

The Truth About Hell

Rod Reynolds

Millions have been taught that God sends the wicked to an “ever-burning hell,” to be tortured for eternity. Yet, the Bible tells us that God is just and merciful. What is the truth about hell?

In traditional Christianity it's long been taught that when people die they don't really die. The body dies but the person still continues to live a conscious existence as a "soul." And, depending on the person, the "soul" either goes to heaven or to hell at the time of death.

In this conception, even though the "soul" is detached from the body, those who go to hell are tormented forever in a cauldron of fire. In this hell, in the traditional belief, people are shrieking in agony and pain, burning for eternity but never being burned up. No doubt many a tear has been shed by the loved ones of persons who have died, thinking the dear departed is suffering in torment from which there is no hope of relief or respite.

Is that really what the Bible teaches about death and punishment?

We read in Acts 4:12, speaking of Jesus Christ, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." Yet, many millions if not billions of human beings down through history have lived and died never even having heard of the name of Jesus Christ, nor having had any real knowledge of the true God. Certainly the vast majority of humans have lived and died without becoming Christians in any sense.

God Is Just and Merciful

Yet, we read in Psalm 7:11, "God is a just judge." And we're assured in Psalm 136:1 that God is good, "For His mercy endures forever."

Would a just and merciful God create billions of human beings, deny them a real opportunity for salvation, and then torture them for all eternity in an ever burning hell simply because they did not believe in Jesus Christ, even though many had never even heard of Jesus Christ?

The truth is, the Bible teaches nothing like that. Rather, what the Bible actually teaches about the fate of the wicked has been grossly misrepresented by false teachers claiming to represent Christ.

Wouldn't you like to know what the Bible really teaches about hell?

Immortal Soul?

The idea of people being tortured in an ever burning hell is rooted in another false

doctrine taught in traditional Christianity, the doctrine of the immortal soul. The term "immortal soul" appears nowhere in the Bible. The idea of an "immortal soul" did not come from the Bible, but was borrowed from pagan traditions and embraced by an apostate "Christianity" which had forsaken Biblical truth in many respects.

The pagan Greeks, for example, "... believed that the soul, or thinking principle in man, survived the destruction of the body: they asserted that the souls of men after death became inhabitants of a region lower than the earth, hence called the infernal region, and Hell" (*The Pantheon*, Edward Baldwin, p. 120).

The Bible does not teach that the soul of a human being is an entity which is inherently immortal. Indeed, just the opposite. The Bible teaches that the soul can die, that it can be destroyed. "The soul who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell," said Jesus (Matthew 10:28).

Nor does the Bible teach that any "thinking principle" survives the death of the body. In many scriptures death is likened to sleep, implying no conscious existence (Job 7:21; 14:10-13; 1 Thessalonians 5:10; et al). Death is described very plainly in Scripture in the following words: "His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day *his thoughts perish*" (Psalm 146:4, KJV; emphasis added). "... there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:10). "... the dead know nothing ..." (Ecclesiastes 9:5). These are very clear statements which belie the notion that humans have an "immortal soul" that survives death.

Exactly what is a "soul," anyway? The Hebrew word sometimes translated "soul," *nephesh*, comes from a root *nâphash*, which means to breathe. Hence the primary meaning of *nephesh* is a breathing, living creature (see *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, Brown, Driver and Briggs, and the Hebrew lexicon from *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*). In the Bible, the term is used of all manner of sea and land dwelling creatures and birds that fly, of all manner of creatures made of flesh (Genesis 1:21, 24; 2:19; 9:15; "living thing," "living creature," in each case, Hebrew: *nephesh*). When God breathed the breath of life into Adam's nostrils he "became a living soul" (Genesis 2:7, KJV; "living being," NKJV; Hebrew: *Nephesh*). So man does not *have* an immortal soul, man *becomes* a living soul at the time his life begins. The word *nephesh* is also used of one's life, any life sustained by blood, including human physical life (Genesis 9:4-5; Exodus 4:19). It's used of persons (Genesis 14:21; 46:26; Exodus 1:5). The term is even used in the sense of a dead body (Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6). It's also used of self (Leviticus 26:11, 15).

