

Chapter 17

Sheol & Hades - Not Hell

It is not uncommon for words to take on new meanings as time progresses, and, without doubt, the word *hell* falls into this group.

The word *hell* is of Saxon origin, being derived from the word *helan*, which also has been spelled *hele*, *helle*, *hell*, and *heile*. In its original form, it simply meant "to cover, conceal, and hide." Thus, the expression "to *hele* over a matter" meant "to cover it." Another Saxon derivation is the word *holl*, which refers to a cavern or to the unseen place of the dead, which, in turn, has led some commentators to state that the word *hell* refers to "hole," which means "grave."

A fascinating use of the word *hell* refers to a lover taking his love into a "hell" (hidden place) to kiss her. Try telling the love of your life that you are going to take her to hell for a kiss!

Most would agree that these words have a rather benign meaning and, most definitely, do not conjure up a picture of literal fire tormenting people forever and ever and ever and ever, as some emphasize. If everyone held to its benign meaning, then the word *hell* would be appropriate when referring to the grave or death, a state of unconsciousness where **the dead know nothing whatsoever** (Ecclesiastes 9:5), and **the dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any who go down to silence** (Psalm 115:17). However, this is obviously not the view held by most in our day.

Today, the Christian view of hell is not much different from the pagan view. It is generally described as a grotesque *place* of fire and worms that torments human flesh endlessly as people scream for water to touch their lips to quench their thirst. Strangely, human flesh is never consumed in this hell-hole. Of course, Hollywood movies do much to perpetuate this image and worse with their sordid special effects and pagan-occult plots.

Some years ago, a well-known pastor claimed that Dante's *Inferno* proves there is a hell. Dante the troubadour lived from 1265-1321 AD and wrote the *Divine Comedy* of which the *Inferno* is part. The fact of the matter is that the modern-day *hell* is similar to the *Inferno*; but this came out of the Dark Ages and pagan mythology, not Scripture. If we had lived through this period of history, which was truly dark, we too might have thought it to be a living hell as conjured up by pagans. Some of the imagery preceded Dante, but he played a part in pushing it forward.

Of course, one man's book or any man's book, for that matter, does not prove that hell, as envisioned by the pagans, Hollywood, or the tradition of men, exists.

The word *hell* is usually translated from the words *sheol*, *hades*, *tartarus*, and *gehenna*, which appear in Scripture 31 times, 11 times, 1 time, and 12 times, respectively. The *King James*

Version uses the word *hell* 54 times. Recognizing the difference in these words, some of the more modern translations have moved away from the word and retained the words *sheol*, *hades*, and *tartarus*, all of which refer to the unseen and not to a place of torture for the "living dead" (an oxymoron, i.e., contradictory terms). Yet, the word *gehenna*, which is associated with judgment unto physical death, is translated as *hell* in most English translations.

These words are purposely not capitalized as is done in some translations. Capitalization indicates a place; however, these words need to be looked upon as more of a state of being.

The King James Version and Hell

The *King James Version*, one of the most widely used and influential Bibles in the world, uses the word *hell* more than all translations (54 times). The *New King James Version* is a little better, with only 32 uses. To confuse matters, the *King James Version* also translates *sheol* and *hades* into *grave* and *pit*, as well as *hell*.

Other translations use the word *hell* from 12 to 14 times (e.g., *American Standard*, *New American Standard*, *Revised Standard*, *New Revised Standard*, *New Living Translation*, *Amplified*, *New International*, *Darby New Translation*, and *New Century*). However, there are several versions that attempt to remain closer to the original languages and do not use the word *hell*. These include the *Concordant Literal New Testament* (1926, 1983), *Young's Literal Translation* (1898), *Rotherham's Emphasized Bible* (1902, 1944) and *Weymouth's New Testament in Modern Speech* (1903).

Since the *King James Version* (KJV) uses the word *hell* more than any other, it would be helpful to cite the places where it is used in place of the Hebrew or Greek words *sheol*, *hades*, *tartarus*, and *gehenna*.

