

From the Depth of Sheol

'I cried for help from the depth of Sheol; You heard my voice.' - *Jon. 2:2*

Sometimes the Bible uses terms that we do not use in our daily and common speech. But in that God's ways are higher than ours, and His thoughts also, we should not be surprised to find (as it were) that His vocabulary sometimes is, too. I do not here mean the longer biblical words of 'justification', 'reconciliation', 'propitiation' and so forth. But I do mean the exclusively Old Testament word found in our passage that is in the prayer of Jonah: *Sheol*. 'I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me. I cried for help *from the depth of Sheol*, You heard my voice.' (v. 2)

To some of you, the term 'Sheol' may be entirely new. To others, it may be familiar, but its meaning is somewhat vague. Regardless, we all do well to consider the significance of Jonah's mention of this term in our study of his book.

Jonah called to God from 'the *depth* of Sheol'; that is, literally, out of the *belly* of Sheol. It is interesting to note that before Jonah thanked God for his deliverance in the 'belly' of the *fish*, that he faced the daunting, haunting prospect of the 'belly' of *Sheol*.¹ The belly of Sheol is not one and the same as the belly of the fish (as some who reject the Bible and its supernatural character would have you believe). No, there is a place far worse, more terrifying, and most to be avoided than the inside of a fish, and that is Sheol.

So it's with a sense of seriousness and solemnity that we take up our study of it. Indeed it was being brought to a serious and solemn mindset about this that Jonah came to pray as he did, and be rescued as he was.

¹ *Me'ab*, describing the 'innards' or 'organs' of the fish (1:17), and *beten*, which describes the 'womb' or 'hollowed region' of the realm of the dead (2:2).

We start, then, with *what is meant by the term Sheol*.² We do not know the original meaning of the word. Some surmise that it meant ‘to ask or demand’ (*sa’al*) based on the Proverbs that ‘Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied’, that ‘Sheol... never says, “Enough!”’ (27:20; 30:16). Others wonder if the word stems from a similar word meaning ‘hollow’ or ‘empty’ (*so’al*), and thus that Sheol is a place of emptiness both topographically and emotionally. So we do not know the *origin* of the word.

But the Scripture explains its *sense* to us quite clearly. And when theologians have systematized the Bible according to the theological topics it presents, they rightly place Sheol in a section dealing with man in the intermediate state; that is, man’s existence *after* he dies. (The Bible knows nothing of a sleep or annihilation of the soul upon death. Rather it teaches a separation from the body³ to experience either untold peace and happiness or unspeakable pain and horrors until the general resurrection and judgment of all persons. At this later time, the soul and body are reunited, then to experience more of the same, but now in *body* and soul, and that, everlastingly.)

So we note, as the Bible itself does, that *Sheol is used in a general way of the realm of death and the grave*. In this most broad sense, Sheol concerns all persons in relation to death. In that all sin, all die. And in that Sheol is the realm of the dead, all persons enter Sheol. In a most general sense, Sheol speaks to the state of a person’s existence immediately after he dies. So we read of elderly Jacob saying over his young son Joseph, ‘I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son’ (*Gen.* 37:35; cf. 42:38; 44:29). We read of mortally ill Hezekiah mournfully saying, ‘In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years!’ (*Isa.* 38:10) David reflects, ‘What man can live and not see death; can he deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?’ (*Psa.* 89:48) In all these references - and some others -

² The term is used some 65 times in the Hebrew Old Testament. In the Greek version of the Old Testament it is almost always (61 times) rendered by the term Hades, a term which is used 10 times in the New Testament, and helps toward its understanding (as we will see).

³ Cf. *Ex.* 12:7; 8:8 (with *Psa.* 22:29)

Sheol refers in a very general way to the realm or state where all persons go upon death (particularly, the body into the grave).

But we do not have a full understand of the Bible's teaching if we only mention this. *Sheol, more specifically, and in a far more narrow sense, is a real place where at death all the wicked go for punishment on account of their sin, but one from which the righteous are forever rescued on account of Christ's death and resurrection.* And to have a fuller grasp of the Bible's teaching on this, we explore this summary statement more fully.

