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The Punishment of the Wicked

We have spent most of our time so far looking at what happens to those who are found faithful and are blessed with the gift of immortality. We have seen the sort of life they are to enjoy in the new world when they “*obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God*” (Romans 8:21). In the last chapter, which was concerned with the end of this world, we saw that the last enemy to be destroyed is death, after which the Lord Jesus Christ will hand over control of the kingdom directly to his Father. Then God will become “*all in all*”. But what happens to those who are rejected?

❖ Accepted or Rejected?

In fact we have already glimpsed a few things about those who are found unworthy of life in the age to come. First, we discovered that some people will not be raised from the dead, but will remain dead forever, unconscious and oblivious. There will be no life after death for them: they will simply perish.¹ Others will be raised from the dead and be summoned to judgement together with those who are still living when the Judge returns. What will happen to those who are then rejected by Christ is described as follows:

*“Because of your hard and impenitent heart **you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgement will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works ... for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil**” (Romans 2:5-9);*

¹ Chapter 17, pages 254-256.

*“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, **some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt**” (Daniel 12:2);*

*“He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you come from. **Depart from me, all you workers of evil!**’ In that place there will be **weeping and gnashing of teeth**, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but **you yourselves cast out**” (Luke 13:27,28);*

*“... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, **inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might**, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marvelled at among all who have believed” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).*

These passages warn about the awful things that will happen to someone who is rejected at the judgement seat. They will experience the wrath of God’s righteous judgement (Romans 2:8,9) and His everlasting contempt (Daniel 12:2), by being cast out of the presence of the king (Luke 13:28) to “*suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might*” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). But does that cover the entire picture, or are there other aspects to think about?

❖ What about Heaven and Hell?

You might have been expecting to discover that those rejected would suffer eternal torment in hell, in the company of the devil and his angels. When the Greek idea about an immortal soul was wrongly grafted on to true Christian teaching, it brought with it some complications. If everyone lives forever, because all souls are immortal, then those who die have to go somewhere immediately to continue their existence in a state of bliss and something has to happen to those who are unworthy of life with God. These wrong ideas led to the development of further wrong teaching – about both heaven and hell – which only goes to show that if you get one wrong idea it usually leads to even more error and confusion.

The obvious place for immortal souls to go, according to this scheme of things, was heaven, so that they could live in the presence of God, the Lord Jesus and the angels. Then there had to be a place of everlasting punishment – everlasting because souls were said to be immortal. What a muddle all this created; and there was more to come. If very good-living people died and went to heaven they were thought to be available as intermediaries who could plead with God on behalf of the living, so the idea of saints who would mediate came about. People began to adore and pray to Mary and other holy men and women, believing that such prayers were especially beneficial for certain things. St Christopher was thought of as the patron saint of travellers; St Peter was said to be the gatekeeper of heaven, and so on.

❖ Somewhere In-between?

Some people were unhappy about the thought of the rejected suffering endless torment in hell with no prospect of a second chance. What about those who had never even heard about the Bible, or the Lord Jesus Christ? Were they destined to suffer for evermore, despite that being no fault of their own? Was there no prospect of repentance for tormented sinners? How could all this be reconciled with the idea of a merciful and forgiving God who wanted to save everyone? So a whole system emerged to try and meet those problems – all of them man-made! People began to teach that there was a state of Limbo, or that Purgatory existed – ideas which are completely without any Bible basis whatsoever.

Heaven exists, of course, for it is God's dwelling place and now the Lord Jesus has ascended to live there with his Father and with the angels. They comprise the family of God who now share endless life and who dwell in a situation which is entirely free from sin. But heaven is God's realm, not man's, and the great news is that when the kingdom comes, and the rule of God has been established on earth to such an extent that sin has been destroyed, then the inhabitants of heaven will come to dwell with men.

It is God's purpose to bring together his family in heaven and believers on earth, which is why the Bible ends with a picture of the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to

earth.² But what about hell; how does that fit into the scheme of things?

❖ The Bible “Hell”

Just as the wrong idea about the human condition has made hell necessary as a place of punishment, the right idea about what happens to us after death makes the hell of popular belief quite unnecessary. Because there is no conscious existence after death until the resurrection, there is no need of a place of torture and everlasting punishment. Death could be considered punishment enough. The return to the grave of those who are raised to judgement to see the king in all his glory and glimpse something of his kingdom, and then are rejected and expelled, would appear to be sufficient punishment. So what does the Bible mean when it talks about hell?