***SHEOL* occurs 65 times and is translated by the KJV:**

HELL 31 times: Deuteronomy 32:22; 2 Samuel 22:6; Job 11:8; 26:6; Psalm 9:17; 16:10; 18:5; 55:15; 86:13; 116:3; 139:8; Proverbs 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11, 24; 23:14; 27:20; Isaiah 5:14; 14:9, 15; 28:15, 18; 57:9; Ezekiel 31:16, 17; 32:21, 27; Amos 9:2; Jonah 2:2; Habakkuk 2:5

GRAVE 31 times: Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; 1 Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 7:9; 14:13; 17:13; 21:13; 24:19; Psalm 6:5; 30:3; 31:17; 49:14, 14, 15; 88:3; 89:48; 141:7; Proverbs 1:12; 30:16; Ecclesiastes 9:10; Song 8:6; Isaiah 14:11; 38:10, 18; Ezekiel 31:15; Hosea 13:14, 14

THE PIT 3 times: Numbers 16:30, 33; Job 17:16

***HADES* occurs 11 times and is translated by the KJV:**

HELL 10 times: Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13, 14

GRAVE 1 time: 1 Corinthians 15:55 (not in all manuscripts)

TARTARUS occurs 1 time and is translated by the KJV:

HELL 1 time: 2 Peter 2:4

GEHENNA occurs 12 times and is translated by the KJV:

HELL 12 times: Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6

Sheol and Hades

Sheol, a Hebrew word found in the Old Testament, and *hades*, a Greek word found in the New Testament, have the same meaning. Generally, in Scripture, Hebrew words set the meaning for Greek words. This is a very important point, for there is a mighty difference between the Hebrew and Greek languages. We could say that the Hebrew language originated with God, for it began with the Hebrews and was the primary language for capturing God's Word given through the prophets. Initially, there was no use for Hebrew in literature. Consequently, there was no other literature in use that could corrupt the language. It was used for God's Word; thus, the meaning of what was written could be and still can be determined by the Hebrew text alone.

However, the Greek language is a far different matter. Before Greek Scripture was written, there were countless pieces of Greek literature in use that determined the meaning of words. For example, the Greeks believed in mythology and many gods and, as such, held many beliefs associated with the spirit world. *Hades* was viewed by the Greeks in light of their pagan mythology. Consequently, a Greek reading the word *hades* in Greek Scripture might relate the word to the world of darkness, the spirit world, or some intermediate state after death. The pagans believed in an afterlife, and *hades* would have been associated with such a life.

Thankfully, the Word of God gives the meaning of *hades*, as seen by comparing Acts 2:27, 31 with Psalm 16:10.

(27) Thou wilt not leave my soul to hades, nor wilt Thou give Thy Kind One to see corruption. (31) having foreseen, he did speak concerning the rising again of the Christ, that his soul was not left to hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. (Acts 2:27, 31 YLT)

For Thou dost not leave my soul to Sheol, nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption. (Psalm 16:10 YLT)

The verses in Acts 2 are a direct quote of the verse in Psalm 16, which refer to the Lord Jesus and His death; thus, *sheol* and *hades* have the same meaning. Given this understanding, all one must do is understand what *sheol* means in order to understand what *hades* means.

The *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998) by David H. Stern acknowledges the sameness of these two words by using the word *sheol* (*Sh'ol*) in place of *hades* throughout the New Testament.

Ask, Unseen

In Hebrew, the primary word from which *sheol* is derived signifies "ask." *Ask* refers to something that is *unseen*. One asks: Where has it gone? And the answer comes: To the unseen! In other words, *sheol* refers to *the unseen (imperceptible)*. Every place in Scripture that *sheol* appears is in relation to the state of death where the life of the person ceases and is no more.

Some believe that *sheol* and *hades* simply refer to the grave.

There is another test that can be applied. Taking the word *hades* and looking at the Greek words from which it is derived reveals it too means "un-perceive" or "not to perceive," which is the same as "unseen." Thus, approaching *sheol* and *hades* from two angles yields the same result. They simply mean "the unseen." Obviously, this is a far cry from the modern-day view of the word *hell*.

The Soul and the Unseen, Hades

In a related matter, what happens in death? The **soul** returns to *the unseen* (Psalm 16:10; 30:3; 49:15; 86:13; 89:48; Proverbs 23:14; Acts 2:27, 31). The **body**, which is the man, came from the soil and at dissolution returns to the soil to become dust (Ecclesiastes 12:7). The **spirit**, which is the breath that is blown into the body and which is described as the imperceptible power of life, action, and intelligence, came from God and at dissolution returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The soul or sensation (feelings, experiences), which came from the union of the breath and the body, came from the unseen and at dissolution returns to the unseen. As our body entirely decomposes at death, so do the sensations that comprise our soul end in death. Experiences and sensations of the soul do not continue on apart from the body in death. They did not exist before birth, and they do not exist in death.

