



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Mythbusters: Hell
Straight to hell*

Hebrew Scriptures, Matthew, Luke, 1 Peter

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MYTHBUSTERS

Good morning everyone. If you are watching this online, we welcome you, glad that you have taken the time to join us here at Elizabethtown Church of the Brethren where we practice peace, service and openness to all.

What do you think of when you heard about the place called hell? Especially interesting to me is how early even our children get indoctrinated with particular images. When I asked what people thought of when they heard the word hell both adults and children painted the same picture: a lot of fire, some sort of red demon with a pointy tail and horns, gates that lead into an underground cave-like setting, hard labor, pain and suffering...Well we debunked a number of the myths about satan in the Bible two weeks ago. Let's take a look at hell.

A few facts to get us started:

- If you were to take your pew Bibles out and read it cover to cover, in its 66 books, you would find the word hell in only five of those books. More or less than you thought?
- The word "hell" is mentioned 13 times in your pew Bible. Again, I'm curious is that more or less than you might have thought?
- That's in our pew bibles, the New International Version. Depending on which translation of the Bible, you might see the word hell up to 20 times.

And already we're beginning to see that what we thought about hell may not be as Biblical as we thought. For the sake of sinking our teeth into something, since we are a New Testament people, let's look at the two words that are used most often in the New Testament to depict what we think of as hell.

The two Greek words are Hades and Gehenna

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FIRST, HADES

One of the words that sometimes gets translated as hell and sometimes not, is hades. In our pew Bibles you would find it 8 times, all in Matthew, Luke or Revelation.

For those of you who know your ancient Greek mythology, you know that Hades was a Greek god who was lord of the underworld, an underworld that eventually took his name. As lord of this underworld, he was responsible for those who had died and were buried. In Greek thought he was not an evil tormentor, but because of the fear of death, he was certainly not someone you wanted to meet. In fact, according to the mythology he was seen as an indifferent sort; his role was to maintain balance in the universe.

Given that Hades was understood as the underworld, it is no surprise that the word Hades was used to translate a number of words from Hebrew scripture (Old Testament) when it was translated to Greek in the 3rd century BC. For example, what was written in Greek as “The pit,” became hades. What was written as “Stillness,” became hades. “Death,” became hades. “Deep darkness,” and most importantly the Hebrew word “Sheol” were translated and written as Hades.

My point is not to criticize the translators—it made some sense. For example originally, Sheol was the “realm of the dead.” But importantly, similar to Hades, in the beginning Sheol was not a place of judgment, but simply where all dead went regardless of their righteousness. Then over thousands of years the idea of Sheol’s purpose transformed into a place of judgment. Not quite hell as we think of it, but perhaps separated into different compartments, and your compartment was determined by your earthly behavior.¹ The story of the Rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 represents this concept well. As the rich man is being tormented for his greed and tightfistedness he looks up to Lazarus who is being comforted—who seems to be within earshot and begs mercy.

¹There was also the idea in Jewish thought that there would be a final judgment and that Hades was the waiting area.

I can't blame you if didn't follow *all* of that—it's not always easy to follow. But it is important when trying to wrap our heads around this concept of hell.

To review: When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, many different Hebrew words were translated as Hades; and then when it was translated into English from Greek many or all of those—depending on which Bible you use—were translated as hell. But neither “the pit” nor “stillness” “Sheol” nor Hades is quite the same as the hell we usually see depicted today.

NEXT GEHENNA

Most often used in the New Testament for hell: *Gehenna*, which is used the most in the New Testament.

Matthew 5.22

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, “You fool,” you will be liable to the hell of fire.*

Seems pretty severe for what is a common emotion and everyday slander. And more poignant than ever given the state of dialogue our Brethren district and denomination. But what I want you to note right now is that asterisk, as we read another scripture form Matthew.

Matthew 5.29–30

If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell.**

Boy am I glad last Sunday Pastor Pam gave us some respite from reading the Bible literally. Those cupcakes on top of the fridge aren't worth all of that.

Matthew 18.6–9

If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have

4 *two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell* of fire.*

The word translated in each of these scripture as “hell” in English is *Gehenna*, a valley just outside Jerusalem that served as the city’s burning dump. (So, if you want to clean up your language, you can accurately say “What the *Gehenna*?”, rather than the alternative). *Gehenna* was a metaphor Jesus often used to describe the opposite of the Kingdom of God. If the Kingdom of God is the right way, *Gehenna* is the wrong way. If Jesus’ way is life, then *Gehenna* is death. *Gehenna* in real life was a place so terrible, so rotting, stinking and burning awful that it was used to scare...well, scare the hell out of people. To straighten them out.

And it really was a hellish place; in Old Testament times it was a place where idolatrous rituals were practiced, even including child sacrifice. In Jesus’ day it was an ever-burning pile of refuse, a trash heap, and it was no place you wanted to be. It was the depository for the bodies of criminals after execution. And it was eternally burning to keep down the smell and the volume of trash. In short, it was a hell-scape; an absolute wasteland, both literally and figuratively. Full of rot, decay, scavengers, and the nightmarish memories of brutal and heinous events.

Let us be clear: while *Gehenna* was a flaming place of death, it was not a Satan-guided netherworld filled with tridents and demons. And all of Jesus’ listeners would have known that. It’s also clear that Jesus was using hyperbole, or exaggeration, to make a point. None of us think that Jesus was actually suggesting that we should be gouging our eyes out or lopping off our hands and feet. (Interestingly, this is what *Gehenna* looks like today.)

HOWEVER...

...before we feel too comfortable that we've debunked this hellish misunderstanding as myth, let's hear what Jesus *is* getting at. While we cannot gloss over the fact that Jesus' listeners knew that Gehenna was a trash heap, we also cannot gloss over the fact that they knew that Jesus was warning them about something more than just a trash heap. *Gehenna* was a real place that Jesus used as an example of what your life is going to look like if you allow sin to creep in and take over. *This* was the place Jesus used to describe what it was like to be in sin, and separated from your brothers and sisters and from God. *This* was the end of the road for those who chose the wrong way in life.

The stereotypical view of hell in Christianity is that if you don't believe a certain way or pray a particular prayer in order to get to heaven, well then there is only one other place to go. *Sorry, thanks for playing the game of life, but you are likely bound for the eternal fire and suffering in hell.*

And of course the overarching good news in all of this is that even when we do stumble, which God knows we will, there is always an opportunity for turning ourselves around, and for forgiveness. An opportunity to walk away from the stinking, rotting, hellish *Gehenna*, the trash in our lives. To turn away from that, and travel the path of life that is really life. The path we all wish to travel.

