carry with it the destruction of the soul. Even when the former perishes, the latter remains intact." ^{iv} It returns to God who gave it.

John Calvin noted that: "the soul of man is not a vanishing breath as some people foolishly suggest, but ... it is an essential spirit, and survives death." ^v

Various Bible passages allude to Man's continuing existence after death. For example, when Stephen was stoned to death by a mob, he cried out to Jesus:

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." (Acts 7:59)

Clearly he believed that Jesus would receive his spirit (soul) after death.

When King David's and Bathsheba's first son died from sickness, David declared:

"... Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (2 Samuel 12:23)

Clearly he believed that his dead son continued to exist and that he would see his son again in the afterlife.

When Jesus was crucified, two criminals were crucified beside him. One mocked Jesus, but the other appealed to Jesus:

"And he (the thief) said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' And he (Jesus) said to him, 'Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:42,43)

Blanchard notes: "The promise Jesus made to the dying thief rules out the idea that the soul becomes unconscious at death... the penitent, believing thief was to be in God's blissful presence the moment crucifixion had done its deadly work".^{vi}

2. AFTERLIFE WHERE?

The Bible refers to three "places" of the afterlife -- Sheol, Hades and Gehenna.

SHEOL

"Sheol" is a Hebrew word for "hell", described in the OT as a place of punishment for those who rebel and disobey God, especially in the lower depths.^{vii}

The Bible declares that the wicked "go down to Sheol" (Job 21:13)... "Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol" (Psa 49:14)... their "steps follow the path to Sheol" (Prov 5:5).

"Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters; so does Sheol those who have sinned." (Job 24:19)

B. B. Warfield notes that "Israel from the beginning of its recorded history cherished the most settled conviction of the persistence of the soul in life after death The body is laid in the grave and the soul departs to Sheol."^{viii}

Dr. Robert A. Morey notes that, in Isaiah's prophecy, the King of Babylon is "cast out" of his grave and thrown into Sheol, which is described as a place of punishment"^{ix} :

"Sheol beneath is stirred up to meet you when you come; ... Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, the sound of your harps; maggots are laid as a bed beneath you, and worms are your covers." (Isa 14:9,11)

Sheol is the opposite of heaven:

"If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" (Psalm 139:8)

Morey notes that "Kever (the grave) is the fate of the body, while Sheol is the fate of the soul". He lists 20 contrasts between the grave and Sheol^x. They are not equivalent. He also notes that the dead in Sheol are called "rephaim" (ghosts of the dead, shades, spirits):

"And he hath not known that Rephaim are there, In deep places of Sheol her invited ones!" (Prov 9:18 YLT)

"Sheol beneath hath been troubled at thee, To meet thy coming in, It is waking up for thee Rephaim" (Isa 14:9 YLT)

He notes that: "From the meaning of rephaim, it is clear that when the body dies, man enters a new kind of existence and experience. He now exists as a spirit creature and experiences what angels and other disincarnate spirits experience. ... once man dies, he too becomes a disembodied supradimensional energy being and is capable of thought and speech without the need of a body."

Sheol is a place of never-ending pain and torment:

"The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish." (Psa 116:3)

"The dead are in deep anguish, those beneath the waters and all that live in them." (Job 26:5 NIV)

Morey points out: "It is obvious that nonexistence can hardly experience anger, distress, or pain."^{xi}

HADES (GK: ᾍδης)

"Hades" is a Greek word defined as: "the nether world, the realm of the dead, common receptacle of disembodied spirits". It is equivalent to Sheol in 64 of 71 Septuagint ^{xii} passages. Morey notes that it never refers to the "grave" and "not once does it mean nonexistence or unconsciousness".^{xiii}

He explains that: "Hades does not mean death, because the Greek word *thanatos* is the word for death in the New Testament (NT). ... Hades is not the grave, because the Greek word *mnemea* is the word for grave in the NT." ... 'Hades is not "hell," i.e., the place of final punishment for the wicked, because the Greek word *Gehenna* is the word for "hell" in the NT.' And, of course, 'Hades is not "heaven," ...because the Greek word *ouranos* is the word for heaven in the NT.'

