

What About Death And Hell?

Part I



By Philip E. Busby

Question #19 - *"I have been studying the Bible recently regarding death. A lot of questions arose due to me losing my son last year. One particular one is the idea of "heaven" and "hell". What is Hades, Sheol...etc. and I don't believe that my son is in heaven - I believe he is asleep. What does the Bible say about hell? Is it different from the lake of fire? Was it meant for Satan and his angels? What have you learned in studying God's word?"*

To answer your question, we could cover an immense amount of ground, but I believe this question breaks down into two principal discussions. At the core of what you're asking is the issue of where people go after they die, both before and after Judgment Day. The second issue is about terminology, and that discussion can be very complex.

The problems with language and terminology are always an issue for those of us who speak English. So, one of the first things which helps us understand our Bible is the understanding that English is a very weak language. To tell the truth, almost all the major languages spoken in our world today are weak, especially when compared to the more ancient languages which the words of the Bible were originally penned. There is a depth of thought in many older languages which most modern languages simply do not contain. This becomes especially problematic

when we attempt to write things down. If I'm standing in front of you, talking to you, you can see my facial expressions, you can hear the changes in the tone and cadence of my voice. There is an ambiance to the words. You can often tell if someone is sad, upset, happy, or even downright elated; but when you write it down on paper, all you can do is put an exclamation point at the end of a sentence to indicate some form of emotional expression. The point is, the words themselves do not express the deeper emotion or meaning like older languages could.

Another problem with English is not only do we lack words, we have too many in some cases. Different words can mean the same thing without widely accepted opinion as to which is more severe in meaning. This is where we get odd little sayings like, "I may be dumb but I'm not stupid!" Where does dumb end and stupid begin, or is it the other way around? Much of this problem is created by the fact it could be said, English is not really a language at all, but instead, nothing more than a collection of borrowed words, many of which are mispronounced. To many people this may not seem to be a big problem, and if you do not wish to have very meaningful and in-depth conversations with other humans, it may not be. However, it certainly is a problem if you are trying to understand something as in-depth as the Bible. Not only does English lack the words to describe many things, but because it is, in many ways, a collection of borrowed words, it has no understandable rules for developing new words which others who speak the language would automatically understand even if they had never heard the word before! This means the translators of the Bible's text were limited in many ways; and because English is only getting worse, more recent attempts to "translate" the Bible into even more modern English have given us Bibles which are all but useless.

This is why it's good to stick with the King James. Can there be no argument which says certain scriptures in the King James could be translated differently? No. Is it that there could be no Bible translation made which would use more modern English phrasing without being brought down to an everyday watercooler level of English speech? No, but unfortunately far too many people do not understand the problems I have explained above, and they are seeking a Bible which will spoon feed them information by being put in ever simpler English. That trend has caused a downhill slide, not an improvement

on the English translation of the Bible. The reason to stick with the King James is because it's a solid English translation which is virtually uncorrupted by doctrinal theory as most recent "translations" have been. Its very high level of English captures much of what has been totally lost in more recent versions, and because the Bible is something very sacred and special, there is certainly nothing wrong with its words being immediately and recognizably different from our everyday speech. In spite of its "thee" and "thou" structure, we should realize there is also great value in its commonality. For good reason, the King James is still a very well known and widely read version, and that is good for us because the weaker the terminology the harder it is to talk about a question like the one you have asked!

There are many words and terms connected to the issue you are asking about. Some come from the language the Scripture was originally written in, and some come from languages the text was translated into. Because English is such a borrowing language, the English translation simply keeps some original words in some cases, while translating the same word into more of an English word or phrase in other places. This is also confused by the fact different translations choose to do different things. This leaves us with quite a few words and terms which different people will argue are "Biblical." In your question, you have pointed to some and there are a few more we will want to look at. You have asked about or at least mentioned heaven, death, Hades, Sheol, hell and Lake of Fire. With these, there is also paradise, outer darkness, and grave. Another term which comes into this issue is "grave sleeping." This term is not in the Bible, but it's the proper name - so to speak - for the statement you made concerning your son, and is really at the core of the question you are asking.