Let us note that *Sheol is a real place*. Fifteen times we hear the statement 'down to Sheol' in the Bible.⁴ Like *real* persons who go 'up' to the *real* place of heaven, we are right to understand that the persons who go 'down' to Sheol go to a *real* place. The Bible describes Sheol as a place of darkness (cf. *Job* 10:21-22). From the perspective of one's body being laid in the grave, it is a place of silence (cf. *Psa.* 94:17; 115:17). It is a place where no one praises God (cf. *Psa.* 6:5; 88:10-12; *Isa.* 38:18). It is a place from which no one can save himself: David rhetorically asks, 'What man can deliver his soul from Sheol?' (*Psa.* 89:48). Job says that it is a place from which no one ever comes up and returns (*Job* 7:9). And this is because it is a place over which God alone is absolutely sovereign: 'Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord' (*Prov.* 15:11). God says through Amos, 'Though they dig into Sheol (as if to escape God) from there will My hand take them.' (*Amos* 9:2; cf. *Psa.* 139:8; *1 Sam.* 2:6). God is sovereign over Sheol and its inhabitants.

So, Sheol, with real inhabitants, and under a real God, is a real place.

But moreover, *Sheol is a real place where all the wicked go at death for punishment on account of their sin.* And we emphasize: the *wicked*. 'The *wicked* will turn to Sheol, all the peoples who forget (neglect) God' (*Psa.* 9:17). 'Let the *wicked* be put to shame', says Psalm 31, 'let *them* be silent in Sheol' (*Psa.* 31:17). 'The fool', Psalm 49 says, is 'appointed for Sheol'. His form shall be 'for Sheol to consume' (*Psa.* 49:13,14). 'The

⁴ *Gen.* 37:35; 42:38; 44:29,31; *1 Sam.* 2:6; *1 Kings* 2:6,9; *Job* 7:9; 21:13; *Isa.* 14:11,15; 57:9; *Ezek.* 31:15-16; 32:27; cf. *Job* 17:13-16, and in the New Testament, *Matt.* 11:23; *Luke* 10:15.

feet of the adulteress' we read in the Proverbs, 'go down to Sheol; her steps take hold of Sheol'. 'Her house is the way to Sheol'. And any man who follows her, obviously, will go there too (*Prov.* 5:5; 7:24-27). Job tells us most clearly and helpfully that Sheol (lest we think is only for the really, *really bad* sinners) 'consumes *those who have sinned*' (24:19).

And who is it that has sinned? '*We all have sinned*, and fall short of the glory of God.' 'Death spread to *all* men because *all sinned*...Death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam' (*Rom.* 3:23; 5:12,14). So we should pause momentarily at this point - lest any are drifting - to see that what is being said applies to us all; it concerns us *all*: man or woman, boy or girl. Sheol is that place of punishment to which we are doomed as sinners. Let us take heed!

We go on to note further, then, the sort of punishment that exists in Sheol. Moses is here our first teacher. After reviewing the Law with Israel, and as some of his final words to a sinning generation, he said that God's anger burns like a fire 'to the lowest part of Sheol' (*Deut.* 32:22). The punishment the wicked receive is God's own burning anger, and this, with the metaphor of *fire*.

With this very reference, we have to bring in how the later and fuller revelation of the New Testament enlarges our understanding. When the New Testament writers explained the Old Testament by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they affirmed the Greek term 'Hades' as an equivalent term for the Hebrew 'Sheol'. Indeed when they quote Psalm 16 and its statement of Christ that 'God did not abandon His soul to Sheol' (cf. *Acts* 2), they are affirming that the Greek word 'Hades' is equal to the Hebrew 'Sheol'. But we are especially enlightened when Jesus Himself, in the context of the Day of Judgment, speaks then of Hades as a contrast to Heaven: 'Capernaum, will you be exalted to Heaven? You will descend to Hades!' (*Matt.* 11:22-23; *Luke* 10:15). He teaches us that Hades is properly another word for Hell. Indeed, *He teaches*

us that in Hades (or Sheol) the wicked are punished and tormented with fire even as Moses spoke. Remember that unlike Lazarus, who was taken by angels to Abraham's bosom (a Jewish reference to Paradise, or Heaven), 'the rich man also died and was buried. *In Hades* he lifted up his eyes, being *in torment*.' And what did he cry out? 'I am *in agony* in this *flame*' (*Luke* 16:22-24). Though both died and were buried - Sheol in the general sense for Lazarus - the wicked rich man in particular (and not Lazarus) is mentioned as being in flame, in agony, in Hades, in hell, in the punishing, tormenting flames of Sheol for sins committed against God. So, Sheol is a real place where at death all the wicked go to be punished for their sins forever.