In the New Testament, the *unseen* is used in relation to the Lord's soul not being forsaken in the unseen (Acts 2:27); Capernaum subsiding in the unseen (Matthew 11:23); the rich man residing in the unseen (Luke 16:22-23); the Lord Jesus having the keys of the unseen (Revelation 1:18); death being followed by the unseen (Revelation 6:8); death and the unseen giving up the dead (Revelation 20:13); and finally death and the unseen being cast into the lake of fire, the second death (Revelation 20:14). Of particular note is the personification of death and the unseen, as if they are a specific authority or power.

The soul returns to the unseen from whence it came and not to any place in which life continues (whether hell, heaven, paradise, purgatory, or any intermediate place between life and death). Because of the current meaning of the word *hell*, which should mean "covered"

(hidden or unseen), it is most unfortunate that translators use the word *hell* in place of the words *sheol* and *hades*.

If we desire to hold to what Scripture teaches, then we must hold that *sheol* and *hades* refer to the *unseen*, which speaks of death, a state of unconsciousness, or the grave, *not* a living hell of endless torment and torture.

Gates of the Unseen; Not the Gates of Hell

Now, it is rather common to hear many quote the following verse, proclaiming that the dark forces of this world, which they call *hell*, shall not prevail against the ecclesia, making hell the domain of the devil. This is based on the fact that some translations use the phrase gates of *hell*, which is not the correct translation of the Greek. It should be the *gates of hades* or *the unseen*, as noted below.

"I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church [ecclesia]; and the gates of Hades [the unseen] will not overpower it." (Matthew 16:18 NASB [CV])

"Now I also say to you, that you are Peter [a stone], and on this solid rock I will build my Assembly [or, Church], and [the] gates of the realm of the dead [Gr., hades] will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18 ALT)

For a moment, stop and consider the implications of the word *hell* as held by many today. On one hand, *hell* is depicted as the authority (gates) of the wicked forces of darkness, which is supposedly the devil's domain; yet, on the other hand, it is depicted as an eternal place of torture and torment for the lost, including the devil and its angels.

How can the devil be cast into *hell* as eternal punishment, if hell is also its natural element or realm? Casting it into its natural element would be a pleasure for the devil, not a torment. According to John's Patmos vision, the devil will be cast into the lake of fire, which most people also call *hell*, to be tormented forever and ever (Revelation 20:10). This is a good example of *interpretative bias*.

This does not mean that the ecclesia is not in a battle with unseen dark forces. This is not being challenged. What is being challenged is the use of Matthew 16:18 to make the point.

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. (Ephesians 6:12 NASB)

This is an undeniable truth, and, without any doubt, these forces will not prevail against the Lord as He builds His ecclesia; but this was not Jesus' message to Peter. He was referring to the *gates of death* and not the *hell* that many hold to in our day.

The word *gate* refers to a physical structure that controls (allows or denies) entrance into or exit from a place. Ancient city walls had gates to keep out intruders. Also, gates can be taken figuratively to refer to the *authorities* or *powers* of a place. In the ancient cities, the authorities and powers of the city sat in the gates. In this case, the power or authority pertains to the unseen. Thus, *the gates of the unseen* simply means *the authority or power of the unseen*, which is the realm of the dead.

According to Hebrew Scripture, the unseen refers to *sheol*, that is, death. The comparable word in the Greek is the word *hades* or *unseen*. Again, this is easily proven by comparing Psalm 16:10 to Acts 2:27, 31, where the verses in Acts are a direct quote of the verse in the psalm: **For Thou does not leave my soul to Sheol, nor givest thy saintly one to see corruption.** The word **corruption** refers to **death** (1 Corinthians 15:53-55).

In other words, the state of death will not prevail against His *ecclesia* because Christ died for the sin of the world, was buried, and then was raised from among the dead. Jesus was declaring that because He was about to overcome death, so would His *ecclesia* overcome death, not when individuals die but when the *ecclesia* is raised up together at His presence.

The proof that Jesus had His death, as well as His victory over death, in view is discovered three verses later; a fact His disciples had a difficult time grasping, especially Peter.

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day. (Matthew 16:21 NASB)

Another way to prove the point is through the use of *the gates of the unseen* or a similar phrase in other places of Scripture, particularly its first mention, which sets its meaning for all Scripture, both old and new.

Such a phrase was first used by Hezekiah, king of Judah, when he was ill and literally about to die. He cried out: **"I, yea, I say: In the height of my days am I going into the gates of the unseen, made to miss the rest of my years"** (Isaiah 38:10 CV).

Given the context of Hezekiah's cry and God's response of lengthening his days, there is no doubt that the king was referring to his death and returning to the unseen. His life was about to be cut short, and he was going to the place of the dead, where **the dead know nothing whatsoever** (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6).