Morey observes that: "Before Jesus was raised from the dead, the apostles assumed that everyone went to Sheol or Hades. This Hades had two sections, one for the righteous and one for the wicked." ... "the wicked experience torment and the righteous bliss".^{xiv} This was a rabbinic concept derived from Sheol. Jesus used this concept in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus:

"So it was that the beggar (Lazarus) 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." (Luke 16:22,23 NKJV)

Following the Day of Pentecost, the apostles gained a clearer understanding of death and the afterlife. Morey explains that: "After Christ's resurrection, the NT pictures believers after death as entering heaven to be with Christ (Phil. 1:23), which is far better than Hades. They are present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8), worshiping with the angelic hosts of heaven (Heb.12:22, 23) at the altar of God (Rev. 6:9-11)."

GEHENNA (GK: γέεννα)

Morey notes that 'Gehenna... is found twelve times in the NT and is correctly translated each time by the KJV as "hell."' (ibid p14) ... It 'is the Greek equivalent for "the valley of Hinnom" Josh. 15:8; 18:16; Neh. 11:30). It thus originally referred to the Valley of Hinnom, which was just outside the city of Jerusalem. ... the place where idolatrous Jews gave human sacrifices to pagan deities (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6). Because of these horrible idolatrous practices, the Valley of Hinnom was hated and considered "unclean" by pious Jews. In Christ's day, this hatred of the Valley of Hinnom caused the valley to become the town dump where all the garbage of Jerusalem could be thrown. Unclean corpses as well as normal garbage were thrown into it. Because garbage was constantly being thrown into the valley, the fires never stopped burning and the worms never stopped eating.'^{xv}

"Gehenna came to be understood as the final, eternal garbage dump where all idolaters would be thrown after the resurrection. The wicked would suffer in Gehenna forever because the fires would never stop burning them and the worms would never stop gnawing them. ... Alfred Edersheim, a noted Hebrew Christian, concluded that Gehenna was understood in Christ's time to refer to the place of eternal, conscious punishment for the wicked after the resurrection."^{xvi}

3 ETERNAL PUNISHMENT

Jesus warned the wicked of: "the judgment of the gehenna" (Matt 23:33 YLT), ie: punishment in the afterlife which would be worse than physical death:

"And be not afraid of those killing the body, and are not able to kill the soul, but fear rather Him who is able both soul and body to destroy in gehenna (Gk: ἀπολέσαι ἐν γέεννῃ)." (Matthew 10:28 YLT)

NB: "ἀπολέσαι" (apolesai) comes from the Greek word "ἀπόλλυμι" (apollumi). Thayer's Greek Lexicon defines it: "to devote or give over to eternal misery" (in this verse). It does not mean "to annihilate" or "to pass into non-existence".

WORMS AND FIRE

Isaiah describes the suffering of the wicked in terms of "worms" and "fire":

"And they shall go out and look on the dead bodies of the men who have rebelled against me. For their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh." (Isaiah 66:24)

Morey ^{xvii} notes that, in rabbinic teaching, "gnawing worms" indicated conscious torment. Jesus drew on this rabbinic phraseology in his description of eternal, conscious punishment in Gehenna:

"It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell (Gk: γένναν), into the fire that shall never be quenched — where 'Their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.'" (Mark 9:43,44 NKJV cf: 45-48; Matt 5:29,30; 18:8,9)

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire (Gk: τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον) prepared for the devil and his angels.' ... "And these will go away into eternal punishment (Gk: κόλασιν αἰώνιον), but the righteous into eternal life (Gk: ζωὴν αἰώνιον)." (Matt 25:41,46)

NB: Jesus used the same adjective "αἰώνιον" (aionion) to describe both eternal life and eternal punishment.

Augustine wrote: "To say that life eternal shall be endless [but that] punishment eternal shall come to an end is the height of absurdity" ^{xviii}. J.C.Ryle wrote: "the eternity of God, and heaven and hell, all stand on the same foundation. As surely as God is eternal, so surely is heaven an endless day without night, and hell an endless night without day." ^{xix}

The rubbish dump outside Jerusalem is a metaphor, which Jesus used to depict and describe the terrors of eternal punishment of sinners in hell.