The Greek word sometimes translated "soul" in the New Testament, *psuche*, has meanings similar to the Hebrew *nephesh*. But as we've seen, souls can die, they can be destroyed. The souls of men are mortal. God told Adam, who had become

"a living soul," that he would die, and so, "...return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return" (Genesis 2:17; 3:19).

Of all humans who have ever lived, at this time *only* Jesus Christ has immortality (1 Timothy 6:14-16). We must *seek* immortality (Romans 2:7). The wages of sin is not eternal life in hell, but death, which by definition is the cessation of life. Eternal life is a gift that comes to us from God through Jesus Christ (Romans 6:23).

What Is Hell?

What, exactly, then, is hell? In the Bible are several terms that are sometimes translated "hell." In the Old Testament the word *sheol* is sometimes translated "hell." It means simply a pit or grave, and is often so translated (e.g., Genesis 37:35; Numbers 16:30). In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) *sheol* is commonly translated using the Greek word *hades* (ᾗδης), as in other Jewish works written in Greek. Both words are said to have the same original meaning -- *unseen* (*Strong's Bible Dictionary*, Greek #86; "Hades," *Easton's Bible Dictionary*; "Hades," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1913 edition). The word "hell" in Old English is from a cognate *helan* meaning to cover or conceal, and originally something in "hell" was simply covered or concealed, or buried (cf. [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#); [wordiq.com](#)). In the New Testament, the Greek word *hades* (ᾗδης), sometimes translated hell in the King James Version, means simply the grave.

"For You will not leave my soul in Hades, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Acts 2:27). Note that the "soul" (*psuche*, for the Hebrew *nephesh* in this quotation from Psalm 16:10), referring to the dead body of Christ, was not "left in hades," but he was resurrected, having been dead and buried for three days (cf. Acts 2:31; Matthew 12:40). This is explained further as meaning that Jesus was "put to death," and they "laid Him in a tomb" (Acts 13:28-29). But his body was not left in the tomb to "see corruption," or decay, because he was resurrected three days after his crucifixion, before his body could decay (cf. Acts 2:31; 13:30, 33-37; cf. Mark 8:31). So being in a tomb is equivalent to being in hades.

Note also that David did not go to heaven upon dying, but was placed in hades, the grave, and left there. And in his tomb his body "saw corruption," or decayed into dust (Acts 2:27, 29, 34; 13:36). He is among those who are asleep in their graves, awaiting the second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the first resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:23). All who have died will be resurrected eventually, both the just and the unjust (Acts 24:15; 1 Corinthians 15:22-23; Revelation 20:12-13). None is in an imaginary "hell," writhing in agony. All will have an opportunity to be taught of God, and come to know him (Ezekiel 37:11-14; John 6:45; Romans 11:25-32; 1 John 2:1-2).

Another word translated "hell" is *tartaroo* (ταρταρώ, 2 Peter 2:4). This word

means a place of incarceration, or restraint. Satan and his demons were cast out of heaven to the earth when they sinned against God (Isaiah 14:12; Ezekiel 28:17; Luke 10:18; Revelation 12:4, 9). Eventually they will be cast into the lake of fire, and then apparently into outer darkness (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 20:10; cf. John 12:31; Jude 1:6, 13).

Still another word translated "hell" in the New Testament is *gehenna* (or *geenna*), or valley of the son(s) of Hinnom (from Hebrew, "Gai ben-Hinnom"). This was an area to the south or southeast of Jerusalem where the Israelites had sacrificed their children to Molech (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). It was defiled by the righteous king Josiah in such a way as to render it unusable as a place of worship (2 Kings 23:10).

Many commentators have characterized it as having been turned into a garbage dump, and is described in Jewish writings as a place near Jerusalem, "... a valley, whose fire was never quenched; and in which they burned the bones of anything that was unclean, and dead carcasses [including sometimes the bodies of criminals], and other pollutions" (*John Gill's Expositor* on Matthew 5:22; *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, "Gehenna"). As such, it is a symbol of the lake of fire where the wicked will suffer the second death. Note that though the fires of *gehenna* near Jerusalem were "never quenched," they are not now burning, but burned themselves out long ago (cf. Isaiah 1:31; Jeremiah 7:20; 17:27).

