

# SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER    ISA. 55:10    FOR THE EATER  
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

## THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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### WHAT DOES SHEOL MEAN?

The word *sheol* is a Hebrew word that is found sixty-five times in the Old Testament. It is an important and significant word to which very little studious attention has been given. Translators have used it and abused it in order to get the word and the ideas of "hell" into the Hebrew Scriptures. It has been translated three ways in the *King James Version* as follows: "Grave," 31 times; "hell," 31 times; "pit," 3 times. This arbitrary and inconsistent treatment of the word *sheol* prompts the following conclusions. If *sheol* means "grave," then it does not mean "hell," and if it means either of these, then it does not mean "pit." It appears that the *King James* translators rendered it "grave" when it spoke of a good man going there, and "hell" when it spoke of an evil man departing this life. As to why they translated it "pit" is anybody's guess.

The truth is that *sheol* does **not** mean grave, hell, or pit. This fact was recognized by the translators of the *American Standard Versian* (Nelson, 1901). They admirably solved the problem imposed by this word, one for which there is no English equivalent, by carrying over the word *sheol* in every occurrence. However, when the ASV was revised in 1952 and became the *Revised Standard Versian*, the revisers reverted to the word "grave" in 1 Kgs. 2:9 and Song of Solomon 8:6, which did no more than create a bit of translational foolishness and inconsistency.

The word *sheol* is a noun, and in view of the prevailing grammatical illiteracy, some may need to be reminded that a noun is the word that tells what one is talking about. A noun is a word that means something. Thus the question before us is, what is it that is called *sheol*, what idea did the Spirit

of God desire should come into our minds when we come upon this word in Scripture?

Since the meaning of any word is established by its usage, it follows that the meaning of Biblical words should be established by the use made of them in Scripture. An examination in situ of the sixty-five occurrences of this word should bring a definite conviction as to its meaning. If this will not do it, then there is no possible way in which it can be defined, and we may as well forget the whole matter, and let each attach to it a meaning according to his own imagination. Having made this examination many times, I believe that *sheol* is a name for the state of death. It signifies the state into which one comes as a result of the process of death having worked in him until it gained the victory. There is a state of life and there is a state of death. The Hebrews had a name for this state into which the death process is constantly bringing men, and that name was *sheol*.

If we should say that a man lived eighty years and then died, we would be speaking the truth as we see it. However, it would be just as true to say that this man was dying for eighty years until at last death gained its victory. This truth is set forth in an accurate grammatical rendering of 1 Cor. 15:22 which declares: "**For as in Adam all are dying, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.**" The word "dying" here is present tense, and the words "made alive" are future. Because of what Adam did, all men are dying now; and because of what Christ has done and will yet do all will be made alive. In that time that may elapse between the conclusion of death working in us and our being made alive we will be in the state of death, a condition that the Hebrews called *sheol*.

Scripture speaks of the living and it speaks of the dead ( 2 Tim. 4:1). We enter into the company of the living by birth, and we enter the company of the dead when the breath of life (our spirit) goes out of us. The Lord Jesus was in the state of death (*sheol*) for three days and three nights, and He would still be there if He had not been raised from among the dead. In the Psalms He said prophetically of Himself: "**Thou wilt not leave My soul (Me) in the state of death; neither wilt Thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption**" (Psa. 16:10).

The definition that has been given of the word *sheol* can be tested by every occurrence in the Old Testament. It will be found to be viable, and if the passages where it is found are examined without prejudice, it will

enlighten each verse in which it occurs. Only a few of these can be examined in the space available in this leaflet.

The occurrence in Gen. 37: 5 is important because it is first. Jacob believed that an evil beast had killed his beloved son Joseph, and mourned for him many days. His sons and daughters sought to console him, but he refused to be comforted, declaring that his sorrow would continue until he had joined his son in the state of death (*sheol*).

In Gen. 42:38; 44:29, 31 we find three occurrences which along with the one cited above have been used to prove that *sheol* is a place of mourning and sorrow. This is apparently done to make this word to mean a place of frightfulness, and thus get minds ready for the further idea that *sheol* means "hell"; that is, a place of torment and suffering.

