

SALT & LIGHT (A CHRISTIAN JOURNAL)

An informal journal for the timely communication of Biblical teaching and commentary of importance to Christians.

The Gates of Hell

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I. Prologue

Many so-called 'Fundamentalist' Christians out of misguided zeal dogmatically insist that every word of the Bible be taken literally. Such a position, however, frequently leads to interpretations which are erroneous, nonsensical, or preposterous, if not blasphemous. This is because the Scripture, together with most literary works, abounds in figurative language. The failure to recognize and correctly interpret figures of speech is responsible for many of the false doctrines and incorrect notions held by the typical Christian. A case in point is Matthew 16:18, in which is found the figurative expression, "the gates of hell". If we are to believe the typical 'preacher', Jesus in this verse makes reference to a mighty and sinister spiritual kingdom, the ruler of which is a 'fallen' archangel. However, such is not at all the case. Preachers misinterpret this verse because they do not know the meaning of the Greek word which the King James version translates 'Hell', and because they do not understand the significance of the term 'gates'. When these misapprehensions are rectified, the verse takes on an entirely new meaning, and the traditional interpretation is seen to be laughable.

II. Talmudic Fantasy

Christ Jesus told Peter, "...on this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it", Matthew 16:18. The Church was an entity which did not then exist; it was to be built by Christ, sometime in the future. Many have incorrectly taken this declaration of Jesus to be a reference to a sinister spiritual kingdom which has set itself in array against the Church.

Thoroughly indoctrinated by his pastors and Sunday school teachers in the lore of Talmudic myth, the Judeo-Christian generally envisions Hell as a cavernous subterranean region characterized by sulphurous flame, acrid smoke, and intense heat, in which there is a literal lake burning with fire and brimstone. He supposes the region to be essentially a prison or dungeon to which the 'unsaved' are consigned by God at death, and in which these hapless souls are destined forever to reside, in a conscious state of continuous and unending torment.

Rather illogically, he supposes the same region simultaneously to be the territory of a powerful kingdom, spiritual in nature, consisting of legions of 'demons'—purportedly fallen angels—whose ruler is a fallen archangel named 'Lucifer' or 'Satan' and called 'the Devil'. This kingdom in the heart of the earth is what typically comes to mind when the Judeo-Christian hears references to 'the gates of Hell'.

The popular conception of Hell—that is, the conception typically held by the non-churchgoer—differs slightly from that which is taught from the Judeo-Christian pulpit. Like the Judeo-Christian, the man on the street commonly associates Hell with incarceration and torment, but, unlike the Judeo-Christian, he typically believes that the Devil acts as warden of that domain, and is the one who devises and inflicts torture. In cartoons, the Devil is portrayed as a man-like creature with red epidermis, pointed beard, forked tail, hooves, and horns on his head, typically clad in a cape and carrying a trident.

III. Biblical Fact

The Greek word translated 'hell' in Matthew 16:18 of the King James version is *hades*. Meaning literally 'grave' or, metaphorically, 'the grave', it is used metaphorically for *death*. The word was translated 'hell' because, in the English of A. D. 1611, *hell* meant simply *a hole in the ground, a place of concealment, or a grave*. The Greek word translated 'gates' is *pule*; it designates a gate of the variety found in the wall of a city, palace, or temple—that is, a gateway or portal, often of large extent. In the ancient world, the rulers and authorities of a city commonly held official meetings and hearings at a principal gate of the city. Consequently, the term *gate* came to be used in a figurative sense to designate *rulers, authorities, or government*, and thus, to represent the *strength, might, or integrity* of a realm. The Greek word translated 'prevail' is *katischuo*, meaning *to be strong against*. The phrase, "*the gates of hell*"—literally, "*gates of grave*"—is an *anarthrous* construction, which is simply to say that the nouns appear without definite articles. The phrase is more properly translated, "*gates of death*". The term *gates* is an abstraction; likewise, the term *grave*: no specific gate is in view, nor a specific grave. Death or the grave has no *literal* gates or gateway—except perhaps in the sense that graveyards often are fenced or walled, and tombs have doors which may be considered gates or portals. However, one must ask in what possible way the gate of a graveyard or the portal of a tomb can "be strong against the Church". Obviously, the phrase "gates of death" is a metaphor, that is, *a figure of speech*.

Viewed as a metaphor, the term 'gates of death' has some latitude in its interpretation. Essentially, the connotation is that of a realm from which escape is impossible, whether one views death as an enclosure with impassable walls and impenetrable gates, or as a kingdom which by virtue of its might is invincible.

This figure of speech, with slight variation, is found

throughout the Scripture. Inasmuch as *hell, death, and the grave* are essentially synonyms, the terms ‘gates of hell’, ‘gates of death’, and ‘gates of the grave’ are equivalent.