All this is why I said your question breaks down into two major parts. The questions you have asked about different words are examples of terminology problems. What we must understand is while different words may have different meanings, those meanings can change with time and usage. So, when you want to give a title to something like a place, you are often stuck with the words people already understand to some degree, and those words may change in their common meaning as time passes. This is the case when talking about places such as heaven and hell. If I call them something totally out of

reference, you would have no idea what I was talking about. However, if I say "heaven" or "hell," you have little more than a concept of what I'm talking about. For a good example of this, we'll look at the word heaven. This word in English is very generic! When speaking English, any number of religions will talk about "heaven," but are we all talking about the same place? No! Whether we can with title, define our heaven from another is all dependent on the availability of recognized words. For example, a Christian may talk about heaven and a Muslim may simply refer to heaven when talking about their belief in a place of final rest, but a Buddhist may use the word Nirvana. If I'm a Christian and I want to tell a Buddhist about the true heaven and I'm using his language, I may have no choice but to use the word Nirvana as a conceptual starting place. However, I will need to do a lot of explaining about the difference between his belief and the truth!

This is the issue with the word Hades. Hades is a Greek word, and at the time of Christ it may have been a more generic term or simply the most available word in Greek for the concept of hell. Either way, today, Hades is simply an old word without common use in English. If the word loses its generic feel, it becomes a piece of history, and many people may simply look at Hades as strictly a Greek mythology word. If we do this - and I believe we have - then Hades is not a good word to use because Greek mythology Hades is not the same thing as the true definition of the Biblical hell. In Greek mythology, Hades is the name of a false place and a false god, but we can not afford to let this trip us up. We must understand that just because a word like Hades and Sheol are used in the Bible's text, it does not mean the writers were attempting to talk about the same place the pagans, which may have primarily used these words, were talking about. They were simply using an understandable word to talk about a concept, and through the whole of their teaching, hoped to define for people what the truth actually was and is!

We have to separate these items in our mind and understand the Bible is trying to teach us the truth, not just be a part of the false philosophies of men. This is why we cannot understand what the Bible is saying by simply pulling a verse out of context. We must study the Word as a whole. In the Bible, we may see different words for places like heaven and hell, but what we are attempting to do is find the truth in spite

of the weakness of our language.

Now, before we leave a discussion specifically about terms and words, I need to stop and more specifically cover the two words you asked about, Hades and Sheol. As I mentioned, Hades is a Greek word and the only reason it appears in some translations of the Bible is the New Testament (especially the copies which survived to later generations) was mostly written in Greek. The Hebrew Scriptures, which Christians like to call the Old Testament, were also translated from Hebrew into Greek before the time of the New Testament. A translation called the Septuagint, though rejected by many Jews in Israel, was very popular among early Christians who did not speak or read Hebrew. All this Greek brought the word Hades into common use in Christianity. However, in English the word is more appropriately translated as hell or the grave, for reasons which I hope will be apparent to you later in this discussion. The word Sheol is a Hebrew word used in the original writing of the Old Testament. It is a more appropriate word because it belongs to God's chosen people. Which means, in spite of false beliefs which may get applied to it, unlike Hades, Sheol is intended to stand for the truth. This is a small example of why God formed a chosen people. Their language, their culture, and everything about them was meant to shine forth the truth.

It's not likely that the words Hades or Sheol were ever as generic a word as our English "hell," because they originally stood on opposite sides of the fence. Hades, being a Greek word, stands for the Greek ideas of the afterlife. Sheol, being a Hebrew word, stands for the Hebrew ideas of the afterlife. Are these ideas the same? Well, among men they are far more the same than they should be! Hades was not originally a word to designate a place for the afterlife but the name of a Greek god. However, Hades also became known as the place where this god ruled, and this place was believed to be somewhere inside the earth; thus, it's often referred to as the "underworld." This is the place Greek mythology believed all the dead go, and the fact the Greeks held this theology is primarily why it's so pervasive in our Christian culture. Sheol is a word meant to denote, not so much a place where people go after death, but the simple concept that people leave this life. This may seem like I'm picking at a technicality, but there is a big difference, and the difference is found in man's arrogance. You see,

mythological Hades represents something men believe they understand. They say it is a place. They say it is in the earth, and there is a god which rules it. Man simply developed a story and it became what he taught as fact. In our modern world we have a good example of this arrogance in the teaching of evolution!

In contrast, Sheol was meant to tell us there are things we do not completely understand. If the word had maintained its true spirit, people would have understood what Jesus was saying much better. Jesus told us that if we were going to understand the truth, we would have to become as little children. (Mark 10:13-16) This was to say we were going to have to let go of the things we thought we knew and listen to the voice of God. God will teach us but only if we humble ourselves and allow Him the freedom to even correct what we think we already understand. Jesus said The Holy Spirit would continue the work of teaching us because there were many things Jesus wanted to tell even His disciples, but they could not bear them at that time. (John 16:12-14) When we do not understand something, we should not look to the theologies of men for an explanation; we should look to God. A failure to do this happened when it came to the word Sheol.