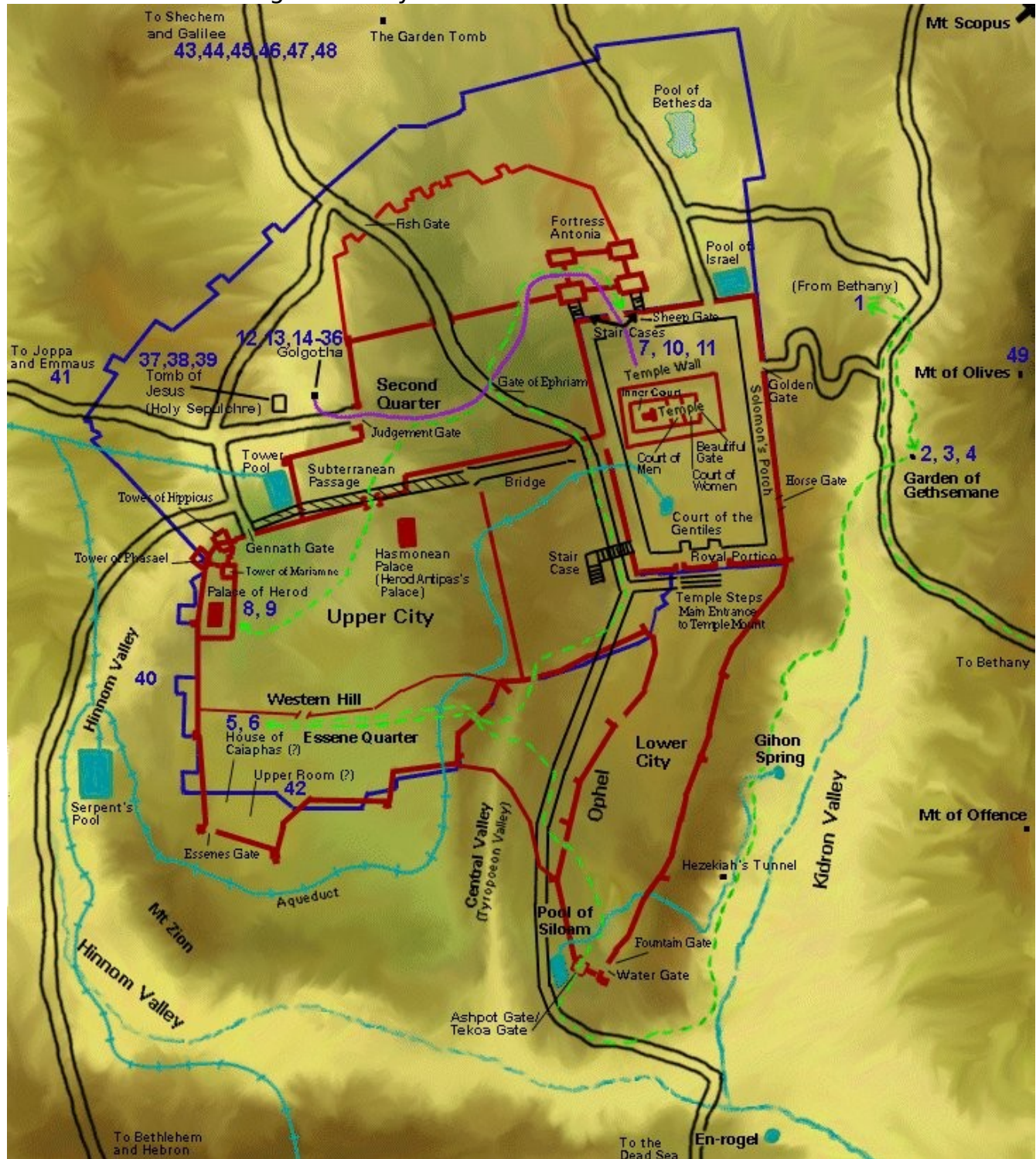
A few scholars have challenged the description of *gehenna* as a dump with perpetual fires burning up refuse, claiming that there is no literary or archaeological evidence supporting it (cf. "[Gehenna in the Synoptics](#)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155, Jan.-Mar. 1998, pp. 324-37 n. 17). Yet, Jesus characterized *gehenna* as a place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not put out" (Mark 9:44, Green's Literal Translation; cf. Isaiah 66:24). This description would certainly fit a city dump where all sorts of refuse including animal flesh was cast to be consumed by ever present worms and continually burning fires.

