

Is There *Really* a HELL FIRE?

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and equipped for every good work.*



By Ronald L. Dart

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Is there an ultimate punishment for wicked men? The glorified Christ answers that question in His revelation to John: “But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

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Is There *Really* a HELL FIRE?

By Ronald L. Dart

Is there really an ever-burning hell where sinners are tormented with fire and brimstone throughout all eternity? Is it only for the very wicked? What about the “unsaved”? The Bible tells us there is only one name given in heaven and earth whereby we must be saved—the name of Jesus. What about all those who have never heard that name? Do they go immediately to the torments of a fiery hell at death? What about babies and little children? Surely they don’t go to hell? Churches have an astonishing variety of answers to these questions, but what does the Bible say? How can we really know the truth?

There is no doubt about it, the doctrine of “hell fire” is mighty effective. “Heaven,” after all, is a nebulous concept. The preachers have given us some idea of harps, angels, clouds, music, milk and honey, and streets paved with gold. That’s all fine if it turns you on, but does it really sound as exciting as French onion soup, prime rib, a bottle of vintage wine, a Mercedes Benz, a private jet, interesting friends, weekends in Las Vegas, and vacations on the Riviera?

But if the idea of “heaven” is nebulous, the idea of “hell” is downright specific. “Hell fire” is an idea that can change lives. Even the thought of experiencing the excruciating pain of sulfurous fire for a day, much less all eternity, is something even the roughest sinner can understand.

“Hell fire” is an expedient doctrine, and that in itself should make us wonder. You don’t suppose there could be a chance—even a small chance—that preachers preach “Hell fire” more because it works than because it’s true?

Has anyone ever lied to you because they believed it was in your interests for them to do so? You're infuriated when you learn about it, and no less so because you realize it was done in good will. The person may have sincerely believed he was doing the right thing, but he took away from you an inalienable right: the right to know the truth and to make your own decision. He also destroyed, incidentally, an important element of trust; for, whatever the motives involved, he lied to you.

Jesus said, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." No matter how well meaning, if a preacher causes you to believe something that isn't quite true, then you're not quite free. And, when you don't do the right thing because it is the right thing, will God give you credit when you do the right thing because of a lie?

If there's even a remote possibility that someone has lied to us about an important matter of doctrine, we owe it to ourselves to check it out. If the doctrine of "hell fire" is true, then it should be a simple matter to prove it in the Bible. Paul admonished the Thessalonians to "prove all things and hold fast to that which is good." Luke wrote of the Bereans saying: "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, because they searched the scriptures daily to prove whether these things were so" (Acts 17:11).

There is no reason to be defensive or fear the truth—let's give this doctrine an honest look.

The *Idea* of Hell

"Hell" in theological usage is a place of punishment after death. Although there exists a bewildering array of doctrines on hell, there are some broadly accepted elements. Hell is generally conceived as a place beneath the surface of the earth, for example. It is a place where the wicked are tormented by fire, suffering excruciating pain—both the pain of loss and pain of the senses. Somehow the fire causes pain but does not consume. It torments, but the usual relief caused by the destruction of nerves and tissue, passing out, or numbness, is denied the sufferer.

And just how long does this go on? Since man is believed to have an immortal soul, his torment continues time without end, unremitting, for all eternity. And how long is eternity? I heard a preacher explain that once.

But, someone else will ask, "Isn't there a statement somewhere about eternal fire"? Yes, there is. In Jude 7, we read: "Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering *vengeance of eternal fire*." But bear in mind that the word eternal describes the nature of the fire that destroys, not the nature of the material that is destroyed. Sodom and Gomorrah are *not still burning*. The cities "suffered" (past tense) the vengeance of "eternal fire." The fire was *from* the Eternal, and the source of the flame itself may well be eternal. But the combustible material it ignited was not.

And so as we continue our study through the New Testament, we find ourselves utterly devoid of any *biblical* support for the traditional doctrine of hell.

