

THE GATES OF HELL

Now there's a phrase you don't often hear about. In fact, most people don't believe in a literal Hell, in spite of the fact that Jesus talked more about Hell than He did about Heaven. But what is this "Gates of Hell"? Is there really a gate that leads to Hell? If so, where is it? In order to answer these questions, we must travel to the northern part of Israel and listen to a conversation between Jesus and His disciples. Join me as we travel into what was once the forbidden territory of the "GOYIM", the Hebrew word for "Gentile".



Figure 1 - New Testament Israel - Nasa Photo

"Descending Dan River" or the "River down from Dan". It was also known as "Banias" or "Paneas", for it was a town of pagan worship of the god Pan, the half-goat and half-man god. But other gods were also worshipped in that town, such as the Emperor Augustus and Zeus. By this time, the disciples had quite an education as they observed the pagan worship of these various gods. They had been to Gentile Tyre and Sidon, "the other side" of the Sea of Galilee, and now they stared at the Pan Grotto. Here they watched people going in and out of the Temple of Augustus, the Temple of Pan, the Temple of Zeus, the Temple of the Sacred Goats, and the Temple of Pan and the Dancing Goats. They also could see a number of niches where statues of the gods were placed.

Surely the Gentile worshippers must have stared at this group of young Jewish men who didn't "fit in". After all, they dressed differently and had those unmistakable Galilean accents. We could imagine what these Gentile worshippers must have been thinking as they

Most of Jesus' ministry was within Jewish territory throughout Israel, but now it was time to take His disciples into the territory of the Gentiles. Leaving the Galilee, Jesus and the disciples went up to **Tyre and Sidon**, present day Lebanon. Then the Lord brought the disciples down to "the other side" (eastern side) of the Sea of Galilee. When the phrase, "the other side" is used, it doesn't just mean "the other side of the Sea of Galilee". It also refers to "the other people" (Gentiles), with "the other gods", who eat "the other" food (pork and other forbidden food to the Jews), and live "the other" life-style. After Jesus fed the 4,000 men plus women and children on "the other side", they crossed the Sea of Galilee again to the Jewish side, but then He took His disciples further north to a place called Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi was a Greek/Roman city located about 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the foot of Mt. Hermon, a 9,200-foot mountain peak at the northern-most part of Israel. The area is lush green and at one time, it was the territory of the Tribe of Dan. That is why the Jordan River is the



Figure 2 - Rick & Linda in one of the niches - Photo taken by a friend.



Figure 3 - The Pan Sanctuary - Photo by Rick Yohn

made their way to the Temples wondering, *"What is this group of Jews doing in our territory?"* Of course, most likely the disciples were wondering the same thing. *"Why in the world would Jesus have brought us up here to observe this pagan worship?"*

The Lord was about to ask a question in the midst of this pagan background that would change the life of Peter and the disciples forever. Visualize Jesus turning to His disciples, as they were gazing at the paganism before their very eyes, and He asked the following question – *"Who do people say the Son of man is?"*

(Matthew 16:13). Now to understand the

impact of that question, we need to consider what the phrase "Son of man" meant to a Jewish mind.

The phrase is used 98 times in the Bible and in the Old Testament it was used to describe the future Messiah. The Prophet Daniel referred to the coming Messiah when he wrote, *"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a **son of man**, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed"* (Daniel 7:13-14).

In the New Testament, the phrase is applied to Jesus, who used it to describe Himself: *"For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath"* (Matthew 12:8). And as our Lord stood before the high priest, He was asked by the high priest, *"Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?"* *"I am," said Jesus. 'And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven'"* (Mark 14:61-62). Jesus was known as both "The Son of Man" and "The Son of God".

So Jesus asked His disciples, *"Who do people say the Son of Man is?"* (Matthew 16:13). The disciples responded to His question with names like *"John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets"*. Then the Lord got personal and followed up with a more pointed question. *"But what about you? He asked. 'Who do you say I am?'"* (Matthew 16:15). As they looked at Jesus and then observed the pagan worshippers entering and exiting their temples, it was as if Jesus was making a comparison between Himself and those other gods. Finally, Peter spoke up with an answer that even surprised him. ***"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"*** (Matthew 16:16).

Consider now Jesus' response: *"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* (Matthew 16:17-18). Let's reflect on three observations in those two verses. First, Peter's confession was a revelation from God and not from man. God opened Peter's mind so that he could comprehend the identity of the One who stood before him.

Secondly, Jesus was making a play on words. Peter means "little stone" or "rock." It is the Greek word **"Petros."** But then the Lord changes to another Greek word when He said, *"and on this **rock**, I will build*

my church." The word for "rock" here is **"Petra"** and refers to a massive rock or bedrock. Jesus was not saying that He would build the Church upon Peter but upon a solid and firm foundation, such as Himself. Jesus is that foundation, that bedrock, for the Apostle Paul wrote, *"For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ"* (1Corinthians 3:11). He also penned the following words about Jesus as a **"Petra"**, *"As it is written: 'See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock (**petra**) that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame'"* (Romans 9:33).

The third observation focuses on **"the gates of Hades."** Some translations translate this phrase as "the gates of hell." What's the difference? The Greek word for hell is "Gehenna," the place of eternal torment. But the Greek word for Hades is "ades." Hades is the place for the soul of the unbeliever until the final judgment. When that time arrives, death will release the resurrected body, and Hades will release the unbeliever's soul. Then both will be cast into the Lake of Fire. The Apostle John tells us, *"The sea gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death"* (Revelation 20:13-14). The more accurate translation in Matthew 16 is **"the gates of Hades."** Hades was the "god of the underworld." And behind the Temple of Augustus was a large cave filled with water. People in Jesus' day saw it as the entrance to the underworld and the god of the underworld, Hades. If you go there today, due to an earthquake, the area shifted, and water no longer fills that cave.



Figure 4 - The Gates of Hades - Photo by Rick Yohn



Figure 5 – Rick standing in front of the Gates of Hades - Photo by Linda Yohn

Though the **"Gates of Hell"** does not exist, both Heaven and Hell do exist. We all have a choice as to where we will spend our next life. And we should be encouraged by the fact that we don't have to "guess" where we will spend eternity, for the Bible guarantees Heaven for each one of us on one condition, and here it is: *"He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life"* (1John 5:12-13). If you have invited Jesus Christ into your life, you have at this very moment life eternal. Religion won't get you to heaven. Nor will good works open the door for you. But a personal relationship with the Lord

Jesus Christ is your passport to Heaven. And just as the "Gates of Hell" did not overtake the Church, nor will it affect you in any way when you meet the condition of receiving Jesus as your Lord and Savior.