

SEED & BREAD

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

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

Otis Q. Sellers, Bible Teacher

FUTURE PUNISHMENT

That there will be punishment in the future for the unforgiven sins committed in this life is a truth that is emphatically declared in holy Scripture. To deny this is simply a denial of truth stated in God's Word, so concerning this there can be no disagreement among those who accept the Bible as a revelation given by God.

However, in regard to the nature of future punishment and its duration, there is widespread disagreement, and these are matters that need to be researched with an honest determination to know what the Word of God has to say concerning them. We owe it to God, in view of all the amazing tools we now have in relationship to Biblical research, to make an honest search for all the facts concerning future punishment. The time for doing this is long past due.

John Stuart Mill, the famous English philosopher, once remarked that when compared with the doctrine of endless torment, any other objection to Christianity sinks into insignificance. This statement was made at a time when most professing Christians believed in what was called "hell" on principle (it simply had to be), and enjoyed describing it or hearing it described in terms as crude, grisly, gruesome, and hideous as possible. And these words of Mill may have been inspired by statements made by his contemporary, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who said in one of his sermons:

"There is a real fire in hell, as truly as you have a real body - a fire exactly like that which we have on this earth, except this; that it will not consume though it will torture you. You have seen asbestos lying amid red hot coals, but not consumed. So your body will be prepared by God in such a way that it will burn forever without being consumed. With your nerves laid raw by the searing flame, yet never desensitized for all its raging fury, and the acrid smoke of the sulphurous flames searing your lungs and choking your breath, you will cry out for the mercy of death, but it shall never, never, no never, give you surcease."

"*Eternal conscious torment*" are the words most generally used to set forth the position of so-called "orthodox church" theology in regard to the nature and duration of future punishment - tormenting as to its nature and eternal as to its duration. And **if** these words express the truth of God in regard to future punishment they are well and good as to a concise statement, but if they do not, they slander the character of God and should be abandoned.

Inasmuch as this "torment" is supposed to take place in an actual location called "hell," the student of the subject is inclined to examine this word first of all, and when he does he quickly finds that the Hebrew word **sheol** and the Greek word **hades** have been flagrantly mistranslated in order to lend support for the idea that such a place exists.

The King James Version translators' treatment of the Hebrew word *sheol* is an example of this. This word is found sixty-five times in the Old Testament where it is translated "**grave**" **31** times, "**hell**" **31** times, and "**pit**" **3** times. Such translating is so arbitrary, inconsistent, and contradictory that one need not hesitate in charging that this was done by the translators in order to get as much "hell" as possible into the Old Testament.

The translators of the American Standard Version (Nelson, 1901) recognized this biased treatment of the word *sheol* and carried over (transliterated) this word in every occurrence, which was a wise move since it had no established English equivalent. Their effort thus removed every occurrence of the word "hell" from the Old Testament. *Sheol* is the Hebrew designation for "**the state of death,**" and I would so translate it in every occurrence. (See Issue No. **SB082** - "What Does Sheol Mean?"). However, since William Cullen Bryant brought the word "thanatopsis" (**thanatos**, death, plus **opsis**, view) a view of death, into the English language, I would suggest that we take *thanatos*, drop the *os*, then add the suffix *ude* to make "thanatude" and we will have a word which truly sets forth the state of death and can be used to translate both *sheol* and *hades*.

Of course many will insist that the words "eternal conscious torment" do sum up and express Biblical truth concerning the nature and duration of future punishment, and they will point out to us the words of **Revelation 14:9-11 where we are told:**

If any man worship the beast and his image and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God which is poured out without mixture into the cup of His indignation; **and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb: 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.**

For many this passage alone would settle it that the nature of future punishment is torment with fire and brimstone, and that its duration is eternal. Nevertheless, for those who always have in mind the principle expressed in the words of Jesus Christ: "**Take heed therefore how ye hear**" (Luke 8: 18), there is something in this passage that seems to shout: "Attention! Consider! Ponder!" and this we must do.

The meaning of this passage is found in the words that tell us that this tormenting with fire and brimstone is done "**in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb**" (Rev. 14:10).

