

Ministry of Grace

Hell

Words translated "Hell" in the Bible

Most Christians think of hell as the place where the unsaved souls of those who have died will spend eternity. As shocking as this may sound, that is not necessarily what the Bible teaches. Before we get into that, however, we need to look at the words that are commonly translated as “hell.” There are four words that may or may not be translated “hell” depending on which translation you are using. They are:

Sheol -- Hebrew - place of the departed dead.

Psalms 16:10 - For you will not leave my soul in **hell** (Sheol); you will not allow your holy one to see corruption.[MKJV]

2 Samuel 22:6 - The sorrows of **hell** (Sheol) hemmed me in. The snares of death went in front of me. . [MKJV]

Deuteronomy 32:22 - For a fire is kindled in My anger, and shall burn to the lowest **hell** (Sheol), and shall consume the earth with its increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains. [MKJV]

In Hebrew writing, Sheol is never used to describe the final destination of the wicked. It is, instead, used to indicate:

- The unseen realm of the dead, where both the righteous and the unrighteous go
- The grave, the actual place where bodies are buried
- The place of punishment for the wicked
- The place from which the righteous are saved

Hades -- Greek - place of judgment. Originally, it was the name of Hades, the Greek god of the underworld (the place where human souls go after death). Eventually, his entire realm became known as Hades.

Matthew 11:23 - And you, Capernaum! You won't be lifted up to heaven, will you? You'll go down to **Hell** (hades)! For if the miracles that happened in you had taken place in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. [ISV]

Acts 2:27 - Because thou wilt not leave my soul in **hell** (hades), neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption. [KJV]

In the New Testament, Hades is a temporary place of the souls of those who have died physically. As we will see, the righteous have been moved out of Hades, and eventually Hades and all who are in it will be cast into the Lake of Fire (**Revelation 20:14**), which is referred to as “the second death.”

Geena or Gehenna -- Hebrew "*ge' hinnom*" = This specifically refers to the Hinnom Valley, SW of Jerusalem, where a refuse (trash) fire burned constantly. Bodies of dead animals and criminals were also thrown into this “eternal” fire. Idolatrous Jews even offered their children in this fire as a sacrifice to the god Molech.

Matthew 5:29 - If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is

Ministry of Grace

better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into **hell**. (gehenna) [NASB]

Matthew 23:33 - You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to **hell**? (gehenna) [NIV]

James 3:6 - And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by **hell**. (gehenna) [ESV]

Tartarus -- In Greek mythology, it is far below Hades. It is the deep abyss that serves as a dungeon of torment and suffering where gods, ferocious monsters and horrible criminals were banished. In the Bible, it is the place of punishment for angels.

2 Peter 2:4 - For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but threw them into the lowest **hell** (Tartarus) and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept for judgment [ISV]

Sheol & Hades

When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek (this translation is called the Septuagint), the Hebrew word Sheol was consistently translated using the Greek word "Hades." Also, **Acts 2:27** is a direct quotation of **Psalms 16:10** and we see that *Sheol* was translated as *Hades*. From this we can deduce that Sheol and Hades refer to the same place. From this point on in our discussion, we will refer to this place as Sheol.

Psalms 16:10 - For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.[ESV]

Acts 2:27 - For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.[ESV]

Where is Sheol?

In Numbers chapter 13 we read about the twelve men who were sent into the promised land to spy it out. Ten of them brought back a bad report and two of them (Joshua and Caleb) brought back a good report. The people believed the bad report and refused to go in to conquer the land. Instead, they said, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt." As a result, God told them that none of the adults, except Joshua and Caleb, would be allowed to enter the promised land, but they would die in the wilderness. Shortly after that Korah, along with Dathan and Abiram, stood up to Moses and challenged his leadership. So Moses told them and all the people:

Numbers 16:29-33 - If these men die as all men die, or if they are visited by the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the LORD."

And as soon as he had finished speaking all these words, the ground under them split apart. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, with their households and all the people who belonged to Korah and all their goods. So they and all that belonged to them went

Ministry of Grace

down alive into Sheol, and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. [ESV]

From this description we can clearly see that Sheol is down inside the earth. Also, when the Pharisees challenged Jesus to show them a sign to prove that he was who he claimed to be, he told them that he would spend three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

Matthew 12:38-40 - Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. [ESV]

One Sheol or many?

