

Where Are the Dead?

by Stephen Wiggins

Some religious questions lack real benefit as they engender speculative theories which promote no spiritual benefit for the Christian (1 Tim. 1:4). The question under consideration, however, is not presented for speculative purposes. Rather, our objective is simply to reflect upon what the Bible teaches concerning man's destiny at death.

Man knows that the grave is where the physical body goes at death. So our primary concern here is where the spirit comes to reside. This is a matter which mankind knows absolutely nothing about except that which is revealed within the scriptures. What we learn, then, will hopefully motivate us to live in such a way as to some day spend eternity with God in heaven. "Where are the dead?" is a legitimate question and one that deserves our reflection.

Definitions

What Is Man? Unless we know what man is, we are not in position to consider what happens to man when he dies. A human is a composite being. He is a dual being, composed of both a body and a spirit. The physical body is derived from the dust of the ground and back to the dust it shall ultimately return (Gen. 2:7; 3:19). Further, man has infused into his body directly from God a spirit or soul. This is that imperishable aspect of the human being that was created in the very image of God. It is that eternal element which departs the body in death (Job 32:8; Eccl. 12:7; Zech. 12:1; Dan. 7:15).'

What Is Life? Life may be viewed under two categories - *physical* life and *spiritual* life. The essential characteristic of death is "separation." The essential element of life is "union." Thus, spiritual life is that state of being united with God in a Father/child relationship. Physical life, on the other hand, is union of body and spirit. When these elements of body and spirit are joined together, they constitute life for the individual human.

What Is Death? When the body and spirit are separated, the resulting condition is death. James states that "the body apart from the spirit is dead" (James 2:26). The basic meaning of death, whether physical or spiritual, is separation. Never does the Bible use death in the sense of extinction, annihilation, or cessation of one's existence. It is simply and solely separation - separation of the body (the flesh) and the spirit (the immortal entity). Thus death is the condition subsisting when the spirit is no longer in the body.

These definitions of man, life, and death, although brief, are vital to a proper understanding of life after death. Man is composed of both body and spirit. Life of a person is the union of this body and spirit. Separation of body and spirit equals death for the physical body. The body was formed from the dust of the ground, and it will return to its original composition in death. A mortal, corruptible thing, it must undergo the natural

effects of its character and composition. If the physical body returns to the dust from whence it was taken, what happens to the spirit? Where does the spirit or soul of man go at death?

Erroneous Answers

There are many erroneous views within religious society given in answer to the question, "Where are the dead?" Let us consider briefly a few of these errors.

What do atheists say? Atheists deny the existence of God. Consequently they do not believe man is a created being. They maintain that humans evolved from lower life forms and cannot be a dual being, composed of both body and soul. Thus there is no spiritual (non-physical) entity such as a soul that departs when man dies. When a person dies, the cemetery is as far as anyone goes. There is nothing beyond the grave.

What do materialists say? Some religious folk are, in reality, materialists. Like the atheists they believe man is wholly mortal. Even though these people believe in God and have religious convictions they still insist that at death the soul's destiny is the grave. Nothing exists beyond death for any person. They consequently deny any future rewards or punishments in afterlife. The ancient Sadducees are representative of this group. They repudiated any existence of life after death. Josephus, a first-century Jewish historian, states that the Sadducees taught their souls die with the bodies" (cf. Matt. 22:23-33).²

What do cultists say? Some cultic groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, maintain that at death the soul goes to sleep. They teach a doctrine commonly known as "soul sleeping" wherein there is no conscious existence after death for the righteous or the wicked. At the resurrection the righteous are returned to a state of consciousness and clothed with eternal life. The wicked, on the other hand, are annihilated and so never experience any conscious, eternal punishment (cf. Matt. 25:46; 2 Thess. 1:7-9).¹

What do Catholics say? The Catholic Church maintains that the spirit, in its release from the body at death, passes into a place called "purgatory." It is here that the soul, for a period of time, undergoes a process of purging or purification for the punishment of sins. When sufficient suffering has been done to compensate for wrongdoing, the spirit is released and allowed to enter heaven. Suffice it to say that there is not the remotest hint of such a doctrine anywhere within God's word (cf. 2 John 9).