When people go to the unseen, they cease to be; and Hezekiah did not want to die in the height of his days, in the prime of his life. His spirit was about to return to God who gave it, his body was about to return to the soil from whence it came, and his soul was about to return to the unseen, which is a state of unconsciousness. There is no consciousness before birth and there is none after death. Jesus described death as sleep, a fact reinforced by Paul (John 11:11, 14, 39; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-16).

Strictly speaking, the *gates of the unseen* refers to the return or death of the soul. Soul is not life, but it is intimately connected with life, for the soul comes forth from life and cannot exist apart from it. The human soul speaks of the human experience or sensations (consciousness, feelings, desires). It is the experience or sensation that results from the combination of an organic body with spirit (*the breath of the spirit of life*) and has been described as a **phenomenon resulting from the perception of the senses**. When life departs a body, the soul ceases, for it has no life apart from the spirit and the body.

Consequently, **the soul going into the *gates of the unseen* means one has died.**

What did Hezekiah mean when he said that he was going into the *gates of the unseen*? He simply meant that, in a figurative sense, the unseen has a particular power or jurisdiction (Revelation 20:6) over man and that power keeps the soul in the state of the unseen. With the spirit gone and the body returned to the soil, no soul of the dead has ever returned from the unseen to tell about it. It is in a state (not place) of unconsciousness. Hezekiah saw himself going into the power of the unseen *not* in the physical or even the spiritual sense of possessing a life after death and entering into some unseen, yet real, realm. Please do not read this into his words. He saw himself dying and ceasing to be, for death is death and no one has the power to overcome death and return to life.

Hezekiah was simply stating the truth that all mankind knows from experience. There is no way for man to rise from the dead and become a living soul again, based on his own power. Mankind has no power over death, for **death passed through into all mankind** (Romans 5:12 CV). When man dies, he has no power to give himself life to rise out of the grave.

The psalmist asks: **What master could live and not see death? Could his soul escape from the hand of the unseen?** (Psalm 89:48). The answer is that no one is exempt from dying and no one can escape from the unseen.

David also cried out to the Lord as he was in much anguish and faced possible death from those who hated him: **Show me favour, O Yahweh! Behold my humiliation due to them who hate me, lift me on high out of the gates of death; that I may recount all thy praises...** (Psalm 9:13-14 REB).

Notice that David specifically referred to the *gates of death*. He was not physically dead at this point, but he thought he might die if his enemies persisted. In a sense, it seems that he likened his state of mind to death, as well, as all his enemies sought for his life. The point is that he joined gates with death.

Why will *the gates of the unseen or of death* not prevail against the Lord's *ecclesia*? The answer is in the resurrection. The disciples did not understand that their Master had to be killed and be raised up on the third day, as evidenced by Jesus' rebuke of Peter (Matthew 16:21-23), the very one who declared that Jesus is **the Christ, the Son of the living God** (Matthew 16:16). Because

Jesus was resurrected, meaning He overcame death, so too will His ecclesia, which is His Body, one day be resurrected and overcome death in His life, putting on immortality.

As believers, this is our grandest hope, and Jesus was and is today telling us to hold to this hope. Death shall not prevail!

Paul confirms this fact.

(54) But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, "DEATH IS SWALLOWED UP in victory. (55) "O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR VICTORY? O DEATH, WHERE IS YOUR STING?" (1 Corinthians 15:54-55 NASB)

But here are the crowning proofs that Jesus referred to the gates of hades or death.

(17) ... "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, (18) and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. (Revelation 1:17-18 NASB)

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil.... (Hebrews 2:14 NASB)

By the way, the ecclesia can bind and loose things on earth as in heaven (Matthew 16:19) because **the Son of God has appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil** (1 John 3:8). The keys of the Kingdom of the Heavens are part of the ecclesia's arsenal of spiritual weaponry.

Thus, in Matthew 16:18, Jesus announced to Peter and the other disciples that He was going to conquer not only death but the devil as well; therefore, death would not prevail against His ecclesia. Why? Because He is alive forevermore, and, at the consummation of the eons, He will abolish the last enemy of mankind, death, which includes the first and the second deaths. Death in both forms (physical and works of carnal flesh) is the last enemy of mankind that must be abolished at the consummation of the eons (1 Corinthians 15:26), and Jesus alone will abolish all forms of death as He delivers up the Kingdom to the Father.

When, through His Complement, His Body, He sums up all things in the heavens and on the earth, Jesus will have accomplished all that the Father gave Him to do for all mankind, and that is to save them from death and to give life to ALL.

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. (Romans 5:18 NASB)