The version we have been using in this study – the English Standard Version – does not mention “hell” at all in the Old Testament and only infrequently in the New, and that is the case with many of the more recent translations. Instead they substitute the original words – either in Hebrew or Greek – and do not translate them at all. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word is “*Sheol*” and in the New Testament it is the Greek word “*Hades*”, although there is another word as well, as we shall see.

This brings us another stage forward in learning how to read and understand the Bible, namely having to think about the meaning of particular words which can be translated in quite different ways in different Bible versions. In this case the translators have done the work for us by identifying the original words; sometimes we have to find that out for ourselves. Here we need help from the margin of the Bible (which can sometimes include helpful notes), a concordance which identifies original words³ or even a Bible dictionary. By far the best way to work out what the word

² See Revelation 21:1-5; 2 Peter 3:13; Ephesians 1:10 and Matthew 6:10. This is also why the “Kingdom of God” is sometimes called the “Kingdom of heaven” – because the rulership of God which now exists in heaven will then be extended to include earth as well. But you can see from Matthew 19:23-24 that they are interchangeable terms.

³ These concordances are known as Exhaustive Concordances and there are two main ones, compiled by Robert Young and James Strong respectively. You might be able to consult one locally, but fortunately you are not likely to need one too often.

in question means, once you have identified it, is to look at the passages where it occurs and just work out the meaning for yourself. That way you are letting Scripture interpret Scripture.

❖ Old Testament – “Sheol”

Let’s try that with the Old Testament word “Sheol” by looking at some passages:

“The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 Samuel 2:6);

*“I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. For **the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.** In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I called. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry came to his ears”* (2 Samuel 22:4-7);

*“The LORD has made himself known; he has executed judgement; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. **The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God**”* (Psalm 9:16,17);

*“Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. **For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.** You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures for evermore”* (Psalm 16:9-11);

“The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, deliver my soul!’” (Psalm 116:3,4);

*“Her house is the way to **Sheol**, going down to **the chambers of death** ... he does not know that **the dead are there**, that her guests are **in the depths of Sheol**”* (Proverbs 7:27;9:18);

*“Moreover, wine is a traitor, an arrogant man who is never at rest. **His greed is as wide as Sheol; like***

death he has never enough. He gathers for himself all nations and collects as his own all peoples” (Habakkuk 2:5).

It doesn’t take a lot of effort to work out what “Sheol” is by looking at these passages (and the other 58 where the word occurs). It is clearly the Hebrew word for **the grave** – the place where the dead are laid to rest. Good and bad people alike are destined to go there, the difference being that God will leave some there for ever – he will “bring them down” or “abandon” them there. The “chambers of death” are destined to be their homes for ever. But the righteous have a different and much better outlook. They will not be abandoned in Sheol, nor will they see corruption, but God will raise them up.

❖ New Testament – “Hades”

There is a real bonus awaiting us here, for one of the Old Testament passages we have already looked at also occurs in the Greek New Testament. The apostle Peter referred to it when he was teaching in Jerusalem and explained what had happened to Jesus when he died, was buried, and three days later rose again. This is what he said:

*“This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. **God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death**, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. **For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption.** You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’ Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that **he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up**, and of that we all are witnesses”* (Acts 2:23-32).

As you can see, “Hades” bears exactly the same meaning in Greek as does the Hebrew word “Sheol” in the Old Testament. If you want to look at some more occasions where the word “Hades” occurs (however it might be translated in the Bible you are using), try 1 Corinthians 15:55 and Revelation 20:13.⁴



❖ Picture Language

Mention of Revelation chapter 20 introduces another feature of Bible language which is a very helpful one for our development as Bible readers. The last book of the Bible portrays future events in vivid picture language. Nations are depicted as beasts; famine is portrayed as a horseman bringing destruction, and suchlike.

The Bible uses such pictures whenever it wants to convey something important in a way which will stick in the mind. But we cannot take those pictures literally: otherwise we will be expecting the Lord Jesus Christ to come to earth riding on a white horse with a sword protruding from his mouth and an iron rod in his hand (Revelation 19:11-15). Each part of the picture symbolises something that Jesus will do when he returns. He will come swiftly (the horse) to rule righteously (the white horse) and with great power he will crush all opposition (the sword and the rod).

Now consider what we are told about hell (the original word being “Hades”):

“The sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire” (20:13,14).

