

10 HELL IS NOT IN THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

Although most recent translations of the Bible have corrected the KJV error of indiscriminately substituting the word “hell” for Hades, Sheol, Gehenna, or Tartarus, most versions used today still retain twelve references to hell—eleven of which are attributed to Jesus. Literal translations of the New Testament do not use the word “hell” because it is not in the original Greek. The error of substituting “hell” for “Gehenna” has been very destructive to understanding the Bible and Jesus’s teachings. Gehenna was an actual valley just south of Jerusalem and was in no need of translation any more than Bethlehem, Emmaus, or Jordan River.

1. HELL IS NOT IN THE BIBLE IN WORD OR CONCEPT.

The concept of “everlasting torment” is not in the Old Testament. Adam and Eve, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon were never informed of such a place or concept. In the New Testament, Paul, who wrote 14 epistles, never mentioned hell even once, nor did Peter, Jude, and John. Neither is hell mentioned in the entire book of Acts which spans 30 years of church history. We may see words and phrases that we (falsely) assume refer to hell, but “hell” is used only 12 times and the word that should have been used is Gehenna, referring to a location just south of Jerusalem. With this understanding, we now have the ability to discern the real meaning of Jesus’s statements regarding The Valley of Hinnom or Gehenna.

2. THE CONTEXT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IS THE COMING NATIONAL JUDGMENT (Roman/Jewish War).

As prophesied by Old Testament prophets, the Holy Land was going to suffer judgment as it had at the hands of the Assyrians in 721 BC and Babylon 586 BC. Unrepentant Jews would perish or be taken as slaves in the Jewish/Roman conflict AD 67-70 but those who believed in Messiah would escape (Lk. 21:21)

3. JOHN THE BAPTIST WARNED OF THE IMPENDING NATIONAL JUDGMENT.

At the beginning of the New Testament, we see John the Baptist warning of the coming judgment: “The axe lies at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t bring forth good fruit is cut down, and cast into the fire.” Mt. 3:10
John spoke of the Messiah who would baptize believers with the Holy Spirit and unbelievers with fire. (Mt. 3:11). John’s mission was to call Israel to repentance and warn of the coming wrath for the unrepentant: “His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.” Mt. 3:12

4. JESUS WARNED OF IMMINENT NATIONAL JUDGMENT.

In Old Testament prophet style, Jesus signaled the coming destruction with “woe” warnings. “Woe to you, you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.” Lk 6:25 “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon which were done in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.” Mt. 11:21. “Woe to you lawyers! For you took away the key of knowledge. You didn’t enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in, you hindered.” Lk 11:52. “Woe” meant national judgment.

5. “GEHENNA” WAS SYNONYMOUS WITH NATIONAL JUDGMENT TO THE JEWS.

Similar to what we think of when we hear the word “Waterloo,” when Jesus made reference to Gehenna, the image that would have been brought to the minds of His Jewish listeners was the slaughter of the Jewish people during the Babylonian War 601 to 586 BC. The Valley of Hinnom i.e. Gehenna, was called the Valley of Slaughter because of the devastation of Jerusalem and countless dead bodies of the people thrown in the valley, serving as food for wild animals. (Jer. 7:30f, 19:1f). It was a sobering picture that would have grabbed the immediate attention of the Jews listening to Jesus. They would have likely known instantly, when Jesus said, “Gehenna”, he was referencing national judgment.

6. PASSAGES WHERE GEHENNA IS FALSELY RENDERED “HELL”. (Parallel passages grouped together)

A. In these passages, Jesus is emphasizing the seriousness of sin and calling people to repent and follow Him. Followers of Jesus responded differently than unbelievers as the Roman conflict neared, due to His warnings (eg. Lk 21:20f). Christians were saved from the ghastly misery of the war. For first century believers, the superiority of following Messiah was two-fold: they were given Life with Christ and, temporally, they escaped the impending national judgment.

a) Mt. 18:9. (also Mk. 5:29, 9:47) “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into the Gehenna of fire.”

b) Mt. 5:30 (also Mk. 9:43). “If your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off, and throw it away from you. For it is more profitable for you that one of your members should perish, than for your whole body to be cast into Gehenna.”

c) Mk 9:45. “If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life lame, rather than having your two feet to be cast into Gehenna.”

d) Mt. 5:22. “But I tell you, that everyone who is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment; ... and whoever shall say, ‘You fool!’ shall be in danger of the fire of Gehenna.”

e) Ja. 3:6. "And the tongue is a fire. The world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature, and is set on fire by Gehenna." (from James)

B. In these passages Jesus is saying not to fear those who may kill you for following Him (persecution of early Christians was fierce), but fear God who brings about the coming devastation through national judgment.

a) Mt. 10:28 "Don't be afraid of those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul. Rather, fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Gehenna."

b) Lk. 12:5. "But I will warn you whom you should fear. Fear him, who after he has killed, has power to cast into Gehenna. Yes, I tell you, fear him." (no suitable burial, shame, bodies eaten by wild animals, etc.)

