

PROJECT TITLE: HOPE AFTER DEATH  
PROGRAM TITLE: HELL  
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Russia's Kola peninsula. 1989. Geologists are drilling deep into the earth's crust. The bit chews slowly through the strata, deeper than any borehole has ever gone. Nine miles down it breaks through the rock into a void. The long drill-shaft spins out of control. The scientists shut down the rig. Sensors tell them the temperature in the hole is over 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. That's hot enough to melt gold!

The director wants to get some other readings. They attach a high-tech microphone to a cable and lower it down. It melts long before it hits the nine-mile level. But not before it picks up the sound of voices – thousands, maybe millions of them. Screaming, screeching, shrieking. Voices of the damned. Tormented, tortured souls suffering in flames.

A popular Christian TV network picks up the story and runs with it. They think it proves that God exists, that sinners go to hell, and that hell is right here, in the center of the earth.

Of course, the story turns out to be a total fraud. But does that mean there IS no hell?

Ask any of those fire-and-brimstone preachers if there's a hell. They'll confirm it no uncertain terms. They'll tell you all about the fire and the torment, demons, screams and agony. They'll describe it in pictures like this:

"When God condemns lost sinners to everlasting punishment, the devil, like a beast of prey, carries them to the lowest depths of hell. There he and his demons rejoice at the sight of their endless suffering. Flames ignite every nerve and fiber of these tortured souls as they writhe in unspeakable agony. Millions of years pass, yet never diminish the term of eternal, conscious torment."

But is hell really like that? Forget about fiery sermons and scary legends and church traditions. Let's look at what the Bible says. We'll use the old familiar King James Bible.

In the Old Testament, "hell" comes from the Hebrew word "sheol." Now, that word "sheol" shows up 65 times. And here it gets confusing. The King James version translates "sheol" as "hell" 31 times, as "grave" another 31 times, and three times as "pit." Seems to me there's a big difference between a flaming hell, a cold, dark grave and an open pit. What do you think?

Several modern translations avoid the confusion by letting "sheol" stand for itself, as an English word, without translating it.

What about the New Testament? "Hell" shows up 23 times, translated from three

different Greek words.

Let's start with "Tartarus." According to 2 Peter 2:4, it's where fallen angels await their final judgment, shackled in "chains of darkness." No fire THERE.

Next comes a word you are probably familiar with: "Hades." It comes straight out of Greek mythology, where it was the subterranean domain of a god by the same name. "Hades" was supposedly where everyone – good and evil alike - went when they died. The King James translators found it ten times in their source manuscripts and called it "hell" every time. Modern versions just leave it as "Hades."

Only once does the Bible portray "Hades" as a place of fire and torment. That's in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, which was all about wealth and poverty, rich people and poor people, and not a literal account of hell or the afterlife.

Twelve times in the New Testament "Hell" comes from "Gehenna." This is the Bible word that comes closest to the popular concept of hell. Literally, "Gehenna" is the "valley of the sons of Hinnom" – a ravine just to the south of old Jerusalem. Today it's a grassy park, but in Old Testament times it was the place of sacrifice, where wicked Israelite kings offered their children as sacrifices to the fire god, Molech.

Gehenna was known as a place where unburied bodies were left to burn and rot among the smoldering garbage dumped there by the people of Jerusalem. It was a disgusting, contemptible refuse heap where corpses decayed and burned until they were nothing but maggots and ashes. It was not a place where dead people waited for judgment or where condemned souls suffered the pangs of unending torment. Instead, "Gehenna" is a fitting symbol of complete destruction - the FINAL destruction of the wicked.

If the Bible doesn't present the traditional view of a fiery, unending hell, where DOES that picture come from?

We can certainly find it in ancient pagan mythology, but it's also embedded in Christian doctrine from early times. It was a favorite theme in medieval art and literature. Take, for instance, Dante's classic "Inferno." Dante takes his readers down through the nine circles of hell to witness grotesque scenes of sinners tormented for their evil deeds. It's a masterpiece of imagination, inspired by twisted scriptures and philosophical fantasies.

Today the topic of hell has become highly controversial. Influential theologians, including the current pope, have rejected the medieval view. They say hell is not a place of fiery torment. Instead, it's a place where souls are completely cut off from the presence of God. And being cut off from God, they say, is the very worst kind of torment.

Still, many people cling to the traditional doctrine. Hellfire is necessary to their world view. They would be disappointed to find that evil men are not there right now, burning in the flames.

So let's ask a big question: Does hell exist today, either with or without fire and torment? The answer is, "Yes – and No."

"Yes" if we agree with the Bible – and take "hell" as referring to the grave, the abode of the dead.

"No" if we picture hell as a place where wicked people are being punished for their sins.

Hold on! Did I just say there's no punishment for sinners? Absolutely not. But if you want flames and brimstone and destruction, you'll have to wait for Revelation's "lake of fire." Look at this:

"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:14-15).

Ah, there it is! The hell we've always pictured. Burning sulfur raining down. Unquenchable flames roaring high. Irresistible, unstoppable fire. And that's GOOD NEWS about the conflict we're all caught up in!

This long-running battle between good and evil – between God and Satan – will one day come to an end. Death and hell will be forever destroyed. Evil men with their evil deeds will be consumed. God will rule a universe free from sin. Those He has redeemed from the earth by the death of His Son Jesus Christ – the saved of all ages – will live with Him forever.

He invites us to share that perfect eternity. You, me, all of us. We can say "yes" to Him by trusting Jesus Christ of the forgiveness of our sins – and accepting Him as our Savior.