This is right at the end of the Millennium, just before God takes control of everything, and it is describing – in picture language – how death and the grave are to be destroyed forever. The lake of fire is pictured as the place of

⁴ Here the word “Hades” is translated “death” in the ESV; “grave” in the KJV.

their destruction and we can identify with the idea, even though it requires us to picture “Death” and “Hades” as if they were people or things. It’s a figure of speech called *personification* and this is a good example of how that is applied in practice. That picture language fits in perfectly with another quite different word used in the New Testament, which is also translated as “hell” and sometimes as “hell fire”.

❖ New Testament – “Gehenna”

This Greek word is “gehenna” and the curious thing is that Gehenna was a place near Jerusalem which was used as a rubbish tip. In particular it was the place where the bodies of executed criminals were thrown prior to being burned, for there was always a fire burning at this tip to dispose of the rubbish.⁵ Using that word was therefore a perfect way of warning people that they could come to a very sad end if they didn’t come to their senses. Perhaps mothers would say that to naughty children – that they would end up “in Gehenna” if they carried on being naughty!

There are just twelve times when this word is used, seven of them by Matthew who was writing especially for Jews. It is the reference to fire which has led people to conclude that this is a place of eternal torment, but once you understand the background to the word, and appreciate that this is picture language, it all makes perfect sense and fits in precisely with what we have learned about death elsewhere in Scripture. Here are a few of the occasions when “gehenna” is the underlying word:⁶

*“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than **that your whole body be thrown into hell**” (Matthew 5:29);*

*“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can **destroy both soul and body in hell**” (Matthew 10:28);*

⁵ “Gehenna” comes from the Hebrew word “Ge-Hinnom” which means “the Valley of Hinnom”. This was a valley just outside Jerusalem which was once used for idol worship, was cleansed in the days of King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10), and later became a rubbish tip for the city.

⁶ All 12 occurrences are in Matthew 5:22,29,30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15,33; Mark 9:43,45,47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.

*“If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to **hell, to the unquenchable fire**” (Mark 9:43).*

The meaning is quite clear: don't behave in such a way that you will be totally destroyed and disgraced – like a common criminal. And the idea of fire is picked up to describe utter destruction in other passages too, like Revelation 20:13,14 and the “lake of fire”. Again it has its basis in these ancient rubbishy tips and is a very colourful and graphic image. Thus Paul talks about the coming of the Lord Jesus:

*“... with his mighty angels **in flaming fire**, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. **They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might**” (2 Thessalonians 1:7,8).*

And the Lord himself talked about the wicked being destroyed in the fire, just as weeds are burned by a farmer:

*“**Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire**, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, **and throw them into the fiery furnace**. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:40-42).*

Jesus was using parable language and his meaning is plain once that is understood: he was describing utter destruction, as in the picture of the Lake of Fire.

❖ **Parables**

Jesus often taught in parables because this way of teaching immediately separated those who just wanted to hear stories from those who were prepared to take some trouble to work out what he was saying. Finding out what is true, especially now that there are so many wrong ideas about, takes time and effort; but, as we know, nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without some effort.

Jesus revealed things in his teaching which had not been understood before, for the purpose of God had advanced in an important way when the Son of God was born. Now there was an opportunity for everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – to find the way that leads to eternal life:

*“He told them another parable. ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven that a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened.’ **All these things Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable**. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: **I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world**” (Matthew 13:33-35 quoting Psalm 78:2);⁷*

*“**Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you**. For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened” (Matthew 7:7,8).*

It follows that when Jesus speaks in parables we need to be able to differentiate between the picture and the meaning. In the above parable, the Kingdom of God is compared to leaven because that has such a powerful influence when mixed with flour. The kingdom of God is neither leaven nor flour, but it can be likened to those things in that limited effect.

❖ **Lazarus and the Beggar**

There is one parable that Jesus taught which requires a little more detailed consideration, for this has been a cause of confusion to people who insist on understanding it literally and not as Jesus intended. As we have been looking at figurative – or picture – language, reading this parable gives us an opportunity to note the difference between a parable and straight teaching. This parable is not meant to be taken literally. It is a carefully constructed picture with a very pointed meaning.

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and

⁷ “Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old” (Psalm 78:1,2), again the emphasis being upon listening and thinking about what is said.

licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead' " (Luke 16:19-31).

Certain elements in that picture are straightforward. A rich man and a poor man had lived in very different circumstances and when they died they were pictured as receiving very different rewards. One was pictured in bliss, the other in torment. Lazarus could see the rich man in torment and wanted to help him, and the righteous and the wicked could converse. All were in a conscious state after death.

❖ Why Picture Language?