Thus it is inaccurate - as well as ruinous to the souls of men - to regard Sheol as merely a 'netherworld' or 'spirit world' which is a common destiny for all persons. Sheol is not a mere 'land of the shadow' with grey ethereal wisps of ghostly images. Neither is it a realm without moral distinctions, without blessedness on the one hand and without pain on the other - a sort-of barren, emotionless, expressionless wasteland lacking definition. No! At death God has something *better* for the *believer*, even as He has something *worse* for the *unbeliever*.

For Sheol is but a *temporary* place for the wicked. Sheol has to do with 'the place where the wicked remain until their final judgment.'⁵ Like a cabin for vacation, or a tent for camping, Sheol is a temporary dwelling. So we read of 'death and Hades giving up their dead' and of 'death and Hades [being] cast into the lake of fire' (*Rev.* 20:13,14) on that last great day of God. It is here that the flames and torments of Sheol - heated hot as they are for the wicked at death - are heated hotter when the body is reunited with the soul only to undergo the same torments but now in *body* and soul. So, for the wicked Sheol is hell only waiting to be heated hotter.

How wise was Solomon when he called Sheol 'severe' (*Song* 8:6). He called Sheol 'severe' not because Sheol is disproportionate to sin, or too extreme and repulsive in

⁵ Desmond Alexander, *Jonah* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1988), p. 113

nature, or even unfitting of God, but because it is a fierce and solemn subject, as is the sin, as is the death, as is the misery, and as is the God who accompanies it. So it is that with Sheol, then: 'behold the severity of God' (*Rom.* 11:22a).

But behold, also, the *kindness* of God (*Rom.* 11:22). For, to finish an accurate lesson on this subject, we see that Sheol is not only a real place where all the wicked go at death for punishment on account of their sin, but also that *Sheol is a place from which the righteous are forever rescued on account of Christ's death and resurrection.* How we give thanks that David spoke of Christ, and that God raised His Son from the realm of the dead so that we could pass through not harmed, not punished, not fearing!

David says concerning [Christ], "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. - *Acts* 2:25-32; *Psa.* 16:8-11

And that's precisely what Jonah confessed at the most critical moment of his life at 2:6 - 'You have brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God.' He confessed Christ as Savior, having been united with Him in His death and resurrection in a very profound and foreshadowing way!

So it is that we say with the Psalmist, 'Their form shall be for Sheol to consume so that they have no habitation. *But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me.*' (*Psa.* 49:14-15). And again, 'Your lovingkindness toward me is great, and You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.' (*Psa.* 86:13). Proverbs 15:24 declares the wisdom that not only leads to, but speaks of, salvation: "The path of life leads upward for the wise that he may keep away from Sheol below."

Because Christ was victorious over the corrupting power of Sheol, you His people, united to Him by faith, share in this victory *now*, at the moment of your death, and also at the Last day when that word is fulfilled: ‘O Death, where are your thorns? O Sheol, where is your sting?’ (*Hos. 13:14; 1 Cor. 15:54-55*)

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So, all these features that we have noted from the Bible about Sheol, are confirmed in the very experience of Jonah. What it must have been like for Jonah in the sea: God’s breaking waves rolling over him, the current engulfing him, sin weighing him down, Sheol pulling him in! But there at the bottom of the sea was something worse than weeds and the base of the mountains. There was the gate of Sheol! He began by ‘fleeing from the presence of the Lord’. Then he went down to Joppa, down to the ship, down into the hold, down into the seas, down to the depths. And there he senses that he is truly ‘expelled’ from the Lord’s sight. And as Jonah is fainting away, his spirit ready to depart from his body, and his body to lay vacant at the bottom of the sea - as well as in Sheol - he by faith remembers the Lord, and cries out in repentant desperation that he be saved. His last and most important thought is a fear of the prospect of being abandoned in Sheol under God’s judgment and forever separated from Him. ‘The earth and its bars was around me forever; but You have brought up my life from the pit, O Lord my God’ (v. 6).