The sorrow of Jacob over the loss of Joseph seems to have been eased in some measure by his delight in Benjamin. When his brothers sought to take him into Egypt to confirm the truth of their statements made to Joseph, Jacob was loath for him to go, out of fear that something evil would happen to him on the journey. He declared that if any evil should fall him that he would go into the state of death (*sheol*). In other words, he said he would die of a broken heart.

Since Jacob spoke of going "down" into *sheol*, his statements have been used to support the theory that it is a place downward, and is located somewhere inside of the earth. However, *sheol* is not a place. It is a state or condition, and when we compare the state of the dead with the state of the living, the word "down" properly describes its character. In all the Old Testament the word *sheol* is never related to life, to a place of life, or a state of life.

Hannah, in her inspired prayers after the birth of Samuel, declares: "**The LORD killeth, and maketh alive: He bringeth down to *sheol* and bringeth up**" (1 Sam. 2:6). This being Hebrew poetry, we find a repetition of ideas. Here "killing" is the equivalent of bringing down to *sheol*, and "making alive" is the equivalent of bringing up from *sheol*. Hannah's conception of *sheol* was one of death, not of life.

David set forth the same idea of *sheol* in telling of his own experiences: **'When the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men**

**made me afraid; the sorrows of *sheol* compassed me about; the snares of death prevented** (had confronted) **me about**" (2 Sam. 22:5,6). This is a theme which is repeated many times in the Psalms. In Psa. 30:3 we read: "**O Lord Thou hast brought up my soul from *sheol*: thou hast kept me alive from going down into the pit.**" David was never in *sheol*, but apart from divine intervention he would have been. Therefore, he spoke of his experience as if it had been real.

In the Old Testament *sheol* and *death* are used synonymously; they are always linked together as being one and the same. *Sheol* is beyond all doubt the state of death. Therefore, those in the state of death cannot be alive, and there is no release from this state except by resurrection. "**For if the dead rise not. . . . Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished**" (1 Cor. 15:16, 18).

Among the passages that need to be considered because they give explicit information in regard to those who are in the state of death (*sheol*) is Psalm 6:5: "**For in death there is no remembrance of Thee: and in *sheol* who shall give Thee thanks.**" Again in Psalm 89:48 the question is asked: '**What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? Shall he deliver his soul from the hand of *sheol*?**'" Solomon urged, "**Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might, for there is no work, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom in *sheol* whither thou goest.**" Eccl. 9: 10.

A note on Isaiah 14:9-17 is necessary as the word *sheol* is found three times in this portion, verses 9, 11, and 15; and the passage is used to prove that there are conversations in *sheol*. In considering this passage we must not forget that the prophecy of Isaiah is Hebrew poetry, and as is usual in poetry the language is highly figurative, going even to the point of poetic license. This is certainly done in 14:8 where we are told that trees are speaking. I am convinced that the language of this portion is the most highly figurative in the Old Testament. A note from F. C. Jennings is apropos here: 'We must most surely not assume with some, that we have here a simple prosaic revelation of the world of the dead, any more than that in the previous verse we are told with prosaic literalness that the trees talk. In both cases the language is intensely poetical, and yet nothing could more graphically bring before our minds the height from which this king of Babylon had fallen, and the depth to which that fall had taken him.'

The difficult nature of this passage must not be minimized, yet the idea that

it sets forth life as it is in *sheol* is absurd.

The witness of good King Hezekiah is most important. In Isaiah 38 we find that he was sick unto death and had been told by the prophet to set his house in order, for he was to die and not live. This is proof that life and death are opposites, and that death cannot be life in another place. The King made this a matter of earnest prayer, bringing to God's attention his life and walk before Him, and the Lord answered his prayer by promising him fifteen more years of life. When he recovered from his illness he wrote of his dealings with God wherein he said: **"I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of *sheol*, I am deprived of the residue of my years. I said, I shall not see the LORD, even the LORD, in the land of the living, I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world"** (Isa. 38: 10, 11). Furthermore, he declared, **"For *sheol* cannot praise Thee, death cannot celebrate Thee: they that go down into the pit cannot hope for Thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day"** (Isa. 38:18, 19).

May all the living who read these words be generated of God to make an honest study of this important word.

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