We have already concluded, by looking at Scripture as a whole, that:

- 1 The dead are unconscious;
- 2 Abraham is specially mentioned as one who has not yet been rewarded, because he "was gathered to his people" (*Hebrews 11:8-16; Genesis 25:8*);
- 3 Their hope is resurrection from the dead – which is mentioned in the parable;

- 4 "Hades" is just the Greek word for the grave: it is not a place of torment. In any case, those who believe in a place of torment would not expect any contact between heaven and hell. That would make for considerable difficulties and much on-going sorrow for inhabitants of heaven, if those they had loved were separated from them, yet were visible.

So, why did Jesus use this particular picture language to make his point? He was gently, but very effectively, poking fun at the rather silly views that some Jews had developed. We know from Jewish history that some Jews believed in a sort of waiting area where the just and unjust were left, pending the judgement and the resurrection. There the just would "enjoy the prospect of the good things they see, and rejoice in the expectation of those new enjoyments ... while they wait for that rest and eternal new life in heaven which is to succeed this region".⁸

The place of waiting was called by those Jews "The Bosom of Abraham". Meanwhile the unjust would be dragged to the neighbourhood of hell itself where they were to be "struck with a fearful expectation of a future judgement" and when they looked across to 'Abraham's Bosom', even hereby are they punished: for a chasm deep and large is fixed between them: insomuch that a just man that hath compassion upon them cannot be admitted".

With that information we can now see why Jesus told this story and what his point really was. Those Jews who believed that they were going to a waiting area after death, where they would be tormented by the sight of what they should have believed, but where it was now too late for them to do anything about it, should take every opportunity to draw the right conclusions about what they had seen and heard from Jesus. After death it would be too late. If someone was raised from the dead and came back to life again, they should take especial note of what that meant. It would be a remarkable way for God to demonstrate that the raised person was on His side.

And notice one other thing. This is the only time in all of the parables that Jesus taught when one of the characters is named. The beggar is named "Lazarus" and, on the eve of

⁸ A full account of these Jewish views is given in the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus, in his "Discourse to the Greeks concerning Hades". The quotations that follow are from that document.

his last visit to Jerusalem, who should the Lord Jesus raise from the dead but his friend Lazarus! You can read all about that in John chapter 11, and the reaction of the Jewish leaders in John 12:10,11. Far from believing what Jesus taught, they decided the best course of action would be to kill Lazarus as well, so they were certainly taking no notice of what Jesus taught or did.

❖ Destruction in Death

Unless we take notice of the warnings given to us by Jesus and the apostles, we will be denied everything that God wants to share with us. As the apostle Paul said earlier in Romans:

“The wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23).

We have worked out that death really does mean death: that it is a punishment from God which will have abiding consequences. Unless we do something about it we will cease to exist for ever:

*“For he sees that even the wise die; the fool and the stupid alike must perish and leave their wealth to others. Their graves are their homes forever, their dwelling places to all generations, though they called lands by their own names. **Man in his pomp will not remain; he is like the beasts that perish**” (Psalm 49:10-12);*

*“For when he dies he will carry nothing away; his glory will not go down after him. For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed, – and though you get praise when you do well for yourself – his soul will go to the generation of his fathers, who will never again see light. **Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish**” (49:17-20).*

Note the difference between those two extracts. A person may be held in honour in this life, but that counts for nothing after death if there was no *understanding* of the purpose of God. Without that understanding there is little to distinguish a man from an animal. But the knowledge of God's purpose which is then acted upon makes all the difference. This gives us a real hope of resurrection from the dead when we can be given everlasting life and a place in God's kingdom, when it is established on earth.

Things to Read

- 📖 Ecclesiastes chapter 12 concludes the book written by King Solomon about the meaning of life. In this chapter he gives an illuminating portrait of old age and eventual death. Notice how he describes death, as a return to dust, and what he says about judgement to come.
- 📖 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 tells how the coming again of Jesus will separate the world into those who long for him to come and save them and those who are destroyed by him. Notice that their destruction is said to be everlasting.

Questions to Think About

- 23.1 Where did all these good men expect to go at death? (In each case the Hebrew word is “sheol”, although it is translated differently in different Bible versions.)
- a Jacob (Genesis 37:35)
 - b Job (Job 14:13; 17:13-16; 19:25-27)
 - c King Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:10-18)
- 23.2 What does the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:5-13) teach us about our prospects of going to heaven at death? What are we really praying for when we pray for God's kingdom to come?



“Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9-13)