



“Where Are the Dead?”

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Most everyone is interested in the questions surrounding what happens to us after death. Atheists and materialists contend that death is the absolute end of human life; that we're only a mass of molecules and that all of our actions, thoughts, and emotions are merely the result of the interaction of chemicals in the brain, and once the brain dies, so does everything else about us. Theists, on the other hand, generally believe in 'life after death,' but that's a very general statement. To be more specific, what happens to us when we die? The Bible teaches that we will eternally exist after this temporal world vanishes, but what about the meanwhile? Where are our loved ones right now who have died? A viewer asks an interesting question about that. She writes: *“When one dies, at what point do they go to heaven? Is it immediately or at the resurrection?”* That's a good question, and one that I suppose many of us would like to know something about. The Bible does teach that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both the saved and the lost (**1 Corinthians 15**). But in the meantime, do the righteous dead go immediately to live with God in heaven, or is there something else spanning the time between the grave and the end of time? Let's see what light the scriptures shed upon this question.

To begin to understand what happens to human beings in death, we first need to understand what humans ARE. Are we physical beings, are we spiritual beings, or a combination of the two?

Genesis 2:7 “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

So, God first fashioned a body, then He gave it life, and it *became a living soul* fashioned in the image of his Creator. Depending on what kind of distinction you believe exists between the soul and the spirit, man is either a dichotomous or a trichotomous being. He was given a body to house his spirit, and the Bible thus refers to him as *a living soul*. A body without a spirit is simply dead.

James 2:26 “For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.”

When the spirit leaves the body, that is when death occurs. It took God breathing into the body of lifeless Adam a spirit for him to become physically alive. His connection to God made him spiritually alive, and consequently, the reverse is true. When a person becomes spiritually separated from God through sin, he is then spiritually dead, and when his spirit departs his physical body, he is then physically dead. The scriptures teach that that body then goes back to the elements out of which it originally came. After Adam sinned, God pronounced this curse:

Genesis 3:19 “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.”

That refers to the body once the spirit departs. All of us physically bear the image of Adam, so not only because of sin will we one day die, but our bodies will also go back to the dust of the earth. But, what happens to the soul? What happens to the rest of man? The apostle Peter referred to his body as a *tent* or *tabernacle*. In other words, a *temporary dwelling*.

II Peter 1:14 “Knowing that shortly I must put off this my tabernacle, even as our Lord Jesus Christ hath shewed me.”

He says that he would leave this dwelling place, his body. If we *put off* or *leave behind* our bodies, that implies that our being, apart from the body, goes someplace else. One day, we will shuffle off this mortal coil, and the spirit that once lived inside will continue to live someplace else. The Bible is very clear that we will eventually either go to heaven or hell after the resurrection and judgment take place. That is very true. **Matthew 25:31-46** is just one passage that shows that this will be the case. But the viewer that wrote to us wants to know about the interim. Where are the spirits of the dead until the resurrection?

Some do believe that the Christian goes immediately to heaven upon death and that the sinner goes immediately to hell when he/she dies. But is that what the Bible teaches? Perhaps the most detailed account of what occurs in death is the story of the rich man and Lazarus that Jesus relayed in **Luke 16**.

Luke 16:19-31 “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.”

Some allege that this was a parable, and therefore what happened to these two men cannot be taken as a real account. They say that Jesus was merely using this scenario to illustrate the relationships of Jews and Gentiles to the kingdom of heaven. Well, Jesus indeed told this story for an illustrative purpose, but that doesn't make it untrue. The Bible does not introduce it by calling it a parable, as it does most other parables. This story also includes actual names, unlike other parables.

But, be that as it may, even if it should be regarded as a parable, that doesn't make it a fairy tale. You see, a parable is merely an illustration. It is a story that the hearer can understand and relate to that is used to illustrate a spiritual truth that is harder to understand. Jesus's parables were always rooted in either everyday occurrences or general understandings.