Where then, does it come from? Perhaps to some extent from apocryphal Jewish writings. In the book of Judith, for example, the vengeance of the day of judgment is described as "fire and worms" in the flesh of those who rise up against Israel which "they shall feel and weep forever" (16:17). In another book the fate of the tyrant is declared to be "eternal torture by fire," and "interminable torments" (4th Maccabees 9:8-9; 10:10). Yet another of these books speaks of the "furnace of hell," and of the despisers of the Most High as doomed to be "henceforth in torments, always in pain and anguish of seven kinds" (4th Esdras 7:36, 79, 80).

But at this point one is reminded of Paul's warning to Titus, "Not giving heed to Jewish fables, and commandments of men, that turn from the truth" (Titus 1:14). According to Josephus, at least two Jewish sects, the Pharisees and the Essenes believed in everlasting punishment. Even some of the great Rabbis who spoke of *limited* punishment made exceptions for certain classes of sinners. The school of Hillel taught that sinners of the heathen and others were punished in Gehenna for a space of twelve months, and afterward were consumed; but that Christians, Epicureans, and those who deny the divine origin of the Torah, the truth of the resurrection, and those who sin like Jeroboam are said to go down to Gehenna to be punished there to ages of ages.

So it's entirely possible that the Christian tradition of an ever-burning hell fire was derived, not from the Scriptures, not from the teachings of Jesus, but from *Jewish traditions*!

If this verse is a description of the traditional “hell fire” then not only the damned will be there, but Jesus Christ and the saints as well! If this is hell, then there is no place except hell! On careful examination, the whole idea dissolves into absurdity.

If you’ll study Revelation 14:9-11 in its context, you’ll find that it takes place right at the very end time. Jesus Christ has just returned to the earth for His saints, and is in the process of bringing a halt to human violence. This event takes place just before the seven last plagues are poured out (notice chapter 16). Those who drink of the wine of the wrath of God and are tormented with fire and brimstone are *not* souls in hell, but *living human beings* who are still in rebellion against God this late in history.

Continuing with verse 11, “And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, *who worship the beast and his image*, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.”

The perpetual smoke mentioned here is simply an antitype of the perpetual fires in Gehenna. The mere fact that the smoke continually ascends up says nothing about the survival of those who are being burned. Also, notice that it says they have no rest day nor night who worship (Greek: “are worshipping,” present tense) the beast. These are living people who are *still* worshipping the beast, still bearing about his image and the mark of his name.

These are living human beings, not souls in hell.

This same time is spoken of in 2Thessalonians 1:7-8, where the return of Christ is described in powerful terms: “And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, *In flaming fire* taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting *destruction* from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of His power.”

Notice that it is living human beings who receive God’s vengeance, who are incinerated by flaming fire at Christ’s return. Notice also, that their punishment is everlasting (permanent) *destruction*. The word *destruction* is meaningless if there is not a point where the destruction is complete. In other words, you can’t keep on destroying something for all eternity. It’s a contradiction in terms.

He asked his audience to imagine a mountain of granite one mile high at the peak and one mile in diameter at the base. He then asked us to imagine that once a year a small bird flew to the peak of that mountain of granite and proceeded to polish its beak. When that small bird, polishing its beak once a year, has worn that mountain of granite down to a pebble you can hold in your hand, *one day of eternity shall have passed!*

Just how bad do you have to be to warrant this kind of punishment for that long?

Roman Catholic theologians distinguish four meanings of the term *hell*: (1) Hell is the strict sense of the term, or the place of punishment for the damned, be they demons or men; (2) The limbo of infants (*limbus parvulorum*) where those who die in original sin alone, and without personal mortal sin, are confined and undergo some kind of punishment; (3) The limbo of the fathers (*limbus patrum*), in which the souls of the just who died before Christ awaited their admission to heaven: for in the meantime heaven was closed against them in punishment for the sin of Adam; (4) Purgatory, where the just, who die in venial sin or who still owe a debt of temporal punishment for sin, are cleansed by suffering before their admission to heaven (*Catholic Encyclopedia*, article “Hell”).

There are two very disturbing ideas presented here. First, *infants*, babes of a few days, weeks, or months, who have *never committed personal sin* are consigned to a compartment of hell for “some kind of punishment.” Why? Because of “original sin”—the sin of *Adam*! So say the Catholics.

