

WHAT IS HELL?

ONE of the doctrines that the clergymen of Christendom have given false colouring without restraint is that about HELL. Does the Holy Bible give a picture of hell as a place of literal fire where the wicked are tortured everlastingly? If it is so, why did Jesus Christ the righteous go to hell?

In *the Explanatory Catechism of Christian Doctrine*, it is stated that hell is “the place where the devils and lost souls are punished”. And *the Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary*, (Second Edition, Revised) states as follows: “HELL is the place and state of eternal punishment which consists, primarily, in the deprivation of the enjoyment and sight of God face to face (pain of loss) and, secondarily, the infliction of positive punishment by an external objective agent, called fire, which is a physical reality though unlike earthly fire (pain of sense). This punishment is not equal for all, but corresponds to the sinner’s aversion from God and conversion to creatures.... It is of faith that their punishment will never end.” (Page 226).

Exaggeration

On the basis of this knowledge, several pictures of hell as a place of horrors have been painted in order to frighten the believers into subjection to the priests. Also, stories of unlimited exaggeration about hell have been invented and told from the pulpits, to the extent that the sermons have had more bearings on intimidation than exhortation.

The Rev. J. Furness, in his description of the lowest depth of hell, stated that “the roof is red-hot, the walls are red: the floor is like a thick sheet of red hot iron”. He further wrote as follows: “Listen to the tremendous, the horrible uproar of millions and millions of tormented creatures, mad with the fury of hell. Oh, the screams of fear, the groanings of horror, the yells of rage, the cries of pain, the shouts of agony, the shrieks of despair, from millions on millions. There you hear them roaring like lions, hissing like serpents, howling like dogs, and wailing like dragons. There you hear the gnashing of teeth, and the fearful blasphemies of the devils. Above all you hear the roarings of the thunders of God’s anger, which shake hell to its foundations. But there is another sound. There is in hell a sound like that of many waters; it is as if all the rivers and oceans in the world were pouring themselves with a great splash down on the floor of hell. Is it then, really the sound of waters? It is. Are the rivers and oceans of the earth pouring themselves into hell? No. What is it then? It is the sound of oceans of tears running down countless millions of eyes. They cry forever and ever. They cry because the sulphurous smoke torments their eyes. They cry because they are in darkness. They cry because they have lost the beautiful heaven. They cry because the sharp fire burns them.” (*The World’s Redemption*, page 343).

It is sad to note that certain people who parade themselves as the ambassadors of Jesus Christ and teachers of his word should be so shameless and lost to virtue in telling blatant lies even in the name of God! Has anybody ever gone to “hell” and come back to tell those dreadful stories?

How do the clergy come about such ideas of hell? Was it by revelation from the Scripture or by dream?

We must admit that by the teaching of the clergy concerning hell, they portray God as a heartless and cruel Father. No one can imagine how the Almighty God who is infinitely kind and loving and whose “mercy endureth forever” can keep human creatures to be tormented – in sharp fire where the victims are “roaring like lions, hissing like serpents, howling like dogs and wailing like dragons”-for eternity. The Holy Bible does not lend support to this bogus teaching.

The word *hell* is derived from the Hebrew word *sheol* and the Greek word *hades*, and it means the grave, pit, tomb or the condition of the dead. Another Greek word also translated hell in the New Testament of the Bible is *Gehenna*. It is a word with a historical background used figuratively in the Greek Scriptures.

There is not a word in the account of the creation to show that God prepared a place with fire for the eternal punishment of sinners. In the first chapter of Genesis there is a comprehensive record of how the heaven and the earth, the sun, moon and stars and the seas were created. If there were such an important place of unquenchable fire where there are “millions and millions of tormented creatures”, as taught by certain churches, it would not have been omitted from the inspired account of the creation.

When God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden, He told him definitely that if he (Adam) ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, death would be the penalty. (Genesis 2: 16, 17) So when Adam disobeyed the divine commandment the sentence of death was passed on him, and God said: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust (NOT FIRE) shalt thou return.” – Genesis 3: 19

If there were such a place of fire for the punishment of sinners, Adam through whose disobedience sin entered the world would have gone there. In fact, God would have given an indication to that effect at the time He pronounced His sentence on Adam. What He told Adam was that he (Adam) would die and return to the dust. And St. Paul stated: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” – Romans 6: 23.