Jesus one time told a parable in which He likened a farmer sowing his crop to the preaching of the gospel. Another time, He told a story of a rebellious and prodigal son who left home, and of his older brother who pouted when his younger brother returned and received his father's attention. These and other stories were rooted in imaginable and perhaps even real occurrences that Jesus' hearers could relate to. If the story of Lazarus and the rich man is purely made up out of thin air, if there are no such places where the disembodied dead go, the story itself would've sounded so foreign and strange to those listening to it that it would not have complimented the truth that Jesus was teaching them but rather have distracted them from it, thus defeating the purpose of the story to begin with. I believe that what Jesus describes is indeed what in effect happens to saved and lost people when they die; that He lifts back the veil of immortality and gives us a glimpse at the other side of death.

So, how does Jesus describe it? He says that when Lazarus died, he was *carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom* where he was being comforted and was, obviously, at peace. In other passages, the Bible seems to refer to this place or state as *a paradise*. It may be helpful to remember that *paradise* is perhaps a provisional or descriptive term and not necessarily a formal name. When Jesus was appealed to by the penitent thief on an adjacent cross at Calvary, you recall His reply:

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

First of all, that shows that even though the body dies and is placed in an earthly grave, the spirit which left that body departs and goes somewhere else. Jesus would be laid in the tomb of Arimathea that day, but He says to the thief that he would be with Him that day in paradise. The word *paradise* simply means *a garden or a place like Eden/an Edenic place or a place of future happiness*. Some will say that paradise refers to heaven, pointing to Paul's vision:

II Corinthians 12:2-4 "I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, (whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) such an one caught up to the third heaven. And I knew such a man, (whether in the body, or out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth;) How that he was caught up into paradise, and heard unspeakable words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter."

The *third heaven* that Paul speaks of here is generally thought to be the heaven where God dwells. The first heaven being the sky above the earth where the birds fly, the second heaven being where the stars and planets exist—space, in other words, and the third heaven being beyond or outside of that. So, could it be that to be caught up into paradise is to be caught up into heaven?

Look closely. He doesn't say that he was caught up INTO the third heaven but caught up TO the third heaven. But in verse 4, he says that he was caught up INTO paradise. Paul used two different words in the Greek there; that is not merely a distinction in the translation. That distinction is there in the Greek. The Greek word *heos* which is translated to mean *until* or *unto*, whereas he uses the Greek word *eis* in verse 4 which means *into* or *the point reached or entered*. There seems to be some distinction.

Now, we can't be very dogmatic about that, especially based on this particular argument alone, but let me give you a couple of other passages to consider along with this. Look again at Jesus' statement to the thief on the cross:

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

Both Jesus and the thief died that very day. Yet, a few days later, when Mary saw Jesus after His resurrection, Jesus told her this:

John 20:17 "...Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God."

You see, He didn't return to heaven until forty days after His crucifixion when He ascended from the Mount of Olives.

Then, look at **Acts 2** at Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost. Peter shows that King David was not the object of his own prophecies concerning the Davidic throne. Listen to him carefully. He quotes David's prophecy.

Acts 2:25 "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:"

The one that David is prophesying of would sit at God's right hand. That speaks of a place of power and authority; in heaven, in other words, where God dwells. Who is David talking about in this prophecy? Certainly not himself. He is looking about one thousand years into the future and Peter shows how that this very thing proved that Jesus was the Christ and the promised King that would come to reign upon David's throne. Let's read further from Peter's sermon.

Acts 2:29-34 "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. 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; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear. For David is not ascended into the heavens: but he saith himself, The LORD said unto my Lord, Sit thou on my right hand,"

Consider what Peter is saying. David is both dead and buried and his body remained in a grave to that very day. **Luke 16** suggested that when people die, they go to a realm of *Hades*, an *unseen realm of departed spirits*. That's where David would've gone. But Peter said David's body remained in the

sepulcher or grave *this day*. What day? That very day, the Day of Pentecost when Peter was preaching, which is after the resurrection of Jesus.

He also said of David that he is *not ascended into the heavens*. One might say that that is just symbolic language that means that David has not been exalted like Christ has been. True enough, but if David went to heaven when he died, verse 34 would be a false statement, because Peter said that he had NOT ascended to heaven. A statement that contradicts the truth cannot illustrate the truth, you see. Rather, I believe that David is in the same place that Jesus described Abraham as being in, which is the same place that Lazarus is in. That's where Jesus and the penitent thief went when they both died, and that is not heaven, the eternal home of the righteous.