What do reincarnationists say? Hindus and Buddhists and other Eastern religions teach the doctrine of reincarnation. They believe that after a person dies his or her soul enters another mortal body to live on earth again. Life for the individual goes around in cycles of birth, death, and rebirth into another body. They die over and over again until they reach a state of perfection. The Bible says, however, that "it is appointed unto men once to die, and after this cometh the judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

What do the misinformed say? Whereas some, both within and without the Lord's church, have a scriptural view of man's spiritual nature and afterlife in an eternal abode, they remain uninformed as to where man's spirit resides between death and the final judgment. These contend that at death the soul goes immediately to its eternal destiny, heaven or hell. This is not what the Bible teaches. One's spirit does not enter his eternal abode at the moment of death. Rather, there is an intermediate state to which the soul departs to await the bodily resurrection and the final verdict of the judgment.

Paradise

As Jesus hung suspended on the cross between the two thieves one of them said, "Remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." Our Lord replied, "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42-43). Jesus and the penitent thief journeyed to Paradise on that day following their death. Three days later, on the day of his resurrection, Jesus stated to Mary, one of the woman who discovered the empty tomb, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended unto the Father" (John 20:17).

Jesus had died three days earlier and had gone to Paradise. At the time he conversed with Mary, however, he had not ascended to his heavenly Father as he eventually would do (Mark 16:19; 1 Pet. 3:22). This informs us that Jesus had not yet entered heaven even though he had been to Paradise. Thus, in Luke 23:43 Paradise is not a reference to heaven .4

Is there anything in the scriptures that indicates where the Paradise is that Jesus went on the day of his death? There is. On the day of Pentecost Peter demonstrates from Psalm 16 that David prophesied concerning the resurrection of Christ: "He foreseeing this spake of the resurrection of the Christ, that neither was he left unto Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:31). Two things follow from this statement: (1) Our Lord's body would not be left in the grave until it decomposed; (2) His spirit would not remain in Hades. If our Lord's spirit would not remain in Hades it is obvious that it had been there. But his spirit had also been in Paradise. Thus, we conclude that Paradise is in Hades but neither is a reference to heaven.

Hades

In Luke 16:19-31 there is the narrative pertaining to the deaths and destinies of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. Both men died, and both their disembodied spirits went to the Hadean realm. They both, however, ended up in two different places in Hades. The angels transported Lazarus into "Abraham's bosom" where he was "comforted." The rich man, on the other hand, was confined to a, "place of torment" and remained "in anguish in this flame."⁵

Hades primarily means "the unseen, or invisible world." The place of departed souls, though unseen to people on earth, is not unseen to God. Always, in the New

Testament, Hades signifies only the region of disembodied spirits. The grave denotes only the receptacle of the body .6

Abraham's Bosom. This expression was of clear significance to every Jew within the first century. For many centuries in the Near East it has been customary for people to recline at low tables when eating. The host would be at the head of the table whereas the guest of honor was seated on the right next to him. Thus, one is said to be "in the host's bosom." The expression later came to be a biblical idiom which figuratively indicates a place of prominence and honor (cf. John 1:18; 13:23). So, to be in "Abraham's bosom" was to be exalted to the highest possible place of honor and preeminence. It conveys that Lazarus was now in warm and respected fellowship with Abraham.

Great Gulf. "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf [chasm, NIV] fixed, that they that would pass from hence to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from thence to us" (Luke 16:26). It is important to note that after one dies it is too late to change the course of one's eternal destiny. When death comes and one's spirit enters into Hades, the "great gulf" between the saved and the lost is permanently "fixed" so that one cannot alter his spiritual state or condition. One determines his eternal destiny by the way he lives upon earth in the physical body (2 Cor. 5:10).

Tartarus

In offering proof that God's judgment against the wicked is inevitable, the apostle Peter states that "God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell, and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2 Pet. 2:4; cf. Jude 6). The word translated "hell" in this passage is from the verb form of *tartarosa* and occurs only this one time in the Greek New Testament. It means "to cast into Tartarus." The word is used in Greek mythology of the place of imprisonment and Divine punishment for the souls of wicked men after death.⁷ Brother Guy N. Woods comments as follows:

"It seems likely that Peter, writing in Greek, and to people who would be disposed to understand the words of the language in their ordinary signification, here used the word in its usual import, and that by it he intended to convey the idea that these wicked angels were thrust down to such an abode to await the judgment of the great day. Inasmuch as the nature of the place is the same as that which characterized the rich man in torment in Hades, separated by a great gulf from the righteous there (Luke 16:23-26), it is reasonable to assume that the places are the same, and that tartarus is that compartment in the Hadean realm where wicked spirits are reserved (kept in restraint) until the day of their final condemnation is at hand."⁸