There are several places in the Old Testament where a reference is made to the lowest Sheol. Here are a couple of them:

Deuteronomy 32:22 - For a fire is kindled in My anger, And shall burn to the lowest hell (Sheol); It shall consume the earth with her increase, And set on fire the foundations of the mountains. [NKJV]

Psalms 86:13 - For great is Your mercy toward me; and You have delivered my soul from the lowest hell. (Sheol). [MKJV]

Since a superlative (lowest) is used, it implies that there is a low Sheol and a lower Sheol also, and yet, the words Sheol and Hades never appear in the dual or plural form in the Bible. Therefore, the superlative is seen to refer to areas, portions, or compartments of Sheol or Hades.

Luke 16 - Parable or Actual?

We are about to look at a series of events described in the 16th chapter of Luke. The question we have to ask ourselves is, "Is this a description of actual events and places or is this a parable?"

Parable – From Greek ‘*parabole*’ – ‘*para*’ meaning ‘*beside*’ or ‘*alongside*,’ and a form of ‘*balein*’ meaning ‘*to throw*.’ Thus, the word *parabole* means to place two things side by side for sake of comparing them.

- A parable is a saying or story in which something is expressed in terms of something else
- A parable is a short allegorical story designed to illustrate or teach some truth, religious principle, or moral lesson. [*Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*]

So, a parable is a made-up story with fictional characters (who, incidentally, are never named) used to explain a truth by comparison or association. A parable often uses the form of a simile (“*like*”, or “*as if*”) to express the comparison. Here are some examples:

Matthew 13:24 – He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven **may be compared to** a man who sowed good seed in his field ... [ESV]

Matthew 13:31 - He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven **is like** a grain of mustard seed ... [ESV]

Ministry of Grace

Matthew 25:14-15, 25-30 – For it (the kingdom of heaven) will be **like** a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property... [ESV]

In the 16th chapter of Luke, our Lord is teaching the Pharisees that righteousness is what God demands and that riches mean nothing. In teaching this he uses the story of the rich man and Lazarus to show them where their future lies based on their righteousness. Note that this is not a parable since it does not contain any language of similitude (like, as if, similar to) and He talks about real people (the poor man is named Lazarus and Abraham is called by name). And, Jesus is not using this story to teach some other truth. This IS the truth He's teaching.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31 - There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'

But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'

And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers--so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'

But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'

And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. [ESV]

The Compartments of Sheol

From the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we can see that there are, in fact, different areas, or compartments, of Sheol. There is the place where Abraham and Lazarus are (Paradise), a place of comfort and ease; the place where the rich man is, a place of torment; and a chasm or gulf that cannot be crossed. Let's look at each one of these.

Paradise

From scripture we know that when Jesus died on the cross he went to Sheol. But we also see that he told one of the thieves crucified next to him that the thief would be with Jesus in Paradise. When we compare this to the story of the rich man and Lazarus, we can deduce that

Ministry of Grace

Jesus and the thief went to Abraham's side. Based on the comments Jesus made to the thief, we can refer to this compartment of Sheol as Paradise.

Psalms 16:10 - For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.[ESV]

Matthew 12:40 - For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. .[ESV]

Luke 23:39-43 - One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!"

But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong."

And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."

And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, **today you will be with me in Paradise.**" .[ESV]

Lowest Sheol (the place of torments)

The lowest Sheol appears to be the place of torments that we read about in the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Deuteronomy 32:22 - For a fire is kindled in My anger, And shall burn to the lowest hell (Sheol); It shall consume the earth with her increase, And set on fire the foundations of the mountains. [NKJV]

Psalms 86:13 - For great is Your mercy toward me; and You have delivered my soul from the lowest hell. (Sheol). [MKJV]

Luke 16:23,24 - and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. [ESV]

Great gulf - Chasm - Abyss - Pit of the Abyss - Bottomless Pit

From the Luke 16 passage quoted above, we see that there is a great chasm. We also know from Isaiah and the book of Revelation that Satan and other evil spirits are, and will be, incarcerated in the abyss.