Another metaphor is "fire", which is often used in apostolic writings to depict the pain of hell:

"in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus." (2 Thes 1:8)

"just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire (Gk: πυρὸς αἰωνίου)." (Jude 7)

"And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (Rev 14:11 cf: 19:3)

DARKNESS AND SEPARATION FROM GOD

John's gospel laments that:

"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil." (John 3:19)

It is not surprising then that, in the afterlife, evil men will receive the "darkness" they loved -- banished forever to the terror and loneliness of hell:

"And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." (Matt 25:30 cf: 8:12; 13:42,50; 22:13; 24:51; Luk 13:28)

"These are wells without water, clouds carried by a tempest, for whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever." (2 Pet 2:17 NKJV cf: Jude 13)

Their fate is eternal separation from the life-giving force and love and mercy of God:

"They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction (Gk: *ἄλεθρον αἰώνιον*), away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might" (2 Thess 1:9)

DEATH, HADES AND THE LAKE OF FIRE

During his earthly ministry, Jesus prophesied that an "hour" was coming when God would resurrect the dead and judge them:

"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment." (John 5:28,29)

Jesus' message that wicked people would be cast into "the eternal fire" (Matt 25:41) is repeated in the apocalyptic vision of Revelation:

"The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever." (Rev 20:10 cf:19:20)

"Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Rev 20:14,15)

He also declares that unsaved sinners are "outside" the heavenly city, so clearly, they are not annihilated:

"But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie." (Rev 22:15 cf: 21:8)

4 PAROUSIA & RESURRECTION FULFILLED

Jesus' teaching on the "resurrection of the dead" is echoed in various scriptures, including Daniel's visions and the preaching of the apostles:

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

"having a hope in God, which these men themselves accept, that there will be a resurrection of both the just and the unjust." (Acts 24:15)

"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." (1 Cor 15:21,22)

When the Sadducees denied the idea of the afterlife, Jesus rebuked them with the words of the Old Testament:

"And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Matt 22:31,32. cf: Exod 3:6,15,16; Acts 7:32)

Prior to the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, early Christians were still waiting for the Christ to return as he had promised. Some Christians feared that their deceased brethren had missed out on the parousia and the resurrection. Apostle Paul reassured them that, when Christ returns, the dead would be raised and, together with the living saints, they would all receive new heavenly bodies and go to heaven:

"Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality." (1 Cor 15:51-53)

"But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself." (Phil 3:20,21)

Preterists believe that the resurrection of the dead out of Hades was fulfilled, as prophesied, during the parousia of Christ circa AD 66-70. This is the meaning of the resurrection passage in Rev 20:4-6, where it says of believers who were in the grave: "They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years". Regarding unbelievers it says: "The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended. This is the first resurrection".

Edward E. Stevens explains that: "the resurrection described to Daniel and predicted by the New Testament authors are one and the same, and it occurred during the AD 70 Parousia." ^{xx} He expands: "The biblical phrases ('resurrection of the dead,' 'resurrection from the dead,' and 'raised from the dead') simply refer to a resurrection of the disembodied souls of the dead ones out of Hades (SOH)." ... "Who are the 'dead ones'? They were the disembodied souls of all who died prior to Christ's Parousia. Where were these 'dead ones'? They were in Sheol (or Hades) waiting until the Resurrection."

This teaching is corroborated by an unusual occurrence in AD 66, recorded by first century Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus ^{xxi}:

"Moreover, at that feast which we call Pentecost, as the priests were going by night into the inner [court of the temple,] as their custom was, to perform their sacred ministrations, they said that, in the first place, they felt a quaking, and heard a great noise, and after that they heard a sound as of a great multitude, saying, "Let us remove hence."" ^{xxii}

Stevens ^{xxiii} observes that: "This was evidently the resurrection of the saints out of Hades." ... "The resurrection and judgment at AD 70 were once-for-all events just like the Cross and Christ's resurrection. They are never to be repeated." ^{xxiv} ... "Now we saints no longer have to go to Hades and wait for a resurrection back out of there. Instead, at death we immediately receive our new immortal bodies and go to heaven. That fulfilled hope is a better hope." ^{xxv}

CONCLUSION

Friend, look to your soul! The Bible clearly teaches us that the fate of the wicked is eternal punishment in hell. Who would want such an awful destiny? This is not what God intended for mankind, nevertheless, it is the just punishment for each of us for our sin and rebellion against him.

But there is a better alternative. God has provided a way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ: "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus paid the penalty for our sins to cleanse us and reconcile us to God:

"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God." (Rom 5:6,9)

"He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." (1 Pet 2:24)

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit." (1 Pet 3:18)

Before his crucifixion, Jesus spoke about the hope of eternal life, in heaven with him -- the same hope that all believers now have:

"And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14:3)

Friend, hell awaits the wicked who "loved darkness". Heaven awaits those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus. Why would you perish? Christ Jesus offers you a better hope: salvation and eternal life in him.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Hell Under Fire", Morgan, C.W. and Peterson, R.A. (Gen. Ed.), Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 2004

"Josephus: The Complete Works", trans. Whiston, William. A.M., Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN 1998.