In taking on the beliefs of the pagans around them, which God specifically and for good reason told them not to, Hebrew speaking people came to see Sheol as much the same place as the Greeks saw Hades. Sheol is also often looked at as an underworld. As this corruption crept in, many came to believe Sheol was simply a place where all the dead went, just as Hades. However, this idea did not line up with an obvious truth which the Bible had already revealed to them; and as humans often do, instead of throwing out the false belief, they tried to meld the two. God was trying to explain to them that after death He would judge every soul. For those who trusted in Him, there would be life; but for those who did not trust in Him, there would be destruction. This is what Abraham understood, and it is why he told his son Isaac that, "God will provide himself a lamb..." Genesis 22:8 Abraham understood God would have to provide a way out of the destruction death brought. He did not understand everything, but Abraham trusted God would not allow death to eternally separate God from those who loved Him. (Rom. 4:3) Many of Abraham's descendants did not trust God with this simplicity and turned to the theologies of men. Because the theologies

of men said all the dead went to this underworld and their understanding already told them God would provide a better place for the righteous, the theology eventually developed where Sheol came to be looked at as divided into two places or sections. One section was for the good and the other for the bad. All this thinking is the result of pagan corruption which has translated all the way down to us today.

What do I mean by pagan corruption? Well, it all goes back to the Tower of Babel. (Gen. 11:1-9) After the flood of Noah's day, man attempted to push God out of the hearts of men by building a religion which would trap all mankind into believing a certain way. This religion attempted to explain everything so man would question nothing, and simply believe whatever lie the religion told him. The prominent physical feature of this religion was the construction of a tower. This tower's purpose was to create a place where men could touch the sky. Its more practical idea was to stand as a monument to human achievement and to serve as a place where false priests could go and read the stars to tell man his future. People who teach the Bible often get caught up on the tower as the reason for God being angry, but evidence stands today which tells us otherwise. God did not confound man's language because man was building a tower! After the Tower of Babel, people went out literally to every corner of the globe and built various forms of this tower over and over. Even the tall steeples on Christian churches has a relationship to the same basic ideas; but God is not some angry being whose eyes turn red every time man does something which is displeasing to Him! God is a caring God, and when He is angry, it is a righteous anger.

Jesus did not go into the marketplace and overturn the merchant's tables there even though the merchants were not always honest with their customers. However, Jesus did drive out the money changers from the Temple of God. Even then, He did not do it because of dishonesty but because the Temple of God is simply no place to be buying and selling! (Matt. 21:12-13) By doing commerce in the temple, they were robbing from people the purpose of the temple. The temple was a place for people to pray and commune with God. If they needed to bring a sacrifice, the people needed to buy that sacrifice elsewhere or bring it from home. Bringing the offering through the streets is as much a part of the process as offering it at the temple!

So, Jesus was angry that people seeking to serve God were being sidetracked by these merchants. God gave us a free will, which means we can do what we want. God will not force us to serve Him, but He will not allow other men to take from this earth the ability to find Him! This is the issue God was dealing with at the Tower of Babel. Man wanted to create a religion which would take all men away from finding God by teaching them a common religion. If this had been allowed, concepts about places such as heaven and hell would be solidified by that false religion which was developing under the circumstances of man being all one language. As powerful as it has been in some countries around the world to try and outlaw the seeking of the truth, it doesn't hold a candle to people having a belief which causes them to never even think about seeking in the first place! Understanding heaven and hell in the midst of various philosophies may seem like a hard thing to do, but the fact you have a desire to keep searching until you hear the answer from God, makes the process a good thing! (Heb. 11:6)

There may be many concepts about heaven and hell, but in spite of the confounding of man's languages, most of the base concepts started at the Tower of Babel still prevail. This is why you can talk about the very refined theology of the Greek Hades and see virtually the same base concept among the Canaanites which originally corrupted the Israelites. Now, as we move into a discussion of the truth, it helps to understand that man started out with the right understanding. Man had the opportunity to learn from God from the very beginning. Jesus told us to become as children, and when it came to knowledge that is exactly how God created us - in innocence. Because man did not want to listen to God, he went off and relied on his own understanding in his attempt to explain his existence. This thinking is what brought us to the Tower of Babel and still guides many people today. Understanding this will help us see through the lack of uncorrupted terminology and discover the truth!

In our next segment, we will start our look at what the truth really is by going through what the Bible specifically tells us about death. Until then, I pray you will learn to continually trust in The Lord with all your heart; and lean not unto your own understanding!