Grave

Hell is the grave, pit or heart of the earth where every kind of character – good or bad- goes after death. It is not meant for the wicked alone. Jacob was a godly man and it was through his twelve sons the nation of Israel came into being. When he received the news that Joseph his son, was dead (false it was though) he refused to be comforted and he said: “I will go down to my son into hell, mourning.” (Genesis 37: 35, *Douay Version*) But the Authorised or King James Version renders the text thus: “For I will go down unto the grave unto my son mourning,”

It is the same Hebrew word *sheol* that is translated *hell* in the Douay Version (Catholic Bible, as some call it) and grave in the Authorised Version.

Did Jacob mean that his son Joseph was gone into hell as referring to a place of fire and that he too would go there? Why should they go to such a place if really it existed? Were they wicked? Of course, they were not. The truth is that Jacob knew that the grave or hell is the place of the dead, and so he did not refer to a place of fire.

When on another occasion Jacob was being persuaded by Reuben and others of his children to allow them to take Benjamin to Egypt, he told them: "My son shall not go down with you. His brother (Joseph) is dead, and he is left alone: if any mischief befall him in the land to which you go, you will bring down my gray hairs with sorrows to hell." (Genesis 42: 38, Douay Version.) Hell here is the grave.

Job the prophet of God showed clearly that hell or grave is a place of rest and hiding for both good and wicked people who die. During his troubles which the devil brought upon him he cursed the day of his birth and said that it were better if he had died in the womb because then he would have lain still and quiet in the grave with kings, counsellors and princes. He added: "There (in the grave or hell) the wicked cease from troubling; and there the weary be at rest. There the prisoners rest together; they hear not the voice of the oppressor. The small and great are there; and the servant is free from his master." – Read Job. 3: 11-19.

Furthermore, Job, in the bitterness of his soul, prayed to God: "O that Thou wouldest hide me in the grave ("protect me in hell"- *Douay Version*), that Thou wouldest keep me secret, until Thy wrath be past, that Thou wouldest appoint me a set time and remember me." (Job. 14: 13) If hell is a place of torment, why should Job who needed escape or relief from his anguish pray to be hidden there till God's wrath was over?

There is also the instance of Jonah, the prophet of God, who called the belly of a fish, hell. When he was making a desperate attempt to run away from carrying out the Lord's message, he was thrown from a ship into the sea and was swallowed by a whale. "Then Jonah prayed unto the Lord his God out of the fish's belly, and said, I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the Lord, and He heard me; out of the belly of hell cried I, and Thou heardest my voice." (Jonah 2: 1, 2) But was there fire in the fish's belly? No! Jonah called the fish's belly, hell because it was like a grave – in fact, there he would have breathed his last and remained buried if God had not been merciful to him.

There is no doubt that the wicked will be punished by God. The Bible states that when God will pour out His indignation upon them they would make every effort to escape and would even want to dig into hell for safety but all their efforts will prove abortive. As it is written: "I saw the Lord standing upon the altar: and He said... cut them in the head, all of them; and I will slay the last of them with the sword: he that fleeth of them shall not flee away, and he that escape of them shall

not be delivered. Though they dig into hell, thence shall mine hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, thence will I bring them down..." – Amos 9: 1-4.

The point is that if hell is a place of horrible fire, why should anyone seeking refuge from trouble dig into it? That, of course, will amount to jumping from the frying pan into fire.

The Bible shows that all men are subject to death and that no one has the power to save himself from going into the grave. The Psalmist asked: "Who is the man that shall live, and not see death: that shall deliver his soul from the hand of hell?" (Psalm 88: 49, *Douay Version*) But in the Authorised Version the text is at Psalm 89: 48, and it reads: "What man is he that liveth, and shall not see death? shall he deliver his soul from the hand of the grave?" From this again we see that hell is the grave and there is no fire in it.

There is one other striking instance to show that hell means the pit or heart of the ground. In the days of Moses the prophet, there was an occasion when he received stiff opposition from some of the Jews prominent among whom were Korah, Dathan, On and Abiram. They conspired and organised a rebellion against Moses and Aaron. God was not in their favour and they were justly punished. Moses warned the congregation to dissociate themselves from those wicked men. He said that if they died the common death of all men, then the Lord had not sent him but if the ground broke open, and swallowed them then it should be known that they had provoked God.

"And it came to pass, as he (Moses) had made an end of speaking all these words, that the ground clave asunder that was under them and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed them up... They and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit (inside the ground) and the earth closed upon them: and they perished from among the congregation." – Numbers 16: 1-4,25-33.

