

What Happens When We Die

A study of God's Word reveals the final destinations of all mankind when they experience physical death. Careful attention must be paid to the proper translation of the words used to describe these places referred to in the scriptures in order to have a right understanding of our final destination.

The Greek word "*Hades*" is the same as the Hebrew word "*Sheol*", and both have a literal translation as the "place of the dead". The picture of hades revealed by Jesus is that of the other world: the unseen world, the spiritual world, the spiritual dimension of being.

Jesus says that Hades is a place which is divided into two huge areas or sections or compartments. The two areas are separated by a great gulf that is impassible (Luke 16:26). One area is the place of sorrow or torments where all unbelievers go at the time of physical death (Luke 16:23-24, 28). The other area is the place of Paradise, also called Abraham's Bosom, where believers go. To say that a person was dead, before the death and resurrection of Jesus, was to say that the departed one was in one of the two compartments of hades, in the other world.

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." Luke 16:22-23

1. First, note where believers went when they left this world before Christ's resurrection. Scripture says that the place where believers went at that time is paradise or Abraham's Bosom.

a. Paradise is a term that expressed the happiness that believers could expect upon death. It had the idea of sitting down and feasting with Abraham in Paradise. The bosom of Abraham was referred to because he was the father of the Jewish nation.

"And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, to day shalt thou be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

b. Scripture is clear about where believers go since the death and resurrection of Christ: they go immediately to be with Christ. Genuine believers never taste or experience death. They are transferred into heaven, transferred quicker than the eye can blink.

"We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:8).

"For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better" (Phil. 1:23).

"Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thes. 4:17).

c. There is the *new heavens and earth*. The present heavens and earth are to be destroyed by fire and recreated. They are to be remade and created perfect without any seed of corruption whatsoever. The new heavens and earth are to be the eternal dwelling place for both Christ and believers.

"But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:10-13).

"And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea." (Rev. 21:1).

"For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isaiah 65:17).

2. Second, note where the spirits of unbelievers go when they leave this world. Scripture says that the place where unbelievers go is a *prison* (1 Peter 3:19), and the picture in the Greek is actually that of a prison. Scripture uses four words or terms to describe the prison. Note how each word or term describes a different section or cell block or compartment to the prison of hell.

- a. There is the cellblock or compartment which is called *Hell* or what the Greeks called *Hades* and the Hebrews called *Sheol*. This is the place where all unbelievers go when they die and enter into the next world. Hades is the torment section for the human race, the place where all unbelievers are placed and punished until the end of the world. At the end of the world, they are all taken out of hades and cast into the lake of fire which will be eternal hell.

"And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

- b. There is the cellblock or compartment of *Tartarus*. This is the place where fallen angels are kept until the end of the world. At the end of the world they too shall be cast into the lake of fire. Note the description of Tartarus. It is a place...
- of imprisonment where fallen angels are chained (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).
 - of darkness (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).
 - of vengeance (Jude 7).
 - of eternal fire (Jude 7).

Note: some commentators interpret the "sons of God" of Genesis 6:1-4 as angels and say that they are the only angels imprisoned in Tartarus. In this view Tartarus is thought to be the worst of all *hells* because the sin of Genesis 6:1-4 is thought to be the worst imaginable sin. In this view some of the other angels are said to be imprisoned in the bottomless pit and still others are roaming throughout the universe working for Satan and oppressing men.

"For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Peter 2:4).

"And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day. Even as Sodom and Gomorrha, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire" (Jude 6-7).

- c. There is the cellblock or compartment called the *Abyss* or the *Bottomless Pit*. This is the place where demons and evil spirits are kept until the end of the world.

"And they [evil spirits] besought him that he would not command them to go out into the deep" (Luke 8:31).

"And the fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth: and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit. And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit. And there came out of the smoke locusts [demons] upon the earth: and unto them was given power, as the scorpions of the earth have power....And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit, whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon" (Rev. 9:1-3, 11).

"The beast [antichrist] that thou saw was, and is not; and shall ascend out of the bottomless pit, and go into perdition: " (Rev. 17:8).

"And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years" (Rev. 20:1-2).

- d. There is the cellblock or compartment called *Gehenna* or the *Lake of Fire*. This is the place where all those who have rebelled against God are to be cast at the end of the world—all unbelieving men,

fallen angels, demons, and the devil. At the final judgment of unbelievers, the lake of fire is the *final hell* to which all the wicked shall be judged and condemned, and the judgment of Gehenna is said to be eternal.

