

THE GATES OF HADES

By

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At a large convention this past summer we were told that the hordes of hell were trying to destroy the church but were unable to do so because Jesus said, "...I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is a common use of the passage in Matthew 16:18.

That the enemies of the Lord try unceasingly to destroy His church is true enough, but to use Matt. 16:18 in this connection is a gross mistranslation and misapplication of Scripture. In recent reading I have come across this same idea again and again, in which the writer uses the same passage to suggest that the devil is waging war on the church, but that the church shall continue strong until the end of time because the "gates of hell shall not prevail." One prominent writer interprets the passage to say that the church is assaulting the gates of hell, waging war against the devil and the devil's forces cannot prevail against the church.

Certainly the church does wage warfare against the spiritual hosts of wickedness, including the devil and his angels. It is also true that the church is victorious, although it loses many a battle. However, to use Matt. 16:18 as the basis of this thought not only wrests the scripture, but also misses the important emphasis Jesus made in His statement.

The word rendered "hell" in the King James Version (in this place) comes from the Greek word which is properly translated "hades." It is so translated in almost all other versions. "Hades" is often used as a substitute for "hell" in common language because people know no better or hesitate to use the term, hell. But the two words have different meanings. "Hades" in the Greek is the same as "sheol" in the Hebrew. You are familiar with "sheol" from the Psalms and other Old Testament scriptures. A good example of "Scripture explaining scripture" is a comparison of the passage used in Psalms 16 and its quotation by Peter in Acts 2:25–27. Peter cites David's psalm in showing that the prophecy that one would sit on David's throne was fulfilled by Jesus.

"I beheld the Lord always before my face: for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh also shall dwell in hope: because thou wilt not leave my soul unto Hades, neither wilt thou give thy holy one to see corruption."

When you read the Psalm itself (Psa. 16:8–10) you find the word "sheol" in the place of "Hades." "Thou wilt not leave my soul in Sheol..." It was a common enough term to the Hebrews, simply referring to the grave. It was where His flesh could dwell in hope of a resurrection, so far as Jesus was concerned, for that is exactly what happened. (Soul = life.)

Jesus was put to death. He "poured out his soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12). He died, was buried, and spent three days in the grave. The gates of Hades in that case proved to be a great stone, too heavy to be removed by the devout women who arrived early on the first day to give Him proper anointing. But the gates of Hades (sheol) did not prevail. The women found the stone rolled away and Jesus risen. He was in Hades, but Hades could

not hold Him. “I was dead (not “my body was dead”) and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:18). The gates of Hades could not prevail against Jesus.

So was fulfilled the Psalm, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in Hades.” Peter pointed out that this could not apply to David. “Brethren, I may say unto you freely of the patriarch David, that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us unto this day” (Acts 2:29). The gates of the grave still prevail (up to this very hour) over David, and so with all who have died. They remain in the state of death until called forth on the day of resurrection. If they are part of the church of the Lord, they will then come forth, immortal, powerful, and glorious, never to be subject to death again. The door of the tomb, the gates of Hades, shall not prevail against the church.

Today’s English Version is not a literal translation of Scripture but an effort to translate to the correct original meaning. It translates the passage “Not even death will ever be able to overcome it (the church).” This is the emphasis Jesus made throughout His ministry. He was calling the apostle to suffering, persecution and great tribulation, knowing that most of them would be put to death for their faith, as would thousands more who became part of the church. But at the outset Jesus promised that death could not prevail. Enter the Kingdom and trials are certain. The church has been the battleground since the time it was begun. To be a disciple of Christ means self-denial, sacrifice (although you wouldn’t know it to look at the average church) and tribulation. But it is the one institution that will survive the grave, and even the day of judgment and destruction of all else. Governments will come crashing down in that day, as will all religious organizations save the church. Even the institution of marriage and the home will end, for in the resurrection there is no marriage. There is only one way to survive death and the grave, and that is to be in the ark of the covenant, the church.

The church is not to be thought of as a denomination, nor a movement nor an organization. It is an organism, consisting solely of living members (Peter calls us “living stones”). There is nothing that can be called Christ’s church other than the people. The building, the pews, the organ and other furnishings — none of this is the church. The church is all the saints. Therefore the entire church, every portion of the true church, will survive the grave and live forever.