And do **the gates of death** open to thee for fear;
and did the porters of hell quake when they saw thee?

– Job 38:17 (LXX)¹

13 Have mercy upon me, O Lord; look upon my affliction which I suffer of mine enemies, thou that liftest me up from **the gates of death**: 14 that I may declare all thy praises in the gates of the daughter of Sion: I will exult in thy salvation.

– Psalm 9:13–14 (LXX)

9 For he satisfies the empty soul, and fills the hungry soul with good things, 10 even them that sit in darkness and the shadow of death, fettered in poverty and iron; 11 because they rebelled against the words of God, and provoked the counsel of the Most High. 12 So their heart was brought low with troubles; they were weak, and there was no helper. 13 Then they cried to the Lord in their affliction, and he saved them out of their distresses. 14 And he brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their **bonds**

asunder. 15 Let them acknowledge to the Lord his mercies, and his wonders to the children of men. 16 For he broke to pieces **the brazen gates**, and crushed **the iron bars**. 17 He helped them out of the way of their iniquity; for they were brought low because of their iniquities. 18 Their soul abhorred all meat; and they drew near to **the gates of death**. 19 Then they cried to the Lord in their affliction, and he saved them out of their distresses. 20 He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them out of their destructions. 21 Let them acknowledge to the Lord his mercies, and his wonderful works to the children of men. 22 And let them offer to him the sacrifice of praise, and proclaim this work with exultation.

– Psalm 107:9–22 (LXX)

9 The prayer of Ezekias king of Judea, when he had been sick, and was recovered from his sickness. 10 I said in the end of my days, I shall go to **the gates of the grave**: I shall part with the remainder of my years.

– Isaiah 38:9–10 (LXX)

¹Unless otherwise noted, all citations of Old Covenant scripture are taken from the Septuagint (typically, from the A. D. 1851 English translation of Brenton), which is a translation into the Greek dialect called ‘Koine’ of the ancient Hebrew canon of Old Covenant scripture. The Septuagint commonly is designated by the Roman numeral ‘LXX’, which corresponds to the number seventy, this supposedly being the number of men who laboured on the translation.

The translation was made a century or more prior to the Incarnation, and copies of the Septuagint circulated throughout the ancient world. By the time of the birth of Christ, the Septuagint had become accepted as the authentic and official Canon of Old Covenant scripture. Popular acceptance of the Septuagint was due largely to the fact that the Hebrew language had fallen into disuse; this, in turn, being largely a consequence of the dispersion of Israel by the Assyrian invasion, together with the subsequent seventy years of captivity in Babylon of the remnant which Assyria did not carry away. By the time of the return from Babylon, Greek had become established as the common language of the world, as a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great. Thus, it is the Septuagint, rather than the ancient Hebrew Canon, which was in common use throughout Judea during the era of the Incarnation and the apostolic age, and there is little, if any, evidence that the ancient Hebrew canon was still in use by anyone during this period. Jesus and the apostles quoted from the Septuagint rather than the ancient Hebrew, thus authenticating the Septuagint as the official and authentic canon of Old Covenant scripture. Consequently, it is the Septuagint, rather than the ancient Hebrew text, which the early Church preserved and revered as genuine.

Veneration of the Septuagint—on the part of both the Christian and the Christ-rejecting, unregenerate Jew—persisted for a period of roughly a century after the Resurrection. However, the Jew, having nothing but an adversarial relationship with the Christian, began maintaining his own editions of the Septuagint. Sometime after the final destruction of the city of Jerusalem and the temple in A. D. 70, the Jew attempted to revive the defunct Hebrew language and to re-create the abandoned ancient Hebrew text—a text which, like the ark of the covenant, has disappeared without a trace. It appears that neither a copy nor even so much as a fragment of the ancient Hebrew canon survived to the modern era; at least, Christian scholars know of none to be extant. These efforts of the Jew culminated in creation of the so-called ‘Masoretic Text’, which was not published until the 15th century A. D. It is vital to understand that the Masoretic Text is the product of unregenerate men, working entirely in the Christian era—an era in which no man rightly can claim to possess covenantal relationship with God under the terms of the Old Covenant, for the Old Covenant came to a permanent and irreversible end upon the death of Christ Jesus. Being the creation of unregenerate men, the Masoretic Text by no stretch of the imagination may be considered canonical.