"The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 13:41-42).

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever" (Rev. 20:10).

"And death and hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:11-15).

"But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone: which is the second death" (Rev. 21:8).

3. Third, we examine what scripture says concerning Jesus Christ's activities after His death and resurrection and the changes He brought about in the afterlife because of His victory "over death, hades, and the grave".

"by which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing" (1 Pet. 3:19-20).

"He [Christ] went and preached unto the spirits in prison." What spirits? Who were the spirits to whom Christ went and preached? Note that the unbelievers of Noah's day are mentioned. But did Christ proclaim His triumph only to them? Not likely. He probably proclaimed His triumph to all those who had rebelled against God from the beginning of time.

- a. He proclaimed His triumph to all the unbelievers in *hades*. He *vindicated the way of faith*, proclaimed that the faith of Noah and of all other believers was victorious. Remember that Noah's faith and life were never vindicated during his lifetime. He was mocked, abused, and rejected by the people of his day. Therefore, Christ Himself proclaimed the victory personally.
- b. He proclaimed His triumph to the fallen angels in *Tartarus*. All through history the fallen angels have rebelled against God and fought to keep the promised seed of the Savior from coming to earth. They have done all they can to lead men to reject God. Jesus Christ was able to stand before them and proclaim that He was the promised seed, the Savior of the world, and that the way of salvation was now provided for man.
- c. He proclaimed His triumph to the demons and evil spirits in the *abyss*. He vindicated the faith of all believers who had been oppressed by the evil spirits down through the centuries.
- d. Christ, between his death and resurrection, announced salvation to God's faithful followers who had been waiting for their salvation during the whole Old Testament era. It should also be noted that some interpreters hold that He opened the door to paradise and took the Old Testament saints to heaven with Him when He arose from the dead. Remember: some of the Old Testament believers were raised and appeared to many in Jerusalem when Christ arose (Matthew 27:52-53). This would have been to confirm and strengthen the faith of the early believers—to make them stronger witnesses for the Lord. By seeing their loved ones raised from the dead, they would know beyond any question that Jesus is who He claimed: the Son of God, the Savior of the world.

"And having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it" (Col. 2:15).

"Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14).

Deeper insight into the time period between Christ's death and resurrection can be determined by Paul's words to us in the book of Ephesians.

"Wherefore he said, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things)" (Ephes. 4:8-10).

Christ had to die and descend into the lower parts of the earth. F.F. Bruce points out that the "lower regions" of the earth may mean three things: the earth to which Christ came; the sepulchre in which the Lord's body was laid; or Hades—the abode of the dead.

In allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture, the correct interpretation would seem to be "Hades." When other Scriptures contrast the descent of Christ with the ascent of Christ, the two farthest extremes seem to be indicated.

- a. In Romans 10:6-7 "ascending into heaven" is contrasted with "descending into the abyss"—the abode of the dead. **"Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) 7 or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).**
- b. In Phil 2:8-9, Christ humbling Himself to the lowest "depths of death" is contrasted with Him being "exalted to the highest" heavens by God. **"And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name,"**
- c. In Matthew 12:40, Christ being "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" is taken from Jonah 2:3-4 "in the heart of the seas." **"For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth."**

In light of these facts, Christ's descending into the lower parts of the earth must mean more than Christ just being placed in a sepulchre. It must mean *the place of departed spirits* or *the abode of the dead*.

The point is this: Jesus Christ had to die and experience hell for men in order to gain the right to gift men. That is the enormous price our gifts cost. If He had not died, then we could not be saved or gifted with spiritual gifts. There would be no purpose or significance to life—not beyond a few short years upon this earth. All we would have to look forward to would be death. But Christ has died, and He has conquered all the enemies of man—conquered them in order to gain the right to save and gift us.

4. Finally, when did Christ open the doors of heaven for all the O.T. believers to leave Paradise and enter into God's presence in heaven? Again, while no definitive answer is given, the scriptures indicate that this happened after His bodily resurrection from the grave.

Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" John 20:17

"But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep". 1 Cor. 15:20

(notes taken from Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible – Commentary; PC Study Bible; Life Application Commentary on 1st. & 2nd. Peter)