

ETERNAL TORMENT IN HELL – A SCRIPTURAL TEACHING?

We are assured by nearly every Christian denomination, as well as every obscure Christian sect, that what they believe is based 'solely on scripture'. Usually, if we were to ask any of these various groups why their particular interpretation of the scriptures should be favored against an opposing viewpoint we would likely be told that the others must surely be influenced by some extra-biblical authority, while 'our interpretation is based solely on the scriptures.'

Sola Scriptura – or, scripture alone – has become the 'stamp of authority' for an innumerable myriad of conflicting and altogether contrary doctrines. Surely to a neutral outside observer these words must seem totally meaningless. Apparently anything can be proven 'by scripture alone'.

Or can it?

To test this, let's examine for a moment a doctrine that is believed by millions of Christians, taught in hundreds of Bible Colleges and Seminaries, and proclaimed in countless churches every Sunday: namely, that *Hell is a place of eternal torment*.

This thought, that the wicked will spend eternity in a hell of eternal torment, is one of the most basic and fundamental beliefs of Christianity and has been for centuries. We are assured by many of its adherents that this doctrine is based on 'scripture alone'.

But is it? Let's confine ourselves to the 'scriptures alone' and see what we come up with.

The word 'hell' as it appears in our English Bible is actually translated from one Hebrew word (*Sheol*), and three different Greek words (*Hades*, *Tartarus*, and *Gehenna*). Any honest Pastor, Scholar or Bible teacher will tell you that three of these words have little or nothing to do with our modern conception of hell as a place of everlasting torment. Don't believe me? Ask them.

For example, the Hebrew word *Sheol* simply means 'the unseen'. In the Old Testament *Sheol* received both the good and the wicked; it is often synonymous with the grave. Put simply, *sheol* means 'the death state' and is never connected with the concepts of hell and eternal torment as taught today¹.

Likewise, the Greek word '*Hades*', which appears eleven times in the New Testament, is used in precisely the same way as the Hebrew '*Sheol*'². At 1 Corinthians 15:55 the King James Version renders this word as 'grave'. Revelation 20:13³ makes it clear that *Hades* must be emptied prior to the final judgment. Once again, our widely held conceptions of hell and eternal torment are not to be found in those Bible verses that use the Greek word *hades*.

¹ I invite the reader to verify this for themselves. The Hebrew word *sheol* occurs 65 times in the Old Testament. A careful reading of these verses will easily prove that the modern concept of torment in hell cannot be established from any of these.

² In the LXX translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, *sheol* is rendered by the Greek *hades*.

³ "And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and *hades* delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works." Revelation 20:13

Thirdly, the Greek word *Tartarus* is used only once in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:4), and refers only to the punishment of fallen angels. *Tartarus* is *never* used in reference to human punishment either now or in the future, and so also has nothing to do with our modern conceptions of eternal punishment in hell.

This leaves us with one Greek word - *Gehenna*. Concerning this word we are assured that it certainly *does* teach this doctrine of eternal torment.

But does it?

This word *Gehenna* appears only 12 times in the entire New Testament, and is almost always translated 'hell' by modern translators. I ask the reader to carefully consider the following verses:

"But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Matthew 5:22

"And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." Matthew 5:29

"And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell." Matthew 5:30

"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Matthew 10:28

"And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire." Matthew 18:9

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and

when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves." Matthew 23:15

"Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" Matthew 23:33

"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched:" Mark 9:43

"And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched:" Mark 9:45

"And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire:" Mark 9:47

"But I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell; yea, I say unto you, Fear him." Luke 12:5

"And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell." James 3:6

It should be obvious from the above that 'Hell', whatever it may be, is to be avoided at all costs, and the seriousness of the judgment mentioned in these verses should never be diminished. But for the sake of this discussion, that's not what we're trying to prove.

Remember, the proposition that we are attempting to prove using 'scripture alone' is that 'hell is a place of eternal torment'. Confining ourselves to 'scripture alone' and examining the four original language words which are variously translated into the English 'hell', *this is the whole of the evidence*.⁴ Three of these original language words; the Hebrew *Sheol*, and the Greek *Hades* and *Tartarus*, have nothing to do with the teaching of an eternal torment in hell, and the remaining word, *Gehenna*, appears only in the 12 verses listed above.

So what's the problem? One might think 'Well see, the Bible DOES talk about HELL, at least in those 12 verses you listed.'

But this *IS* THE PROBLEM.

Even if we allow that the Greek word *Gehenna* has been properly translated into English as 'HELL'⁵, none of the 12 places in which this word occurs describes hell as a place of eternal torment as taught by so many today. Look at the list of verses above; *none of them mention torment*.

Put another way, the Bible *never* says that anyone is tormented in hell.⁶

I'm not sure that the average Christian who believes in eternal torment fully appreciates this problem. He or she is usually so conditioned by what they already believe about hell, that they cannot see that these concepts ARE TOTALLY ABSENT FROM EVERY VERSE IN WHICH THE WORD 'HELL' APPEARS.

⁴ I understand that other scriptures are cited in defense of this doctrine, but we should expect to find this doctrine at least once among the actual Greek words which supposedly reference this place of eternal torment.

⁵ The proper translation of *gehenna* is itself a matter of much debate and its widespread translation into the English 'hell', a word which carries so much preconceived theological baggage, is simply begging the question.