But consider: Are they still *babies* in this “limbo”? Do they *understand* their punishment? What does it *accomplish* to punish infants a week old?

Second, consider the implications of the doctrine of purgatory. Observe carefully that it is the *just* who go to purgatory for punishment, not the *ignorant*. Even if we agree that temporary punishment for those who sin without knowing any better is not too far fetched, the people who go to purgatory for punishment are *good* people!

What then of the *ignorant*? What of those who have never heard the name of Christ—the only name given in heaven and earth whereby we must be saved? These are considered “the heathen,” or “the damned” and are consigned, not to purgatory, but to a *permanent place in hell*. Unless we

understand this, some of the actions of the Roman Catholic Church in history are incomprehensible.

When the Spaniards came to the New World, for example, they came not only to conquer, but to convert. The Spanish were filled with all the fire of a religious crusade, “Because the Spanish faith was real, and America had two continents filled with heathen, even the Spaniard who came for lands, riches, or to raise his station in life arrived with a ready, and unshakeable rationale for conquest” (*Lone Star*, by T.R. Fehrenback, page 21). When Vasquez de Coronado asked his priest about the ethics of impressing several Indian girls into his wife’s service, he was told that “While the captives were not technically subject to the crown or laws of Spain, but free agents, if they were allowed to go free they would remain heathen and unquestionably burn in hell forever.” However, under the benign supervision of Coronado’s wife, “The girls would learn both European civilized values and adopt the true faith, ensuring their eventual entry into paradise. *The real crime would not be in enslaving them, but in letting them go free.* Coronado was satisfied; the girls were kept in bondage, and passed from recorded history” (*Lone Star*, pages 21 and 22).

Protestant doctrine, of course, differs radically from Catholic doctrine in many respects. However, the *roots* of the doctrine of “hell fire” still remain firmly entrenched in early Roman Catholic theology. Protestants have long since disposed of any idea of an *interim* state such as purgatory, and allow only two conditions after death—heaven or hell.

If you want to have an interesting evening, sit down with someone who claims to *sincerely believe* that when a person dies he immediately goes to either heaven or hell. See if you can sort out with him precisely who goes where and why. By and large they will tell you that there are two categories of people in the world—the saved and the lost. When they die, the saved go to heaven and the lost go to hell.

So far so good.

But how does a person get “saved”? Well, he has to accept Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and be baptized. Since there is “no other name given in heaven or earth where we must be saved,” than the name Jesus, then it’s obviously impossible, isn’t it, for a person to be saved without *hearing* that name?

discussed the third and fourth reference found in Revelation 20:14-15, so we can turn to the final reference in Revelation 21:8. Here we are told that, “The fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone; which is the second *death*.” But notice that this is not eternal life in hell fire, but the second death. Death is the *cessation* of life, not its continuation in another place! And again, what happens to a fearful or unbelieving man when he is thrown into a lake which burns with fire and brimstone? He is incinerated! Once again we are left with no evidence to support the traditional doctrines of hell fire.

But isn’t there a reference somewhere to people being tormented with fire and brimstone and the smoke of their torment ascending up forever and ever? Yes, there is. The reference is found in Revelation 14:9-11. You may wish to read the entire passage carefully. The third angel says with a loud voice that if any man worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, that same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God. Not only that, he shall be “tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb.” But notice if this is talking about the traditional idea of hell, it takes place with all the holy angels *and Jesus Christ Himself right there* while the torment is going on! Is Jesus Christ going to spend *all eternity in hell*? Of course not!

Let’s pause and think about this for a moment. On the night before His crucifixion, Jesus told His disciples, “In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that *where I am, there you may be also*” (John 14:2-3).

Clearly, when Jesus Christ returns all the saints will be with Him wherever He is. If then the torment with fire, brimstone, and eternal smoke takes place *in the presence of the Lamb*, then it takes place in the presence of the saints as well! Think about it. Could you be happy for all eternity witnessing the excruciating fire and torture of hundreds of thousands of lost souls? Would a sainted mother have to spend all eternity observing the torture of one of her sons who turned out to be a lost sinner?

Isn't it interesting that *not one* of the New Testament references have *anything at all* to say in support of the traditional doctrines of hell fire?