Conclusion

In summary note what has been learned: Life is the union of body and spirit. Death is their separation. At death the body goes into the grave to decompose into dust. The

spirit makes its way into the Hadean realm. "Hades" is a general term inspired writers used to designate the place where both the righteous and unrighteous go at death. It is divided into two compartments. The spirits of the righteous pass into the compartment called "Paradise" or "Abraham's bosom" where they are "comforted." The spirits of the unrighteous go into the Hadean realm as well but into the part designated as a "place of torment" or "Tartarus." Between these two areas in Hades there is a "great gulf," prohibiting any passage from one area to the other. Alexander Campbell offers the gist of it as follows:

“In *hades*, then, the receptacle of all the dead, there are rewards and punishments. There is a *paradise*, or an *Abraham's bosom*, and there is a *Tartarus*, in which the evil angels are chained, and the spirits of the wicked men engulfed. Hence, Dives [the rich man, SW] in *Tartarus*, and Lazarus in *Abraham's bosom*, were both in *Hades*. Jesus and the converted thief were together in *Hades*, while they were together in Paradise.”⁹

Anticipating what will happen on the day of judgment inspiration records that "death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works" (Rev. 20:13). It is at this time that all souls will leave the Hadean realm unto "life" or "damnation" (John 5:28-29). This is to be understood, of course, in harmony with the great judgment scene itself where the entire human race stands before the Son of God to hear the sentencing of their final abode: "And these shall go away into eternal punishment; but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:46). The question we have posed is this: Where are the dead? The biblical answer is that they are in Hades waiting for the great and final Day of Judgment.

Endnotes

1. The terms "soul" and "spirit" are used in different senses within the Scriptures. For a summary of these uses see Wayne Jackson, *Bible Words and Theological Terms Made Easy* (Stockton, CA: Courier Publications, 2002), pp. 168-169.
2. Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), p. 477.
3. The term "sleep," when used in the contexts of death in the Scriptures, always refers to the physical body and not the soul. Sleep is an appropriate figure of speech for the death of the body since the body takes on the appearance of sleep (cf. Dan. 12:2). See Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), p. 179.
4. The Greek term *paradeisos* (paradise) etymologically refers to a "pleasure garden" which refers to an enclosure, a royal park, or a garden with a wall. The term is found three times in the New Testament to denote a place of great blessings. In Luke 23:43 the reference is to that intermediate state of the righteous dead which precedes the final day and the resurrection of the body. In 2 Corinthians 12:4 and Revelation 2:7 the reference

seems to be to heaven itself, the final abode of the faithful. One must remember that a word can take on different senses, depending upon the context in which it is found. See Johannes P Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English of the New Testament*, vol. 1, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), p. 5.

5. Some try to skirt the teaching of this passage pertaining to the Hadean realm by pointing out that this is a parable. But scholarship is divided as to whether or not this is a parable or a narrative relating a historical event concerning real people. This writer's conviction is that the teaching expressed within this passage concerning Hades is true whether it is a parable or not. What one should understand concerning a parable is that it is always "confined to that which is real. Its imagery always embodies a narrative which is true to the facts and experiences of human life." Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 276.

6. Perry B. Cotham, *After Death... What Then?* (Grand Prairie, TX: By the author, 1814 Santa Cruz, 1970), pp. 17-18.

7. Sometimes translators can obscure the meaning of passages by not consistently translating certain words in such a way as to distinguish them from other terms in the original language. For example the KJV has Jesus going to "hell," the rich man lifting up his eyes in "hell," and God casting down angels to "hell" (Acts 2:27,31; Luke 16:23; 2 Pet. 2:4). Yet none of the passages are in reference to *Gehenna* which denotes the final abode of the wicked in the unquenchable fire of hell (Mark 9:43). In a study such as this the student must be careful to distinguish between words such as *Hades* (and its counterpart in Hebrew, *Sheol*), *Gehenna*, and *Tartarus*.

8. Guy N. Woods, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles of Peter, John, and Jude* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1976), p. 166.

9. Alexander Campbell, *The Living Oracles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, reprint 1976), p. 59 in appendix.