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SHEOL EXAMINED

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Important doctrines often become a cause of contention. Labeling any study in God's Word as "scandalous" plays into a scheme of the enemy. Furthermore, avoiding important topics leaves us ignorant. The eternal state of the wicked is one "controversy" that brands truth-seekers as "heretics" looking into "dangerous doctrines." Some who hold the orthodox view wish that no questioning, rigorous studying, or debating be undertaken; however, there should be no fear in reexamining any Biblical subject to find the truth. Let the reader consider these matters and dare to believe conclusions that hold to the facts supplied by God's Word.

Analysis of what Scripture says about *sheol* is vital. It is the only word used in the Old Testament translated *hell*, so it provides a foundation to begin understanding. *Sheol* occurs 65 times in the Old Testament. The King James Version translates it 31 times *grave*, 31 times *hell*, and 3 times *pit*. Less than 50 percent of *sheol's* occurrences are rendered *hell* in English. These discrepancies are misleading and inadequate at best. *Sheol* does not mean the "grave," "hell," or "pit." It would be better transliterated, as some versions have recognized.

Simple study shows *sheol* and "death" being used synonymously. The Old Testament repeatedly links them together as being the same. **The cords of *sheol* surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me** (2 Sam. 22:6, NASB unless noted). The cords of *sheol* are the same thing as the snares of death. This repetition within Hebrew language locks in the meaning. **What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his soul from the power of *sheol*?** (Psa. 89:48). God uses death (*sheol*) and life as opposites. The power of *sheol* IS the power of death. They are identical. **Her feet go down to death: her steps take hold of *sheol*** (Prov. 5:5). **We have made a covenant with death, and with *sheol* we have made a pact** (Isa. 28:15). Examples of this linkage abound: 1 Sam. 2:6, Psa. 18:5, 116:3, Prov. 7:27, 9:18, Isa. 28:18, Hab. 2:5. The repeated synonymous usage should put an end to all controversy.

Sheol is never said to contain torment or suffering and is not connected to fire. *Sheol* is NEVER used as a place where the disembodied soul or spirit goes at death. *Sheol* is ALWAYS associated with the entire person. The locality is spoken of as being "down" and coming up out of *sheol* as being "brought up." Yes, people leave *sheol*. *Sheol* (death) is a temporary state. Just as a poor man's state can change to a state of wealth, a sick person can become healthy, or sadness can be replaced by happiness, so also the one in *sheol* can be resurrected. Those in death (*sheol*) will be raised to life as Christ also was resurrected. ***Sheol* should be defined as the state of death.** As a result, *sheol* is closely connected with destruction.

***Sheol* and destruction lie open before the Lord** (Prov. 15 :11, NIV). ***Sheol* and destruction are never satisfied** (Prov. 27 :20, NIV). *Sheol* is temporary, whereas "destruction" in Scripture is permanent; the second death has no resurrection in view.

The Bible's usage of *sheol* ought to be allowed to speak for itself; however, in passages referencing bad men *sheol* was translated as *hell*. Inconsistently, *sheol* was then translated *grave* when referring to good men. An obvious mishandling of God's Word. The Bible makes no distinction; *sheol* takes good and bad men alike. In fact, the first four occurrences show Jacob knew he would enter *sheol*. **And he said, 'Surely I will go down to *sheol* in mourning for my son'** (Gen. 37 :35). Jacob himself, Israel's patriarch and not a disembodied soul or spirit, was going there. Jacob later said, **you will bring my gray hair down to *sheol* in sorrow** (Gen. 42 :38, also Gen. 44 :29, 31). Jacob would die and enter *sheol* in grief. These facts show the current common view of *sheol* being "hell" or a place for the wicked after death is in conflict with the Bible's teaching. Jacob's fate is unquestionably to be in the Kingdom of God (Matt. 8:11).

Jacob happens to be in a long list of righteous men who knew they were going to *sheol* upon death. Consider Job: **If I look for *sheol* as my home, I make my bed in the darkness. If I call to the pit, 'You are my father'; To**

the worm, 'my mother and my sister'; Where now is my hope? ... Will it go down with me to *sheol*? Shall we go down into the dust? (Job 17 :13-16). Job uses the Bible's metaphor for death as sleeping down in the dust. King David often came close to death, **The cords of *sheol* surrounded me, the snares of death confronted me** (2 Sam. 22:6, also see Psa. 18:5, Psa. 30:3 , Psa. 86:13). King Hezekiah (Isa. 38:10), God's prophet Jonah (Jon. 2:2), and the sons of Korah (Psa. 49:15) knew they too would enter *sheol*. If one acknowledges the Bible's teaching that *sheol* is the state of death these passages make sense.

Wicked men also enter *sheol* upon death. **Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in *sheol*** (Psa. 31:17). **The wicked will return to *sheol*, even the nations who forget God** (Psa. 9:17). These passages do not even hint at torture, only the silent shame of death. **As sheep, they are appointed for *sheol*; death shall be their shepherd. . . and their form shall be for *sheol* to consume so that they have no habitation** (Psa. 49:14). *Sheol* is not a place of torment or consciousness. After an examination of the passages concerning the wicked, we find the orthodox view of *hell* totally imaginary: not derived from the study of God's Word.