But the observant reader will have noted that there is here a reference to a *lake of fire*. Could this be the kind of "hell" of which Jesus spoke? Absolutely! For indeed there is to come a time when a great sea of fire, such as lava, or molten rock, become the ultimate destruction of the wicked. But what happens to a human being when you cast him into a lake of molten fire? Obviously, he is incinerated. *There is no suggestion of even a lingering death*, much less eternal punishment.

There are only five references to the lake of fire in the New Testament, all of them late in the book of Revelation. The first of these is found in Revelation 19:20: "And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshiped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone."

Again, what happens to human beings who are thrown alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone? They are incinerated. They are killed. They are destroyed. There is no suggestion here of eternal torment in a fiery hell.

The second reference to the lake of fire is found in Revelation 20:10. Here we are told that the devil is cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, "Where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever." Look at the verse carefully. It is the *devil* who is being thrown into this lake of fire and brimstone, and it is the devil who is to be tormented day and night forever and ever. The devil is a spirit being and cannot be destroyed by fire. The beast and false prophet are human and most assuredly *can* be destroyed by fire. If you will look carefully at the verse, you'll note that the word "are" in the King James Version is in italics. That means it's not in the original Greek text. The Greek language uses these ellipses commonly and they must be filled in to make sense in English. Unfortunately, the word "are" is probably misleading in this verse. One could just as easily say that the devil was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and false prophet *were cast*.

Once again we are left with a verse that tells us nothing about eternal torment for human beings. The *devil* is going to be tormented for ever and ever, and it would seem that he would like for us to believe that we will share his fate. Nothing could be further from the truth. We have already

Some form of belief, confession, and baptism is required for salvation according to most Protestant denominations. As Paul put it, "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13). But he continues with an important question: "How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?" (verses 14, 15). It is, of course, in such scriptures that the missionary movement firmly places its roots.

But what about *children* who are not old enough to understand? This presents a disturbing problem to most Protestants, and various attempts at rationalizing it have been suggested. Some allow that children, up to a certain age, are not lost, but are born "saved." They become lost when they commit sin. Others suggest that prior to a certain age, children are not held accountable for sin and speak of an "age of accountability." No one really knows what that age is, and children are baptized at very young ages—certainly long before they understand many of the implications of what they are doing.

There are many who claim to believe some version of this doctrine, but it is difficult to see the fruits of this belief in their lives. The death of an infant or child is always an occasion of *terrible* grief to a family, and rightly so. But somehow the grief of the family at the funeral stands in *stark contrast* to the glowing words of the preacher who claims that the child is now in heaven playing with the angels. Preachers have even suggested that God wanted these tiny flowers in His own garden, thus casting God in the role of selfishly taking children away from loving parents because He wanted them for Himself.

The logic of all this is highly suspect, but what is more important, none of it is supported anywhere in the Bible!

The Heathen

Then there is the perplexing question of "the heathen." All Christians know that out there in the world there are all sorts of people who have never heard the name of Jesus Christ. They are utterly ignorant of His gospel and have no knowledge of the way of salvation. Is it just to take a

person who *never had a chance to be saved*, send him immediately to hell at death, and torment him for *all eternity*?

Now all of us know people who *claim* they believe this doctrine. But what kind of *behavior* would you expect of people who *sincerely believed* that there was a lost world out there, destined to eternal torture in hell, a world depending on them to receive the gospel of salvation? Would you expect a church that believed such doctrines to be building a magnificent, expensive family life center, installing gorgeous stained glass windows, or even air conditioning units? Wouldn't you expect them to be sending every dime they could lay their hands on to the mission fields?

I was talking with a man once who claimed to *sincerely* believe in hell fire. He was taking me firmly to task because I didn't believe as he did. I brought him quickly to the core of my problem with his doctrine: "What about all these people who never had a chance to be saved? Why are they going to be roasted in hell for all eternity because *you* didn't send a missionary to them? Why is your church spending as much money as it is at home instead of sending that money to the mission fields?"

Obviously troubled by the question, he attempted several rationalizations and then finally blurted out, "Well, if they never had a chance to be saved, they *are* saved!"

