

BASIC BIBLE TRUTHS

Heaven and Hell

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

When you have read this article you will know the answers to these questions:

1. What is heaven?
2. Where is hell?
3. How does knowing the truth about heaven and hell help us to understand God's purpose with mankind?

1. WHAT IS HEAVEN?

The Bible tells us some important facts about heaven:

- "The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD's; but the earth he has given to the children of men" (Psalm 115:16).
- "Do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne" (Matthew 5:34).
- Jesus Christ, God's immortal Son, "was taken up into heaven", but, he will return to the earth (Acts 1:11). • "No one has ascended to heaven" (John 3:13).
- "David did not ascend into the heavens... he is both dead and buried" (Acts 2:34,29).

What do we learn from these Bible facts?

(i) Heaven is God's dwelling place, not ours. He does not invite us to join Him in heaven, either before death or afterwards.

(ii) Heaven is God's throne. It is true that His redeemed will be "kings and priests", but, "we shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:10). All we have just read fits perfectly with Psalm 115:10: "The earth he has given to the children of men." What a great day it will be when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD" (Habakkuk 2:14).

(iii) Because God's future plan for man relates to the earth, we can understand why Jesus said, "No one has ascended to heaven", and why Peter tells us, "David did not ascend into the heavens". Why should we go to heaven when we die, when all God's future plans for His faithful servants will take place on the earth? Peter told the Jews, "times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send Jesus Christ ... whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things" (Acts 3:19-21). Old Testament prophets spoke about God's kingdom being restored on the earth. This will happen when Jesus returns to be "**King of kings and Lord of lords**" (Revelation 19:16). Like Jesus, we can pray, "your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10).

2. WHERE IS HELL?

"Hell" is the most misunderstood word in the Bible. Basically, in the Old Testament, it means 'the grave'. In the New Testament, "hell" either means 'the grave', or refers to the Valley of Hinnom, a literal, physical valley outside Jerusalem. The idea that hell is the place to which wicked people go when they die, and burn for ever in fire, cannot be true. Why not? Because the Bible tells us that:

- The best man who ever lived, Jesus Christ, went there when he died.
- Jesus came out of 'hell', when he was raised from the dead.

There is no doubt about those two facts. In Acts 2:26,27, Paul quotes Psalm 16:10 which says, "Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell" (Authorised Version). He said David knew that God "would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne; he spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ" (Acts 2:30,31). That must mean Jesus came out of "hell", when he was raised from the dead. Not only did Jesus come out of "hell" (the grave), but also he said, "I am he who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore. Amen. And I have the keys of Hades ("hell", AV), and of death" (Revelation 1:18). Why do we have keys? To unlock doors. Jesus paints a vivid picture of "unlocking the doors" of hell and of death, by raising the dead when he comes (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). We must now ask the question, "Where was the hell to which Jesus went?" We read, "Joseph took the body (of Jesus) ... and he laid it in his new tomb" (Matthew 27:57-60). The "hell" of Psalm 16:10, to which Jesus went, was a tomb. A tomb is a dark, covered place, just like a grave. In fact, the same Old Testament Hebrew word sheol, translated as "hell" in Psalm 16:10, is translated as "grave" in Psalm 49:15. The root meaning of both "sheol", and the New Testament Greek word "hades" is 'the unseen', or 'the covered place'. So "hell", the tomb, the grave and the unseen place, have similar meanings. Truly Jesus rose from "hell", when he rose from the dead in Joseph's tomb. Jesus triumphed over sin and death. Well

can David say, "God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave" (Psalm49:15). Literally, Jesus will raise those responsible to him from "hell"; that is, the grave. Not once does the word "sheol" refer to everlasting torment for the wicked. Jonah uses "sheol" ("hell", AV) to tell us he was in the belly of a great fish (Jonah1:17—2:2). It is a perfect example of "hell" meaning 'the covered place'. "Hell" has nothing to do with being burned by fire. Two other Greek words, besides "hades" are also translated "hell" in the other word is used often and refers to the New Testament. One of them is used only in 2 Peter 2:4. That word means the deepest part of a covered place. The Valley of Hinnom. Jerusalem's rubbish was emptied and burned there. Dead bodies of criminals were thrown into it, and burned by the fires that were never allowed to go out. However, they were ead bodies, not living ones. It was the fire that continued to burn, not individual dead bodies. Everyone living in Jerusalem would know what Jesus meant, when he spoke about a body being "cast into hell" (Matthew 5:29). He was talking about everlasting death for those who did not walk in God's ways. Therefore, in the New Testament, "hell" means either 'the unseen place', which we call the grave, or, the Valley of Hinnom. Hell is not a place of everlasting torment.

3. HOW DOES KNOWING THE TRUTH ABOUT HEAVEN AND HELL HELP US TO UNDERSTAND GOD'S PURPOSE WITH MANKIND?

It helps us very much. The Bible talks about "heaven", but God has not planned for us to go there. If we die before Jesus comes, we shall go to the grave ("hell"). We need not fear, if we belong to Jesus. He said, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). When he returns to the earth, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your sting? O Hades ('grave', AV), where is your victory?" (1 Corinthians 15:55). His faithful will be blessed with everlasting life, at the judgement (see "Resurrection and Judgement" in this series). God has promised to fill the earth with His glory. This will happen when Jesus returns to set up God's kingdom. He will reign from Jerusalem, "the city of the great king" (Matthew 5:35). At that time, "All kings shall fall down before him. All nations shall serve him" (Psalm 72:11); "He shall speak peace to the nations" (Zechariah 9:10). What about you? Will you be among the faithful saints of Jesus? Will you, like them, be made immortal and help Jesus to teach the ways of God to the world's mortal population? Because, "They will turn many to righteousness" (Daniel12:3). If you serve God acceptably now, you will share in that great preaching work in the age to come. Jesus said to his true followers: "Because I live, you also" (John 14:19). will live God's kingdom is coming. Truly, in that day, the blessings of heaven will be showered on the earth.