Luke 16:26 - And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us. [ESV]

Isaiah 14:12-15 - How you are fallen from the heavens, O shining star, son of the morning! How you are cut down to the ground, you who weakened the nations! For you have said in your heart, I will go up to the heavens, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God; I will also sit on the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north. I will go up above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the Most High. Yet you shall be brought down to **hell** (Sheol), **to the sides of the Pit.** [MKJV]

Ministry of Grace

Revelation 9:1- And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven fallen unto the earth: and there was given to him the key of the **pit of the abyss**. [RV]

Revelation 17:8 - The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the **Abyss** and go to his destruction. [NIV]

Revelation 20:1-3 - And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the **Abyss** and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the **Abyss**, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time. [NIV]

Compare these verses above with what is said in Jude and 2 Peter:

Jude 6 - And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. [KJV]

2 Peter 2:4 - For if God did not spare the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell (Tartarus) and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment [NKJV]

Also, notice what the demons said to Jesus when he was about to cast them out of a man and into a herd of pigs:

Luke 8:30, 31 - Jesus then asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion," for many demons had entered him. And they begged him not to command them to depart into the abyss. [ESV]

From these verses, it appears that the abyss, or pit of the abyss, or sides of the pit are the same as Tartarus. It also appears that this is the great chasm that Abraham talked about in Luke 16. And, we see that this is where evil angels and demons are confined.

Lake of Fire - Everlasting abode of the unsaved

In the beginning of this study, we said that Sheol is not where the unsaved will spend eternity. Yes, it is a place of torment and based on what the rich man said, there are flames there. But, one day all the dead (unrighteous) will appear before the Great White Throne and will be condemned to the lake of fire. Hades (Sheol) will also be cast into the lake of fire. This is referred to as "the second death" and it will last for eternity. So, let's look at a few things about the lake of fire.

Eternal, prepared for Satan and his angels

The lake of fire was initially prepared for the devil and his fallen angels. He will be thrown in there at the end of the millennial reign of Christ. It is referred to here as "eternal fire."

Matthew 25:41 - Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. [ESV]

It is not in the earth

In Revelation 20:10, the devil is thrown into the lake of fire. In the very next verse we learn about the Great White Throne Judgment. In this description, we are told that the first heaven

Ministry of Grace

and earth are destroyed. However, the lake of fire still exists and the dead who stand before the Great White Throne are also thrown into it (as we will discover below).

Revelation 20:11 - Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, **from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.** [NKJV]

Hades is thrown into it

Although heaven and earth have been destroyed, we see from verse 14 that Sheol (Hades) still exists and is thrown into the lake of fire. It is uncertain what is meant by death being thrown into the lake of fire. However, in order for God to establish his eternal heaven and earth, death must be done away with. This is probably what is meant by death being thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20:14 - Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. [NKJV]

Beast & False Prophet are the first to go there

At the battle of Armageddon, the beast (anti-christ) and his false prophet will be captured and thrown into the lake of fire. They are the first ones to be sent there. Also notice that it is a fiery lake of burning sulfur (brimstone). The Greek word for Sulphur is *theiō*. When it is said to be burning, it is referred to as brimstone. Sulphur burns with a blue flame that is even hotter than red, orange, or yellow flames.

Revelation 19:20 - But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. [NIV]

The Devil is thrown in there

As was mentioned above, the devil will himself be thrown into the lake of fire. From that moment on, he will not be able to bother humans. He will be tormented there forever.

Revelation 20:10 - And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet **are**, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever [MKJV]

Unsaved are thrown in there

At the Great White Throne Judgment, all the unsaved (unrighteous) will be thrown into the lake of fire. They will suffer torment there for all eternity.

Matthew 25:41 - Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” [ESV]

Revelation 20:15 - And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. [ESV]

Ministry of Grace

What happens to people in hell (the Lake of Fire)?

There are a number of scriptures that talk about eternal punishment. Though the passages below do not specifically identify the place of torment, based on what we have learned above, the only place of eternal fire and torment is the lake of fire. Here are some descriptions of the torment of the lake of fire.

Perhaps the worst part of the torment of the lake of fire will be eternal separation from God!

The fire shall not be stopped

Isaiah 66:24 - Then they will go forth and look On the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die And **their fire will not be quenched**; And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind. [NASB]

Eternal fire, eternal punishment

Matthew 25:41, 46 - Then He will also say to those on His left, “Depart from Me, accursed ones, **into the eternal fire** which has been prepared for the devil and his angels;” ... **These will go away into eternal punishment**, [NASB]

Torment forever

Revelation 20:10 - And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. **They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever**. [NIV]

Darkness, weeping/wailing & gnashing of teeth

Matthew 8:11, 12 - I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom **will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**. [NIV]

Matthew 13: 42 - And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be **wailing and gnashing of teeth**. [KJV]

Matthew 22:13, 14 - Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the **outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**. [ESV]

Matthew 25:30 - And cast the worthless servant into the **outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**. [ESV]

Where do you want to spend eternity?

Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.