"Then *why*," I shot back, "does your church send missionaries? To give them a chance to be *lost*?"

He looked like I had hit him in the stomach. He never made an attempt to answer that question, but somebody, somewhere, has got to answer it. You can't have it both ways. Why *are* all these churches sending missionaries around the world. If every person alive on the face of this planet is going to heaven or hell when he dies, then what about "the heathen"? If those who are in ignorance of Christ are *not* destined for hell when they die, they must be going to heaven. And if I send a preacher to preach to them and they reject the gospel, then they're going to hell. What a *terrible* responsibility!

But if they're not going to heaven, then they obviously are going to hell. Then we're faced with trying to rationalize the nature of a God who is good, merciful, compassionate, forgiving, and who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life," who in

of fire while the place where wicked spirits are is a place of darkness? If wicked human beings are confined in a *fiery* hell, they are in a place of considerable light while demons are confined to a place of darkness. Are then wicked human beings *not in the same place as wicked spirits*?

In any case, 2 Peter 2:4 is about the fate of fallen angels, not the fate of wicked men. Their fate is described by Jude as being "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day" (verse 6), and "wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever" (verse 13).

Of course, none of this is of any help at all in establishing the traditional doctrines of hell fire.

The fourth reference to hell is found in Revelation 1:18. Here Jesus is quoted as saying, "I am He that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell [*hades*] and of death." Since *hades* refers to the grave it is obvious that Jesus has the power to unlock the graves, to unlock death and to release men in the resurrection. Again, we find no support for the traditional doctrines of hell.

The fifth reference is found in Revelation 6:8. Here we find the fourth of the seven seals of Revelation—the "pale horse." In vision, John looked, "and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell [*hades*] followed with him. . ." There is nothing difficult in this scripture. Death rides on a pale horse, and the grave follows him. It is just a metaphor for describing widespread death.

The sixth and seventh references are found in Revelation 20:13-14. Beginning in verse 11, John describes a great white throne and a day of judgment. He continues: "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell [*hades*] delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and hell [*hades*] 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."

This is an important passage for understanding hell, for even though the word *hades* means "the grave," this scripture rules out the traditional idea of hell as a place of *permanent* torment from which one *cannot* be delivered. Here "hell" is *required* to deliver up its dead. Ultimately, both death and the abode of the dead are destroyed in a lake of fire.

It may come as a surprise to you to learn that the traditional doctrines of hell simply are not found in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Where then are they to be found? Fortunately, the biblical references to punishment after death are relatively few, so it won't take us long to trace our way through them. If the doctrine is to be found in the pages of the Bible, it should present itself to us quite readily. If it can't be found in the pages of the Bible, we have every reason to ask *why* preachers continue to teach it!

As it happens, the English word "hell" is only used seven times in the New Testament apart from the teachings of Christ.

The first reference is found in Acts 2:31. Quoting David, Peter states: "He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that His soul was not left in hell [*hades*], neither His flesh did see corruption." Of course, when we understand the Greek word *hades* simply means the grave, we realize it was the tomb in which Christ's body was placed. That is the "hell" of Acts 2:31. This is *not* a reference to Jesus descending into some fiery hell for three days and three nights as some have suggested. There's nothing complicated about this scripture. It just says that Jesus was not left in the grave.

The second reference is found in James 3:6, "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell [*Gehenna*]." Since we already understand the meaning of *Gehenna*, we can see there is nothing here to tell us anything one way or the other about an eternal hell fire.

The third reference is found in 2 Peter 2:4, "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [*tartaros*], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment. . ." Now this is an interesting scripture, because this is neither *Gehenna* nor *hades*. It uses a different Greek word *tartaros*: "The name of a subterranean region, doleful and dark, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds" (*Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*).

What is interesting about this passage is that *tartaros* is regarded by both Peter and the classical Greek writers as a place of *darkness*. But fire gives off light! Doubtless one can explain his way around it, but how does it happen that the traditional idea of hell is a place of flames and coals

turn consigns people to hell fire who *never had a chance to hear of that Son!*

Most people who say they believe in the doctrine of "hell fire" still have a mild discomfiture with the doctrine because it won't stand up to logical scrutiny. There are just *too many* internal contradictions.