⁶ Among common passages cited in opposition to this are Luke 16:24 ('I am tormented in this flame') and Rev 14:11 ('The smoke of their torment ascendeth for ever and ever'). The 'torment' of Luke 16 (which many admit to be of a symbolic rather than a literal nature) is clearly in reference to '*hades*' and is to be distinguished from the supposed 'final hell' of *gehenna*. Even 'conservative' scholars admit that *hades* does not represent the absolute and final state of the wicked. The word 'hell' does not appear in the context of Revelation 14. While the imagery of that verse is usually connected with the concept of an 'eternal hell', the association is an imaginary one in the mind of the reader and not based on a careful reading of scripture. The imagery is taken directly from Isaiah 34 in which the judgments take place upon the earth and are poured out upon the living. Only to those who have been conditioned to believe in an eternal hell of torment *after death* do these verses become descriptive of that condition.

To appreciate what this means, let's say that I asked the average Christian to show me from their Bible *one verse* that states that hell is a place of eternal torment. This can never be done. Why? Because the entirety of the evidence, so far as the actual words which have been translated 'hell', has been given above – *not one of them speaks of torment.*⁷

But if we really want to base what we believe 'solely on the scriptures' then the evidence above presents an even bigger problem for those who teach eternal torment in hell.

Let's carefully look at our Bible and see what we can learn about the 'hell' presented in the 12 verses listed above.

We see that 'hell' is a place of 'unquenchable fire'. But scripturally (since scripture is our SOLE guide) what does this mean? What is an 'unquenchable fire'? Is it a fire that *never* goes out? Isn't that what we've been taught to believe about the 'unquenchable fire' of hell?

Careful examination shows that the scriptures make many references to 'unquenchable fires'. But what may surprise you is that many of these 'unquenchable fires' *are no longer burning*. For example:

"Therefore thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, mine anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the ground; *and it shall burn, and shall not be quenched.*" Jeremiah 7:20⁸

Here the prophet Jeremiah is warning the Jewish nation about their impending invasion and destruction by Babylonian armies. But did the fury and the fires spoken of here *last for all eternity*? Absolutely not. As the New American commentary states:

'In this case God's anger was going to be poured out on the land like burning pitch that would not be quenched *until it had consumed everything it touched*'⁹ (emphasis mine)

So, *scripturally speaking*, an 'unquenchable fire' is *not* one that burns FOREVER - it is simply one that burns *until it has accomplished its purpose*. Therefore, using scripture alone one cannot prove that 'hell' is a fire that never goes out. That idea is simply not scriptural. To be sure, like the unquenchable fires of old, the fire of 'hell' will burn until it accomplishes its purpose. This, however, is no proof that its fires will *never* burn out.¹⁰

What else can we learn from the 12 'hell' verses listed above?

We learn that hell is a place where 'the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched'. Well, that *sounds* rather ominous, but scripturally, what does it really *mean*?

⁷ The Anchor Bible Dictionary admits this: 'Although *not describing the torments of Gehenna*, Jesus warned his disciples to take all precautions not to fall victim to it.' Freedman, D. N. (1996, c1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (2:927). New York: Doubleday.

⁸ See also Jeremiah 17:27, Jeremiah 21:12, Ezekiel 20:47, Ezekiel 20:48, Amos 5:6

⁹ Huey, F. (2001, c1993). *Vol. 16: Jeremiah, Lamentations*; The New American Commentary (108). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

¹⁰ Other verses such as Matt 18:8 describe this fire using the Greek word *Aionios* which is often translated 'eternal'. However, a careful examination of all ways in which this word is used proves that it need not mean, and indeed often cannot mean 'unending'.

Here Jesus is quoting the sixty-sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah which reads:

"And they shall go forth, and look upon the *carcasses* of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh." Isaiah 66:24

Sticking to the scriptures ALONE, what do we learn from this passage? What is this 'fire' burning, and what are these 'worms' feeding upon?

CARCASSES – or dead bodies!¹¹ Once again, the modern concept of souls being tormented after death is entirely absent!

How in the world did the picture of fire and worms *consuming dead carcasses* get turned into the modern teaching of immortal souls being tormented for all eternity? Certainly not by following *scripture alone*!

So what have we learned using scripture alone?

- 1) That four different words are generally translated into the English word 'hell', but of these only *gehenna* is believed to refer to the eternal hell of common Christian thought.
- 2) None of the verses containing the word *gehenna* speak of physical torment.
- 3) Scripturally, an 'unquenchable fire' is not one that never goes out, but one that burn until it accomplished its purpose.
- 4) Even if an 'unquenchable fire' is 'eternal' the only thing it is said to burn are carcasses, and certainly *not* conscious immortal souls.

This brief study isn't meant to address every scripture which is usually offered in order to 'prove' that there is a hell in which the lost will be eternally tormented. However, I hope that the reader will be compelled by this evidence to study this topic further. Are you really sure that what you've been taught about hell is based 'solely upon the scriptures'?

So let me ask the average Christian today:

Since your belief in hell as a place of eternal torment is supposedly based 'solely on scripture', and since *none* of the verses that contain the word 'hell' actually teach it, which verses in the Bible really teach what you believe about hell?

¹¹ The Hebrew word *Peger* appears 24 times in the Old Testament and never means anything other than a corpse.