Popular notion perceives the Masoretic Text as simply the ancient Hebrew text to which ‘vowel points’ have been added; but, in actuality, the Masoretic Text is a new Bible, written in a language considerably more complex than the language of the ancient Hebrews. Regrettably, William Tyndale translated his English Bible from the Masoretic Text, rather than from the Septuagint; thus were Christians originally introduced to the Jewish counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Canon. And despite the fact that, soon after its publication, the Masoretic Text was demonstrated by Christian scholars to be but a counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Canon and marred by numerous serious flaws, Tyndale’s use of the Masoretic Text set a precedent which has been followed by virtually every subsequent translator of the English Bible. Demonstration of the corrupt and spurious nature of the Masoretic Text is not difficult, for New Covenant scripture contains numerous quotations of Old Covenant scripture, and inspection of the quoted passages reveals all manner of corruption, including truncation, augmentation, and selective editing.

Thus, despite its historical role as the basis for English Bible, the Masoretic Text is nothing more than a poorly-crafted modern Jewish counterfeit of the ancient Hebrew Bible which long ago had been abandoned, even by the Jew; as such, the Masoretic Text is unreliable, utterly worthless, and offers nothing whatsoever of value to the Christian. The oldest extant copies of the Septuagint predate the oldest extant copies of the Masoretic Text by more than a thousand years. Moreover, there is no *demonstrated* continuity between the ancient Hebrew Canon and the Masoretic Text. Without question, the Septuagint is the only reliable link to the ancient Hebrew Canon. Indeed, the Masoretic Text gives the appearance of being a heavily-edited translation of the Septuagint into the Masoretic Hebrew language. But whatever the pedigree of the Masoretic Text, it is the Septuagint alone which is the authentic canon of Old Covenant scripture, simply because it is from the Septuagint alone that Jesus and the apostles cited the Scripture.

For a more comprehensive discussion of this matter, see the journal article, “Rightful Succession & Imposture: The Case of the Septuagint vs. the Masoretic Text”, *Salt & Light*, Vol. 2, No. 6.

IV. Absurd Heresy

Within Christian circles, one sometimes runs across a fantastic and absurd heresy which has its roots in the popular misconception of the meaning of the term 'hell'. According to this heresy, while the body of Jesus lay in the tomb, Jesus himself went to 'hell'. One variant of this myth has Jesus "preaching to 'souls' supposedly incarcerated in hell"; another has Jesus suffering judgment and torment.

This heretical teaching is laid bare immediately once the true meaning of the term 'hell' is understood. And perhaps the simplest, most-direct method of establishing the true meaning of the term 'hell' is to point out in Scripture the correspondence between the terms 'hell' and 'corruption' (that is, the corruption associated with death and the grave)

V. The Proper Interpretation

When Jesus told Peter, "... *on this rock I will build my church; and gates of death shall not be strong against it,*" he was uttering a prophecy with a twofold reference. At the same time, he was stating an important truth concerning the nature of death—a truth which Christians of this day generally fail to appreciate.

The Church built by Christ Jesus is the temple of God—a living, spiritual edifice, built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone. The physical temple destroyed in A. D. 70 by the Romans will never be rebuilt, nor will there ever again be a physical temple—that era ended once and for all with the resurrection of Christ Jesus, which act is the laying of the cornerstone of the living temple.

14 Therefore hear ye the word of the Lord, ye afflicted men, and ye princes of this people that is in Jerusalem. 15 Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with Hades, and agreements with death; if the rushing storm should pass, it shall not come upon us: we have made falsehood our hope, and by falsehood shall we be protected: 16 Therefore thus saith the Lord, even the Lord, Behold, **I lay for the foundations of Sion a costly stone, a choice, a corner-stone, a precious stone, for its foundations;** and he that believes on him shall by no means be ashamed. 17 And I will cause judgement to be for hope, and my compassion shall be for just measures, and ye that trust vainly in falsehood shall fall: for the storm shall by no means pass by you, 18 except it also take away your covenant of death, and your trust in Hades shall by no means stand: if the rushing storm should come upon you, ye shall be beaten down by it. 19 Whenever it shall pass by, it shall take you; morning by morning it shall pass by in the day, and in the night there shall be an evil hope. Learn to hear, 20 ye that are distressed; we cannot fight, but we are ourselves too weak for you to be gathered. 21 The Lord shall rise up as a mountain of ungodly men, and shall be in the valley of Gabaon; he shall perform his works with wrath, even a work of bitterness, and his wrath shall deal strangely, and his destruction shall be strange. 22 Therefore do not ye rejoice, neither let your bands be made strong; for I have heard of works finished and cut short by the Lord of hosts, which he will execute upon all the earth.

— Isaiah 28:14–22 (LXX)

24 Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of

mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, **which built his house upon a rock:** 25 and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for **it was founded upon a rock.** 26 And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand: 27 and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it.

— Matthew 7:24–27

19 Jesus answered and said unto them, **Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.** 20 Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? 21 **But he spake of the temple of his body.**

— John 2:19–21

10 Be it known unto you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him doth this man stand here before you whole. 11 **This is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner.**

— Acts 4:10–11

9 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, **ye are God's building.** 10 According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. 11 **For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.**

— I Corinthians 3:9–11

19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; 20 **and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone;** 21 **in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord;** 22 **in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God** through the Spirit.