Then why do they cling to it? There are two possible reasons. One, they believe it is supported by scripture and that their failure to understand the logic of hell is their *own* failure and inadequacy. In other words, there must be a logic there if the Bible tells me it is true, even though I can't see it.

The other reason people cling to the doctrine of hell fire is that it sits firmly on and proceeds logically from another *fundamental* doctrine: the immortality of the soul. If *we assume* that man has an immortal soul, then we are forced to answer the question of what happens to that soul at death. If the soul cannot die, then it must be alive, and if it's alive it must *be* some place. The logic of this is so powerful to some people that it overwhelms all other logical problems with the doctrine of hell and heaven.

But the truth is, the Bible *does not* teach that man has an immortal soul. The Bible teaches that man is *mortal*. That when he dies, he returns to the grave. He waits, unconscious, in the grave, until the resurrection, and *then* he meets whatever reward God has in store for him.

But just for the moment, let's lay aside our assumptions about the immortality of the soul and let's look at the doctrine on hell based not on an unproven assumption, but on the scriptures themselves. What is the *true* biblical teaching about "hell fire"?

Gehenna

As far as we know the first time Jesus ever referred to "hell fire" was in the Sermon on the Mount. As the disciples sat about listening to Him, He said: "Whosoever is angry with his brother without cause shall be in danger of the judgment. . .but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of *hell fire*" (Matthew 5:22).

What do you suppose came into the mind of Jesus' listeners when He used those words: "hell fire"? Was this a new idea to them, or did they already have some notion of what "hell fire" was?

As it happens, the disciples were quite familiar with the term Jesus used. Speaking in Aramaic, He called it: “*Gehenna* fire.” Unfortunately, when the English reader sees the word *Gehenna*, it immediately conjures up a preconceived idea. We may have inherited that idea from our parents, we may have learned it from preachers, or we may simply have picked it up from the use of *Gehenna* in literature for a place of fiery torment and confusion.

Unfortunately, our preconceived ideas are not always correct. We need to keep in mind that Jesus, speaking in the first century, may have been saying something *quite different* from what you or I, the twentieth century reader, may assume.

The truth is, *Gehenna* was a well-known geographical location—an important historic site. When Jesus used the term *Gehenna*, everyone in His audience knew *exactly* what He was talking about. *Gehenna* was a valley named after the sons of a man named Hinnom. Called in the Old Testament “the valley of the son of Hinnom” (Joshua 15:8), it was a deep east-to-west valley located about one thousand yards south of the temple mount.

Why was this valley significant? To understand this, you need to acquaint yourself with a period of history well known to Jesus’ listeners.

About the middle of the eighth century B.C. a wicked king named Ahaz reigned in Jerusalem. “Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem: but he did not that which was right in the sight of the Lord, like David his father: For he walked in the ways of the kings of Israel, and made also molten images for Baalim. Moreover he burnt incense in the *valley of the son of Hinnom* [*Gehenna*], and *burnt his children in the fire* after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel” (2 Chronicles 28:1-3).

Of all the evil practices one might imagine, perhaps the most evil of all was burning children alive to Molech—one of the hateful gods of the heathen.

Two generations later another wicked king—Manasseh—continued the same practice. “Manasseh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty and five years in Jerusalem: But did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord, like unto the abominations of the heathen, whom

listen though one came to him from the dead. But in the process of making this point, Jesus gives us some interesting insights into the fate of wicked men.

We are told in verse 22 that the rich man died and was buried. Where was he when he was *buried*? Well in *sheol* or *hades* of course. Verse 23 is fascinating. Jesus said, “And in *hades* he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and sees Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

Now if you understand that man does not have an immortal soul, you will realize that the described events can only take place *after* the “resurrection to judgment.” Even Lazarus must wait in the grave until the resurrection of the just at Christ’s return (1 Corinthians 15:21-23, 52-53; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). The rich man would not be raised until a *thousand years later* (Revelation 20:5-6).