The characteristics of *sheol* are straightforward and simple. God could hardly give more forthright characteristics. **For there is no remembrance of You in death; in *sheol* who will give You thanks?** (Psa. 6:5). God's Word shows the righteous cannot praise Him in death. **For *sheol* cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness. It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today** (Isa. 38: 18-19). Again, *sheol* is a place of silence, opposite of life. **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in *sheol*, where you are going** (Eccl. 9:10). Those believing the dead are alive in heaven or hell align with Satan's original lie in the garden rather than the facts of God's Word. **If I make my bed in *sheol*, behold, thou art there** (Psa. 139:8). Death is figuratively compared to sleep which is the closest thing we can comprehend in comparison. **If I look for *sheol* as my home, I make my bed in the darkness** (Job 17:13). Ecclesiastes and Job have been ridiculed as if their testimony does not flow with the rest of God's Word. Their testimony flows perfectly, teaching us to think about what God meant rather than preconceived ideas we have picked up outside the Bible. Blindfolds must be worn to miss the consistent Biblical teaching of what *sheol* is, proving some will go to great lengths to distort God's Word.

Being told of his coming death, Hezekiah said, **In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of *sheol*; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years** (Isa. 38 :10). David knew the dead are dead, not alive. **The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to *sheol* and raises up** (1 Sam. 2:6). The temporary nature of *sheol* which is ended by resurrection is also evident. **Oh that You would hide me in *sheol*, that You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, that You would set a limit for me and remember me!** (Job 14:13). Job will experience his wish in the future when God calls him out of death. **Shall I ransom them from the power of *sheol*?; Shall I redeem them from death? O death, where are your thorns? O *sheol*, where is your sting?** (Hos. 13 :14). 1 Corinthians 15, a prominent resurrection chapter, quotes this verse showing Jesus removing the sting of death in resurrection.

With these facts established, one can then consider *figurative* usages of *Sheol*. God personifies *sheol* as if it were a living person. This type of personification is commonly used for teaching. In our culture the "Grim Reaper" or walking skeletons are a few examples. *Sheol* is personified as having a mouth: **Our bones have been scattered at the mouth of *sheol*** (Psa. 141:7). *Sheol's* "mouth" poetically talks, *sheol* . . . never says 'Enough' (Prov. 30 :16) . Jonah found himself in the belly of *sheaf* (Jon. 2:2). *Sheol* does not really have a mouth, voice or belly, but we easily understand this written figure since death consumes everyone. **Therefore *sheol* has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude...descend into it.** (Isa. 5:14). Death is pictured as eating the city of Jerusalem! How many calories are in that meal?

Sheol is personified as taunting the mighty warriors. **Hell [*sheol*] from beneath is excited about you, to meet you at your coming; it stirs up the dead for you, all the chief ones of the earth; it has raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations** (Isa. 14 :9 , *NKN*) . This brings to mind a picture of *sheol* stirring a pot of dead warriors getting ready to add more mighty ones. These dead ones are not really on thrones; the statement is to stir up the minds of those still alive when they think of death chomping at the bit for them to enter it with no warm welcome awaiting them. God is mocking man's pride. **The strong among the mighty ones shall speak of him and his helpers from the midst of *sheol*, 'They have gone down, they lie still, the uncircumcised, slain by the sword'** (Ezek.32:21). This depicts dead "uncircumcised" warriors speaking from *sheol* to the living warriors. Do these armies think they are too strong to die? The warning is "I was once like you, now I am dead, slain in battle." Clearly, these dead are not still living or tormented. When people force their idea into figurative language, they get a twisted mess rather than God's clear teaching.

Another description has *sheol* grabbing people instantly from life. Korah's rebellion was consumed when the ground opened its "mouth" and swallowed them, **they descend[ed] alive into *sheol*** (Num. 16:30). One moment they are alive; the next moment they are dead, swallowed by death. Korah's rebellion went down bodily and were killed instantly. **Let us swallow them alive like *sheol*, even whole, as those who go down to the pit** (Prov. 1:12).

Conscious torment is not attached to the Bible's occurrences of *sheol*. Those who insist on holding that view charge God with administering a punishment He never gave warning of. **Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?** (Gen. 18:25). Justice would state the punishment beforehand in a straightforward manner.

A personal examination of *sheol*:Occurrences provides straightforward conclusions to those who desire the truth: *Sheol* is synonymous with death and is the temporary resting state of the righteous and the wicked before resurrection. Death, the opposite of life, is a place of silence. *Sheol* can be personified as living, eating, and talking. *Sheol* does not proclaim the orthodox view of "hell." The Old Testament does not proclaim "eternal torment." By examining this "dangerous doctrine," this study of the Bible should make heretics out of us all. (For further reading, see the booklet by Otis Q. Sellers, *Sheol, Hades and Destruction*, No. SS16 on seedandbread.org)