But then what about this passage:

Revelation 2:7 “...To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

Remember that the word *paradise* is a provisional term, a descriptive word more than a formal name. You could refer to any beautiful or pleasurable place as a paradise and, in that sense, heaven is indeed a paradise. But it does not seem to be the same place under consideration in **Luke 16**, where the righteous go when they die and await the resurrection in the last day.

We also need to consider Paul's statement here:

II Corinthians 5:8 “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.”

One could argue that Paul is saying when we leave this body—death, in other words—that we are immediately with the Lord, who is in heaven. But the text doesn't indicate that it takes place instantly or immediately after death. Rather, at some point it follows death. That explanation better harmonizes with all of these other passages. In fact, in that same chapter, look at verse 1.

II Corinthians 5:1 “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved (meaning if this body dies), we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.”

That word *tabernacle* means a *tent* that one dwells in while on a journey. Paul says that we will trade this tent, which is the present body, for a different dwelling, an eternal one. When will we receive a new body? In **I Corinthians 15:35-54**, Paul tells us it will be not at the point of death, but at the resurrection. At the last trump when Jesus descends.

I don't want to sound dogmatic about these points because there is enough mystery surrounding a world that we cannot see, much less truly understand from our mortal vantage point, that it ought to make us very humbly approach these issues. But, in answer to the viewer's question, I will say that it appears to me that there is an abode of peace, comfort, and delight where those who died in Christ await the resurrection, where we will then receive new bodies and ultimately, eventually enter the presence of the Lord in heaven eternally. Time for those in paradise now would be irrelevant because it exists outside of this mortal life as we know it, where we are confined by time and space and so forth.

So, the time that elapses between the lifespan and deaths of human beings and the return of Jesus really is a moot point.

There is one other thing to consider. What about the dead who died outside of Christ? That's a different matter. Remember what Jesus said of the rich man.

Luke 16:23-24 "And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

Is this the hell that the Bible speaks of? Is this the final and everlasting abode of the damned? Is it where the devil and his angels and those who rejected Christ will be cast for eternity? The word *hell* is an unfortunate translation here. The Greek word that Jesus used was *Hades*, which was understood to refer to *the realm of departed/disembodied spirits*, not referring to the ultimate, resigned place of the wicked. In other words, to the realm where the spirits of men go immediately after death, righteous or unrighteous. *Hades* would describe that entire state of the disembodied dead. Within that state, some are in a pleasurable place, and others within this realm are consigned to an awful fate in a place of torment and punishment. They too, just like the saved who are comforted and at peace, await the resurrection and the final judgment, when they will then suffer what the Bible calls the second death (**Revelation 20:14**). In other passages, Jesus referred to that place which is to come for the lost as Gehenna.

Mark 9:43 "And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched:"

Peter says there is a place right now where the rebellious angels are being held, reserved in unbreakable chains for judgment.

II Peter 2:4 "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;"

This place that Peter refers to, known as *Tartarus*, is apparently in this unseen realm. Angels are being held, reserved in chains, awaiting the judgment, when they will be ultimately cast into the lake of fire. My own personal belief is that this is the same fate of the wicked who have since died and await the resurrection.

You see, friends, there is the state of the dead now, and then there is the eternal state that will commence at the Great Day, at the end of time, when Jesus comes again. Our spirits receive a new body and we enter our eternal abode, to either rejoice with the saints in the presence of the Lord, or suffer an endless and Godless night of torment and anguish. But, know this: in the meantime, death is the end of life on earth. Don't get the idea that there is some opportunity for repentance and redemption between the state of the dead now and the state of the wicked in eternity. No, this life and this physical death is the end of the window of grace and repentance. Our destiny is then sealed.

Hebrews 9:27 "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment:"

Therefore, it is URGENT that we prepare for death. We will either be in peace or in torment. Most will not “rest in peace” after death. I ask today, which will it be with you?

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