The events described in Jesus’ parable, then, cannot take place until after the second resurrection. As Jesus said, “Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which *all* that are in the graves [*sheol*] shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (John 5:28-29). Without the twentieth chapter of Revelation, we might not realize that this speaks of two separate and distinct resurrections at least a thousand years apart!

The parable of Lazarus and the rich man, then, speaks of that time in the future when the rich man who was in “hell” (*sheol*, the grave), is resurrected to judgment. Since this judgment is a judgment by fire, it’s logical to assume it’s talking about *Gehenna* since that’s the only fiery judgment Jesus discusses.

For our purposes at the moment, however, it’s enough to note that there is *not one word* in this parable about the *length of time* the rich man is tormented by flame. As far as this parable is concerned, it could have been a minute, an hour, or a day. While this parable clearly shows ultimate punishment by fire, it is *utterly silent* about the *duration* of punishment. The scripture has no bearing on the traditional teaching of eternal torment in the fires of hell. Perhaps you’d like to read the parable again to confirm this for yourself.

How did Jesus' audience understand this? They visualized a valley to the south of Jerusalem where bodies were eaten with worms and where the fires were kept burning and never put out. Somehow from this scripture people have gotten the idea that human beings in hell don't die. But the scripture says that it's the *worm* that doesn't die.

Does it come as a surprise to you to learn that Jesus never spoke of any other type of hell fire? *Gehenna* was a specific location, well known to all Jews, *on the surface of the earth*. Where then did the idea come from that "hell" lies somewhere *beneath* the surface of the earth?

Hades

The King James translators were somewhat indiscriminate in the use of the word "hell." Not only do they translate *Gehenna* as "hell" they also translated a very different word, *hades*, as "hell." When Jesus spoke of a "hell" beneath the surface of the earth, He used the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebrew word *sheol*. This word is universally translated into Greek as *hades*. It is probably from this word that the idea of a subterranean hell derives.

When Jesus spoke of *sheol*, the term was once again quite familiar to His audience. But none of them visualized *sheol* as a place of fiery torment.

Surprisingly, the Old Testament reveals a lot of information about hell. It tells us that the direction to hell is *down* (Psalm 55:15). It tells us that it is a *deep* place (Job 11:8), it is a place from which one can be *delivered* (Proverbs 23:14), it is a place one can dig into (Amos 9:2). Jonah even considers the belly of the whale to be a "hell" of sorts (Jonah 2:2).

In the broadest terms, *sheol* simply means "the abode of the dead." It refers to "where the dead are." Since most of the dead are buried, then hell, in the sense of *sheol* or *hades*, is well translated by the English word "grave." But *sheol* could be *anywhere*—it was simply a place of the dead. We find an interesting conjunction of the concepts of *hades* and *Gehenna* in one of Jesus' parables. It is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man found in Luke 16:19-31. Bear in mind as you study this passage that *it is a parable*—it is not a description of an historical event. The point of the parable is that if one would not listen to the law of Moses, he wouldn't

the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel. . .He reared up altars for Baalim, and made groves, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. . .And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the Lord. And *he caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom* [*Gehenna*]: also he observed times, and used enchantments, and used witchcraft, and dealt with a familiar spirit, and with wizards: he wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him to anger" (2 Chronicles 33:1-6).

In the reign of Manasseh, then, *Gehenna*, the valley of the son of Hinnom, became a center of foul, demonic, corrupt worship to a degree that boggles the mind.

This practice continued until the reign of King Josiah. Josiah "broke down the houses of the Sodomites, that were by the house of the Lord, where the women wove hangings for the grove. And he brought all the priests out of the cities of Judah, and defiled the [pagan] high places where the priests had burned incense. . .And he defiled *Topheth*, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom [*Gehenna*], that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech" (2 Kings 23:7-10). *Topheth* is yet another name for *Gehenna*.