How could he confess that? How is that true for him? *Through Christ and through faith.* Just as David looked ahead and spoke of Christ, so too did Jonah. To be sure, it was by the sovereign, invisible, and mysterious working of the Spirit ‘who goes as He will’. Jonah could not see it. But Christ was there with him in his plight, being the substance of Jonah’s prayer for salvation and confession of the Lord’s mercy.

Such was Jonah. But what about you? Is there a feeling sense of the weight of your sin that causes you to sink quickly to Sheol? Is there a desperate cry to the Lord that He, by the same Savior for Jonah, will also save *you*?

Sheol is a great terror for sinners to enter, but it is even there at its gates that every believer who cries to God for mercy will find the Savior ready to save. So then, the passage becomes additionally useful for both warning and encouragement:

‘If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there’ (*Psa.* 139:8). Let *this* truth be a comfort to you whose loved ones have recently died; and because of *your* close love for them and hold on them, you’ve been pulled into the current that moves at the gate of Sheol. Let these be times when, seeing our own mortality and vulnerability to death, we give heartfelt thanks for that deliverance we have received in the death and resurrection of Christ - that through faith in Him we not only have died, but that having died we have ‘passed out of death and into life’, and that ‘though we die we shall live’, that truly we shall never die who have eternal life (*John* 5:24; 11:25-26).

Let this truth be a comfort and hope to you in every instance where you come closer to your own mortality, your own infirmity, and the times when your frailty in the face of calamity reminds you vividly and unmistakably that death can be very near and very sudden. (We’ve been faced with that of late.) But let it be something that deflects you to Christ.

But we also take seriously the plight of others who are outside of Christ and in their sins. We weep for them. We pray for them. We seek their salvation. We warn them of their future *without* Christ even as we urge them to one *with* Him.

Further, we humbly see what our own sins deserve at the high and holy bar of God’s judgment, and before the holy and good God we’ve each offended. The great weight of our many and frequent sins are quickly bringing us down to the gate of Sheol faster than if they were merely Adam’s. And the only hand that can reach deep enough is that of the Lord Jesus Christ. He took Jonah from the depth of Sheol; and

he took us! So we rejoice that God has not only *had* mercy, but that He *delights* in mercy; mercies that are new every morning and endure forever (*Mic.* 7:18; *Lam.* 3:22-23; *Psa.* 100:5).

Even further, we say to any here who may never have come to the very person of Jesus Christ the Lord and Savior, who have never said to the effect, ‘God be merciful to me the sinner’ - let this day be for you a day *of repentance* rather than a day *toward retribution*. Let such persons be especially warned, who would comfort themselves with a false peace, based on a false hope, rooted in a falsehood, that physical death ends your existence entirely. No! A thousand times, no! Death is a means through which you pass into your everlasting state. ‘Sheol is the Old Testament manner of asserting that death does not terminate human existence.’ (George Eldon Ladd) Do not find comfort in an annihilation, or in a soul sleep, or in a purgatorial purification, or any living person other than Jesus Christ.

Let every person in reach of these words ask himself or herself: Where, then, am I headed? Which path have I taken? Will I this day choose life or death? Will I go the broad way with many a person on it that leads to destruction? Or will I go the narrow way that, although with few on it, leads out of Sheol and into life?

Dear friend, make sure now of your everlasting home.

Today we often hear expressions like, ‘he died’, or ‘he has passed on’, or ‘he is no longer with us’, or ‘he crossed over to the other side’. But the Bible has a precise vocabulary with fuller force and truthful significance designed to warn us so that it may bless us: *Sheol, a real place where at death all the wicked go for punishment on account of their sin, but one from which the righteous are forever rescued on account of Christ’s death and resurrection.* All glory be to Him who not only rescues us from the wrath to come, but meets us at, and brings us from, *the depth of Sheol.*

Preached at Messiah’s Church (RPCNA)

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