The exact site of *Gehenna* is disputed, though its approximate location to the south or southeast of Jerusalem is known. "Topographically the identification of the valley of Hinnom is still uncertain. It has been in turn identified with the depression on the western and southern side of Jerusalem, with the middle valley, and with the valley to the E." ("*Gehenna*," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1913 ed.).

The sacrificial laws God gave Israel required that the dung and certain portions of sacrificial animals were to be taken outside the camp (beyond the city walls in temple times) and burned (Exodus 29:14; Leviticus 4:11-12; 8:17; 16:27; Numbers 19:5). The "dung gate," or refuse gate, through which all kinds of refuse, not only the flesh and dung of animals, but pottery shards and other material, was taken outside the city and disposed of, was located just to the west of the southeast extremity of the city wall during the time of Jesus (second temple era; see gate

marked "Ashpot Gate" on map below).

Outside the "dung gate," where the Hinnom Valley and Kidron Valley meet, was a massive city dump. Archaeologists had been digging in the area of the dump for well over a hundred years, without realizing it was a dump. It wasn't until 1995 that Israeli archaeologists Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron discovered that the area



had been a city dump. The archaeologists estimated the dump held a total of 300,000 tons of refuse, and received 3,000 tons per year. A large amount of animal bones and pottery shards were found in the dump. Studies concluded that the signs of cuttings on the bones indicated the animals had been slaughtered in accordance with ritual law ("[The View From the Garbage](http://www.haaretz.com)," www.haaretz.com). With an estimated average of more than eight tons of refuse being cast into the dump every day, there seems to be no reason to doubt the descriptions of gehenna as a place of continual fire and worms.

At the time of Christ's coming the city which is the seat of the great harlot -- the false system of religion which has deceived all nations -- will be destroyed. Its destruction is described in Revelation 18. The city will fall, and will "become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!" (Revelation 18:2). The destruction of this spiritual Babylon will "be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isaiah 13:19). A massive earthquake will split the great city into three parts, and volcanic eruptions will spew massive stones into the air to fall like hail (Revelation 16:18-21).

According to the historian Edward Gibbon the early Christians believed Rome would be eventually "burned in a vast lake of fire and brimstone" (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. i., chap. xv, p. 263; cf. Revelation 18:8). Rome is surrounded by volcanic mountains and underlain by beds of sulfur (brimstone). The soil of Rome consists of volcanic rock from former volcanic eruptions in the area. According to *Townsend's Tour in Italy*, describing the land from Rome to Naples, "The entire country and district is volcanic. It is saturated with beds of sulphur and the substrata of destruction. It seems as certainly prepared for the flames..." (cited in *Barnes New Testament Notes* on Revelation 18:8).

Evidently the area will collapse into a massive lake of burning sulfur, and become literally a lake of fire. "Her smoke rises up forever and ever" (Greek: "into the ages and the ages"; Revelation 19:3). At the time of Christ's coming the beast and the false prophet will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 19:20). This fire will have been prepared for the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41). Satan will be cast into it, along with the demons, and it will be their prison throughout the millennium (Revelation 18:2; 20:1-3). This "lake of fire" does not now exist, and will not exist until the time of Christ's second coming.

Finally, after the millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment, death and hell (hades), that is, the grave, themselves will be (symbolically) cast into the lake of fire and the whole earth will be purged by fire to make way for a new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 20:14). The incorrigibly wicked will not suffer in agony forever and ever, but will simply be burnt up, and exist no more, except as ashes under the feet of the righteous (Malachi 4:1-3; Matthew 3:12; Revelation 20:15).

The imaginary hell of traditional Christianity -- a place of eternal torment for vast hordes of unsaved humanity -- including infants -- does not exist. God is far more merciful than the blasphemous image of him portrayed by the paganized hell tradition of popular Christianity.

Read also our articles: "Lazarus and the Rich Man"; and "What Is Death?" Both are available on our website www.cogmessenger.org.

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 542
Peculiar, MO 64078
USA