C. In these passages Jesus promised the imminent judgment of war for Jewish leadership because of their perversion of the law of God and their soon-to-be persecution of Jesus's followers (which continued for almost 35 years until the war.)

a) Mt. 23:15 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel around by sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much of a son of Gehenna as yourselves."

b) Mt. 23:31-33 "You testify to yourselves that you are children of those who killed the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you offspring of vipers, how will you escape the judgment of Gehenna?"

7. SOME OLD TESTAMENT PHRASES ARE ASSUMED TO BE ABOUT HELL, BUT WERE COMMON IMAGES IN REFERENCE TO NATIONAL JUDGMENT.

These include many fire images: consuming fire, unquenchable fire, fire and brimstone, cast into fire, branches burned, blazing fire, roaring fire, melting. Other phrases include worm dies not, weeping and gnashing of teeth, no rest day or night, etc. Some Old Testament examples follow:

a) **Assyrians to be destroyed:** "Your breath is a fire that will devour you. The peoples will be like the burning of lime, like thorns that are cut down and burned in the fire." Is. 33:10-11

b) **Jerusalem to be destroyed:** "They shall go forth, and look on the dead bodies of the men who have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched..." Is. 66:24

c) **Judgment on Israel:** "I will kindle a fire in you, and it shall devour every green tree in you, and every dry tree: the flaming flame shall not be quenched, and all faces from the south to the north shall be burnt thereby." Ezk 20:47

d) **Judgment on Israel at hands of Assyria 722 BC:** Seek Yahweh, and you will live; lest he break out like fire in the house of Joseph, and it devour, and there be no one to quench it in Bethel." Amos 5:5f

e) **Future destruction of Jerusalem:** "For, behold, Yahweh will come with fire, and his chariots shall be like the whirlwind; to render his anger with fierceness, and his rebuke with flames of fire...for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they will be loathsome to all mankind." Is. 66:15, 24

f) **Destruction of Judah & Israel:** "The mountains melt under him, and the valleys split apart, like wax before the fire, like waters that are poured down a steep place." Micah 1:4

g) **Destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon 586 BC:** "The Lord...called you to weeping, to wailing..." Is. 22:12

8. IN THE N.T. WE FIND THE SAME LANGUAGE REGARDING THE COMING NATIONAL JUDGMENT.

As a Jew, Jesus was steeped in the language and history of the Old Testament as was his audience. So when we see "fire" language and other national judgment images, we need to understand it as they did.

a) "...will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth." Mt. 13:50

b) "For our God is a consuming fire." Heb. 12:29

c) "Where their worm does not die and their fire is not quenched." Mk 9:46

d) Jesus said, "I have come to throw fire on the earth. How I wish it were already kindled!" Lk. 12:49

e) Throw out the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' Mt. 25:30

9. THE "LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN" STORY IS NOT TEACHING ABOUT HELL. Luke 16:19-31

The story of Lazarus and the Rich Man was apparently drawn from a folk story and used for a Pharisee audience to teach about their corrupt values. They were lovers of money and believed that their wealth indicated they were favored by God. Jesus's story showed this to be false. We know that this tale is fantasy, because the Old Testament taught that the dead do not remember (Ps. 6:5), do not think (Ps. 146:4), have no activity (Eccl. 9:10), and there is nothing about going to "Abraham's bosom." These would have been known facts among Jews and consequently the story would have been received as a teaching story about avarice and not about the afterlife. For those who might say Jesus would not have used a pagan story, check out when he alluded to Beelzebub, a Philistine god and Mammon, a Syrian deity.

Further study: [Essays on Eschatology](#) by Samuel G. Dawson. You can also find his free article on the [samuelgdawson.com](#) website. Also find "Lazarus and the Rich Man" story explained in [Essays on Eschatology](#) book and website.

NOTE: Sheol (Hebrew) and Hades (Greek) are equivalent terms for "the unseen." (No torment is associated with these terms.)