"Sheol, Hades, and Gehenna", Morey, Dr. Robert A., Bethany House Publishers, Minneapolis, MN 1984, (extract from: Chapter 3: *"Death and the Afterlife"* pp.72-93).

"Systematic Theology", Berkhof, Louis, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, Scotland 1949 (1984 Ed.)

"What Happened In A.D. 70?", Stevens, Edward E., International Preterist Association, Bradford, PA 2018

"Whatever Happened To Hell", Blanchard, John, EP Books, Darlington, England 2014

"Why Physical Bodies Were Not Raised", article by Stevens, Edward E., 2014.

RELEVANT GREEK TERMS

(with abbreviated Strong's or Thayer's definitions)

ᾗδης : (Hades) -- properly, unseen, the place (state) of departed souls:—grave, hell.

αἰώνιος : (aionios) -- perpetual, eternal, for ever, everlasting.

αἰώνιον : (aionion) -- adjective form of **αἰώνιος**.

ἀπόλλυμι : (apollumi) -- to devote or give over to eternal misery; to incur the loss of true or eternal life; to be delivered up to eternal misery.

ἀπολέσαι : (apolesai) -- aorist / past tense of **ἀπόλλυμι**.

εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων : (eis tous aionas ton aionon) -- to the ages of the ages.

γέεννα : (Gehenna) -- valley of (the son of) Hinnom; a valley of Jerusalem, used (figuratively) as a name for the place (or state) of everlasting punishment:—hell.

κόλασιν : (kolasin) – from **κόλασις** : (kolasis) – correction, punishment, penalty, torment.

ὄλεθρον : (olethron) – from **ὄλεθρος** (olethros) : to destroy; a prolonged form; ruin, i.e. death, punishment:—destruction.

ENDNOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptures are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright ©2001, 2007, 2011, 2016 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱ Unless otherwise indicated by the context, the term "man" in this article is used in the generic sense, meaning humans of either male or female sex.

ⁱⁱ *"Elemental Theology"*, p178, cited in Blanchard p87.

ⁱⁱⁱ *"Systematic Theology"*, Berkhof p672.

^{iv} *ibid* p673.

^v *"Commentaries"*, John Calvin, vol. XVIII, p222, cited in Blanchard p92.

^{vi} *"Whatever Happened To Hell"* p100.

^{vii} Dr. Robert A. Morey notes that *"During the Intertestamental period, the Jewish concept of Sheol had progressed to the stage where it was believed that Sheol had two distinct compartments, or sections. One section was a place of torment to which the wicked went while the other was a place of conscious bliss, often called "Abraham's bosom" or "paradise," to which the righteous were carried by angels."* (extract from Chapter 3, *"Death and the Afterlife"*, p12).

^{viii} *"Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield"* (ed.), Meeler; pp. 339, 345, cited in Morey p1.

^{ix} Morey, *op.cit.* p4.

^x *ibid* p7.

^{xi} *ibid* p8.

^{xii} Septuagint is an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament.

^{xiii} Morey, *op.cit.* p11.

^{xiv} *ibid* p13.

^{xv} *ibid* p15.

^{xvi} Morey states that Gehenna 'is a word which describes the ultimate fate of the wicked after the general resurrection and judgment. While Sheol and Hades describe the temporary abode of the dead until the resurrection, Gehenna is the place of future punishment in the eternal state.' *ibid* p14.

^{xvii} *ibid* p17.

^{xviii} *"City of God"*, Augustine, 21.23, quoted in Blanchard p319.

^{xix} *"Expository Thoughts"*, J.C.Ryle, vol.1, p344, quoted in Blanchard p320.

^{xx} *"Why Physical Bodies Were Not Raised"*, Stevens.

^{xxi} **Flavius Josephus** (circa 37-100 AD) was a Jewish priest, scholar, historian and active participant in the final decades of ancient Israel (Judea). He was also an aristocrat, a Pharisee, a military commander and politician, who wrote extensive accounts of his life and Jewish history, including a detailed account of the Jewish War against the Roman Empire (c. AD 66-70).

^{xxii} *"Complete Works of Josephus, Wars 6.5.3"* (299-300).

^{xxiii} *"What Happened In A.D. 70?"*, Stevens p19.

^{xxiv} ibid p47.

^{xxv} ibid p50.