The Douay Version renders the piece as follows: "And immediately as he (Moses) had made an end of speaking, the earth broke asunder under their feet; and opening her mouth, devoured them with their tents and all their substance. And they went down alive into hell, the ground closing upon them." This again confirms beyond doubt that it is a pit or inside the ground that is known as HELL.

Gehenna

We stated earlier that the Greek word *Gehenna* also translated hell in the New Testament is a picture word with a historic origin. It has an entirely different meaning from *hades*.

Gehenna is compounded of two Hebrew words, *Ge Hinnom*-that is, "the valley of Hinnom" or "the valley of the son of Hinnom". It was a place on the outskirts of Jerusalem in which children were cruelly sacrificed by fire to Molech, the idol of the Ammonites. – 2 Kings 23: 10; 2 Chronicles 28: 1-3; 33: 1, 2, 6.

God condemned the Jews who committed the abomination of burning their children in fire. Said He: "And they built high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart." – Jeremiah 7: 30, 31.

The valley of Hinnom became a place for depositing refuse. All sorts of rubbish, dead animals and even corpses of criminals were dumped there. Worms were always around to consume the rotten things and there was fire underneath that kept burning, consuming the rubbish. This place was identified with the destruction of undesirables. It was against the background of this notion that Jesus in Mark 9: 43-48, used the word *Gehenna* translated *hell* or *hell fire* to symbolise the everlasting destruction of the wicked.

Among other things, he said: "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: where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched." (Mark 9: 47-48) It is very wrong to interpret this text literally because it will mean that we should pull out our eyes if they irritate or itch us and so on. Christ used the eye to symbolise anything that is precious to us. So he used the hand, foot, and eye separately to illustrate the value of sacrifices we, his followers, should make in order to prove ourselves worthy of the Kingdom of God.

In other words, Christ was saying in effect that if anything very dear to us would cause us to go to everlasting destruction, it will be better to deny ourselves and forsake that thing – even if it is as precious as an eye – so that we may enter God's Kingdom.

The fire therefore is not a literal object but a symbol of the suffering or severe pain -"weeping and gnashing of teeth" – which God would make the wicked taste while alive before they go to perpetual destruction which is also known as the "second death" – that is, the death in which there is no more favour or chance of resurrection. After they have died, they do not suffer pain any more (Isaiah. 66: 15, 16; Romans 2:5,6,8-9; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-9; 2 Peter 3:7, 10; Revelation 21: 8).

Concerning the punishment of the wicked in the last days, St. Paul stated: "And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power." – 2 Thessalonians 1: 7-9.

We must point out that the punishment of the wicked takes place when they are living – either in this life or at the resurrection of the dead. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that the dead are unconscious and therefore they cannot feel pain. "For the living know that they shall die," said King Solomon, "but the dead know not anything" – Ecclesiastes 9: 5, 6.

“Apostles’ Creed”

On the whole, let no one be deceived that there is a place of literal fire -“red-hot” as Rev. Furness without Scriptural proof said – where the wicked are being tortured forever. In the so-called Apostles’ Creed of the churches it is stated that Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, “was crucified, dead, and buried: he descended into hell”. If hell is for the wicked only, Christ would not have “descended” into it. He was not wicked.

Of a truth Jesus Christ went to hell in fulfilment of prophecy and God raised him the third day from the grave. He himself said: “For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale’s belly; so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” – Matthew 12: 40.

Concerning Christ’s resurrection, David the Psalmist, stated: “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell (sheol – grave) neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.”- (Psalm 16: 10) And St. Peter, dilating on the prophecy after it had fulfilled, said: “Men and brethren, let me freely speak unto you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his sepulchre is with us unto this day. Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; he seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell (grave) neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up whereof we all are witnesses.” – Acts 2: 29-32.

Hell, we reiterate, is the grave, and it is from there both good and bad will come back during the resurrection. As it is written: “Wonder not at this; for the hour cometh wherein all that are in the graves (not fire or heaven) shall hear the voice of the Son of God. And they that have done good things shall come forth (from hell or grave, not heaven) unto the resurrection of life; but they that have done evil; unto the resurrection of judgment.” – John 5: 28, 29, *Douay Version*.

What some people call limbo or purgatory exists only in the imagination of some teachers, and not in reality or in the pages of the Holy Bible. We shall go into details on this issue at another time. It is the truth Jesus said will make us free.