The Greek word translated "presence" twice in this passage is neither *parousia* nor *pareimi*; it is **enopion**, which means "in view of" or "in the sight of." (Strong's word No. 1779 - E.G.C. page 264). Therefore, unless the Lord Jesus spends His days and nights in this presumed place of torment, those who suffer there will not do so in His sight. This indicates that a more exact understanding of this passage is highly desirable, and that the meaning of the word translated "torment" needs to be carefully considered.

"Do you believe in hell?" This is the blunt question that has been asked of me on numerous occasions, and usually in the spirit that demanded a "yes or no" answer. To these questioners I have ordinarily answered: "If you want a simple 'yes or no' answer, I will need to know what you mean by the word 'hell,' what idea or concept you have in mind when you use this word. If you are thinking of a place or condition such as set forth by Spurgeon, Calvin, Rutherford, or Edwards, my answer is an unqualified NO."

Consider this description of "hell" from the words of Jonathan Edwards: *The woes of sinners in hell will not be a cause of grief to the saints in heaven, but of rejoicing. Though they hear you groan, and sigh, and gnash your teeth, these things will not move them at all to pity you. After your godly parents have seen you lie millions of years, or ages, in torment, day and night, they will not begin to pity you then. They will praise God that His justice appears in the eternity of your misery. The torments in hell will be immeasurably greater than being in a glowing oven, a brick kiln, or fiery furnace.*

Another lurid description of hell is found in the writings of the great Scottish theologian Samuel Rutherford: *Suppose that we saw with our eyes for twenty or thirty years together, a great furnace of fire of the quantity of the whole earth, and saw there Cain, and all the damned as lumps of red fire, and they boiling and leaping for pain in a dungeon of everlasting brimstone - and the black and terrible devils, with long and sharp toothed whips of scorpions lashing out scourges on them, and if we saw our neighbors - yea, our own dear children - swimming and sinking in that black lake, and heard the yelling and crying of our young ones - if we saw this, we would not dare blaspheme the majesty of God.*

Thus we see that a century or more ago good Christian men were proclaiming some very coarse and crude ideas concerning the nature and duration of future punishment. They spoke about "hell" as if they had been there and returned to report on its geography, climate, mean temperature, and vital statistics. Lurid and revolting ideas of punishment were developed in a time when preachers of the gospel mistakenly held that it was their supreme duty to "strike the fear of God in the hearts of men" by means of their messages. The "hot gospel" preachers went the limit in following out this conviction, never awakening to the truth that it is the **goodness of God that leads men to repentance (Rom. 2:4)**. Vivid messages concerning the nature of torments that were to be endured in hell were a necessary stock in trade of every evangelist and revivalist. And it is good indeed that such ideas as to the nature of future punishment have disappeared from most evangelistic efforts today. Yet we need to ask what truth has come in to take the place of these errors?

There is no evidence that the present generation of ministers, teachers, and evangelists have any accurate truth concerning future punishment. A few generalizations, some dogmatic statements, along with certain texts taken out of context seem to be the extent of knowledge among those who claim to be heralds of God's truth. In fact they appear to possess no more knowledge of future punishment than the men of the world who never open a Bible. Now and then they warn about "ending up in hell," speak about "hell-bound sinners," make reference to "the doomed and the damned," but seldom go beyond such generalizations as these. There is no truth in such phrases.

The man who pleads for a reexamination of the subject of future punishment will find that he is instantly condemned for so doing. The church member who asks his minister for some definite teaching on this subject will find himself under the suspicion of heresy.

All that anyone can ever know about future punishment must come from the Word of God. There are no other sources of information. The Bible must be carefully considered from Genesis to Revelation, every passage that might have any bearing upon the subject must be noted, and if these are then studied to see what light they give upon the subject, we will have God's word on this subject. All texts must be studied in the light of their context, and the words used must be considered in regard to their historical and grammatical meaning. All interpretations must be righteous. This is the only way we will ever come to the truth of God.

The time has come, even as in the days of Ezra for truth-loving men to OPEN THE BOOK (Neh. 8:5).

End Issue No. SB182