By the time of Jeremiah, *Topheth*, the valley of Hinnom, or *Gehenna*, had become the ultimate symbol of corruption and defilement. In the nineteenth chapter of Jeremiah, we read a terrible and terrifying condemnation of the inhabitants of Jerusalem: "Thus saith the Lord, Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests; And go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom [*Gehenna*], which is by the entry of the east gate, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee. . .Behold, I will bring evil upon this place, the which whosoever heareth, his ears shall tingle. Because they have forsaken me, and have estranged this place, and have burned incense in it unto other gods, whom neither they nor their fathers have known, nor the kings of Judah, *and have filled this place with the blood of innocents*; They have built also the high places of Baal, to *burn their sons with fire* for burnt offerings unto Baal, which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that this place shall be no more called *Tophet*, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter."

Jeremiah proceeded to warn the elders and priests that God would cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies in the valley of *Gehenna* and that their carcasses would be left there for meat for the fowls of the heaven and the beasts of the earth.

Then Jeremiah broke the bottle in the sight of the men that were with him and said to them, “Thus said the Lord of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter’s vessel, that cannot be made whole again: and they shall bury them in Tophet [*Gehenna*], till there be no place to bury.”

Did the idea of a “*Gehenna*” originate with God? Was it God who came up with the idea of burning people alive in *Gehenna* fire? Hardly! It was a *heathen* practice to burn children alive to Molech. Israel adopted this practice and carried it out in *Gehenna*. God then declares that He will burn those who burned their children—a just punishment for them—and that their punishment would take place in *Tophet*—*Gehenna*. Out of this concept grows the idea of “*Gehenna* fire.”

By the time of Jesus, the valley of *Gehenna* had become a garbage dump of the worst sort. The valley of Hinnom was known to all as a deep narrow gorge about a thousand yards south of the temple area. It became an object of horror to the Jews—doubtless because of the pagan sacrifices made there prior to Jeremiah’s day. It is said to have been made the receptacle for bones, the bodies of beasts and criminals, refuse and all unclean things. Fires are said to have been kept perpetually burning in order to consume the foul and corrupt objects that were thrown in it. It made a natural and unmistakable symbol of dire evil—of absolute ruin and destruction.

So when Jesus spoke of “*Gehenna* fire” His audience knew *precisely* what He was talking about. It was a *literal valley with literal fire*. He was speaking of something *present*, something they could walk out and look at. The fires of *Gehenna* burned perpetually, and the smoke ascended up continually.

It was not, however, a place for the punishment of the living. It was a place for the disposal of the dishonored and despised dead.

With all this in mind, then, let’s consider the remainder of Jesus’ teaching on the subject of hell fire. Take, for example, Matthew 23:33. Jesus

here is condemning the Pharisees and the scribes for their hypocrisy (verse 27), and He concludes, “Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell [*Gehenna*]?”

Once again we must place ourselves in Jesus’ audience. If you had been standing there and heard Him condemning the Pharisees in this way, all you had to do was lift your eyes and look to the south to see the smoke arising from the valley of Hinnom—from *Gehenna*—and recall the prophecies of Jeremiah. Mind you, *no other interpretation of the word Gehenna was known to Jesus’ audience at any time*. They did not imagine a cavern in the bowels of the earth, with bubbling pools of fire, demons tormenting sinners, etc. They visualized a foul, defiled, stinking garbage dump where their bodies could be dumped to be burned and disposed of—*nothing more!*

On another occasion Jesus was encouraging His disciples not to be afraid of people who would persecute them for the sake of the truth. He said, “Fear them not therefore: for there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed; and hid, that shall not be known. . . And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*Gehenna*]” (Matthew 10:28).

Think carefully about that verse, and once again place yourself among Jesus’ audience. What did they think of when He spoke of destroying both soul and body in *Gehenna*? They thought of a city dump with fires burning here and there where their body and soul would be *destroyed*. They did *not* visualize a place of living torment where they survived throughout eternity receiving continual punishment by fire. They visualized a place with dead bodies being burned.

Every single time Jesus referred to “hell fire,” He was talking about *Gehenna*. And when He used the word *Gehenna* He was speaking about a literal place then in existence on the south side of Jerusalem and all of His audience understood precisely what He meant.

When we understand this, it should be simple to look at a scripture like Mark 9:47-49 and understand precisely what Jesus meant. This is a scripture often used by ministers to “prove” hell fire. Jesus said, “And if your eye offend you, pluck it out: it is better for you to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into *Gehenna* fire: Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.”