— Ephesians 2:19–22

4 **To whom coming, as unto a living stone,** disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, 5 **ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house,** an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. 6 Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, **I lay in Sion a chief corner stone,** elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. 7 Unto you therefore which believe he is precious: but unto them which be disobedient, **the stone which the builders disallowed, the same is made the head of the corner,** 8 and a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed.

— I Peter 2:4–8

The Church is portrayed in Scripture as the figurative body of Christ, Christ Jesus himself being the head.

And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

— Colossians 1:18

Thus, the members of the Church are both members of the figurative body of Christ and living stones in the new, living temple of God. With this understanding, the meaning of the phrase, “*and gates of death shall not be strong against it*”, becomes clear. ‘Gates of death’ are strong against the Church *only* if they are able to prevent the escape of Christ Jesus or the escape of members of his body, for those held captive in the clutch of death cannot be members of a living body, nor can they be living stones in a living temple.

37 Now that the dead are raised, even Moses shewed at the bush, when he calleth the Lord the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. 38 **For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him.**

– Luke 20:37–38

The resurrection of Christ Jesus is a partial fulfillment of the prophesy, “*gates of death shall not be strong against it*”. The resurrection of the Church will complete the fulfillment.

22 Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: 23 him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: 24 **whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it.** 25 For David speaketh concerning him, I foresaw the Lord always before my face, for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved: 26 therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: 27 because **thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.** 28 Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; thou shalt make me full of joy with thy countenance. 29 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. 30 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; 31 he seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that **his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption.** 32 This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.

– Acts 2:22–32

But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, **he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies** by his Spirit that dwelleth in you.

– Romans 8:11

20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. 21 For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so **in Christ shall all be made alive.** 23 But every man in his own order: **Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ’s at his coming.**

– I Corinthians 15:20–23

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality,

then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 **O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?**

– I Corinthians 15:54–55

Thus, it is clear that the prophecy, “*gates of death shall not be strong against the church*”, refers to the fact that, when God the Father raised Christ Jesus from the dead, death was unable maintain its hold on Christ, who is head of the body and chief cornerstone of the Church. Moreover, it is clear that the prophecy refers also to the fact that those who comprise the Church—living stones in the temple of God—likewise shall be resurrected from the dead.

VI. The Power of the Resurrection

The declaration of Jesus, that ‘*gates of death shall not be strong against the church*’, implies that escape or release from death is no easy matter. The Judeo-Christian—having been thoroughly indoctrinated with the lie that man is, in essence, an immortal spiritual being—typically has little appreciation of this fact, nor of the absolute necessity of resurrection.

Certainly, release from death is a matter far exceeding the capability of any man; indeed, apart from and until the Resurrection, death is haughty victor over man. Consider again the words of the Almighty to Job:

And do the gates of death open to thee for fear; and did the porters of hell quake when they saw thee?

– Job 38:17 (LXX)

Contrast this humbling passage with the confident words of Paul, just cited, but well worth repeating again and again:

54 So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, **Death is swallowed up in victory. 55 O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?**

– I Corinthians 15:54–55

In his epistle to the Ephesians, Paul describes the Father’s activity in the resurrection of Christ Jesus with the phrase “*the working of his mighty power*”.

15 Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, 16 cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; 17 that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: 18 the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, 19 and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to **the working of his mighty power, 20 which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead,** and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: 22 and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.

– Ephesians 1:15–23

Christians glibly quote verses such as, “*For with God nothing shall be impossible,*” Luke 1:37, while remaining oblivious to passages such as these words of Paul. The Christian serves a God who is mighty—a God who is infinite in his understanding. Yet few ever come to the realization of the extent to which our God exercises his might and understanding in our behalf, and the magnitude of might and understanding which were necessary to bring into existence the things that now are. The Christian tends to look with apathy at the majestic works of God—perhaps the greatest of which is the resurrection of Christ Jesus—saying to himself, “*Oh, he’s God; for him, that was nothing.*”

VII. Conclusion

Far from being a reference to a spiritual kingdom set in array against the Church, the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew 16:18, “*gates of death shall not be strong against [the church]*”, are essentially a restatement of a prophecy penned long ago by David:

8 I foresaw the Lord always before my face; for he is on my right hand, that I should not be moved.
9 Therefore my heart rejoiced and my tongue exulted; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: 18 10 **because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.**

– Psalm 16:8–10 (LXX)

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*These, having put the world in commotion,
are also here present...and these all do contrary
to the decree of Caesar, saying another
to be king—Jesus.*

– Acts 17:6–7

We ought obey God rather than men.

– Acts 5:29