DEATH IS THE ENEMY. The biggest opposition to Christ in our day is in the form of humanism. Humanism’s greatest obstacles are creation and death. Their answer to creation is evolution, and their answer to the question of death is to deny its reality. A number of books flooding the country present the idea that death is only a shucking off of a burdensome body, that the soul continues on into infinity. This is the way of unbelief and the answer of Satan to the simple fact pronounced by God. “Thou shall surely die.” It is the effort to escape the frightening and certain fact of death without yielding to the Lord of life, Who alone has the keys of death and of Hades.

That death is a curse, resulting from rebellion against God, is a pronounced feature of Bible revelation. Not only was it declared to be the direct result of man’s sin in eating the forbidden fruit, but it is everywhere spoken of as a thing of dread, and sorrow and as an enemy (I Cor. 15:26). It was the first curse placed upon man, and the earth, which was given to his dominion, and will continue to be a curse as long as the earth

stands (Gen. 3:17–19). Only in that new creation where death is absent is there the promise that “there shall be no curse any more” (Rev. 22:3).

It is the church which inherits this new creation, for it is only the church that prevails over death. While millions of God’s saints have died and have entered hades, the doors of that grave must give way at last to the power of Jesus, who “gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21).

WHEN IS THE VICTORY? The battle against death was won at the cross, but the victory is not fully realized for the believer until the day of resurrection. While the Christian rises from his baptism to a new life in the world (Rom. 6:4) he is still subject to the curse of mortality until Christ comes. “For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first...” (I Thess. 4:16). We have heard no trumpet and experienced no resurrection from the grave. To this date the gates of Hades remain closed. They will yield only to the voice of the Lord. “...for the hour comes in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth” (John 5:28–29).

While all the dead are raised “at the last trump” and at the voice of the Lord, only the Christians are raised to immortality. The rest of the dead are raised in the corruptible state, and subject to the second death, the final and irreversible death in the lake of fire. One who dies without having been cleansed from sin by Christ will be raised in such sin to face Him in judgment. “And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, even the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:14). The whole system of mortality — death, the grave, the unrepentant sinner — all find their final destruction in the lake of fire. Only the saints, the church of the Lord, are released from the grip of death to live forever. Hades shall not prevail.

THE PRE-EMINENCE OF THE THEME. Why would Jesus attach this fact, concerning Hades, to His basic statement that He would build His church? Why not mention some of the other facts regarding the church as is done by His followers, such as the promotion of missions, unity and love? Certainly these are essential elements in the church. But Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it.”

Here is an emphasis by the Lord. The most significant thing about the church is that death cannot hold it. Here is the greatest answer to man’s greatest problem. Christ deals with it first. What a shame that the modern church builders evade the issue as much as possible. Death is hushed up. We don’t talk about it, and give vague answers concerning it. For this cause millions are turning to spiritualism and trying to get their answers from books like “Life After Death” and “Life Is Forever,” two popular books upholding the false doctrine of spiritualism.

Christ burst right out with the issue. Death is the enemy which does prevail over every unredeemed sinner. Only the redeemed may go through hades and come forth victorious, as did Jesus. The church has the message of life, the answer to the curse under which the whole world suffers. The church needs to get back to that message and shout it loud and clear.

This does not mean we should neglect the present needs — strength through sharing, love, peace and the fruit of the holy spirit. But there must be a clear knowledge

and confidence in the ultimate destiny. As Paul expressed it, “IF we have only hoped in Christ in this life, we are of all men most pitiable” (I Cor. 15:19).

The original purpose of God has not changed. When Jesus came to reveal the Father and build the church, He was in no way acting out of harmony with the original and eternal purpose of the Creator TO HAVE MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE. The church is not a second thought, nor a “parenthesis” nor a necessary alternative to that purpose. It is a means of carrying it out.

There can be NO man in God’s image if all are to be subject to the just penalty of death for sin, for “all have sinned.” But by redemption from sin, the church is that body of humanity that is free from the penalty and the final death, hence the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

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