

Where did Old Testament Saints go after they died?

A study of what the Bible says about Sheol and Hades.

- A. The Old Testament teaches life after death, and that all people went to a place of conscious existence called Sheol. The wicked were there (Psalm 9:17; 31:17; 49:14; Isa 5:14), and so were the righteous (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 2 Sam 22:6; Job 14:13; Psalm 88:3; Eccl 9:10; Isa 38:10; Jonah 2:2).
- The New Testament term for Sheol is Hades.¹ Prior to His death and resurrection, in Luke 16:19-31, Jesus taught that Hades² was divided into two sections: a place of comfort where the poor man Lazarus went after he died, and a place of torment where the rich man (who refused to feed poor Lazarus while the two men were alive) went after he died. In this same passage Jesus taught that there was a ‘great chasm’ between the two sides of Hades (Lk 16:26), but that people could see each other across the chasm, and even speak to each other at times (Lk 16:23-25).
- B. The Scripture says that after Jesus died He descended into Hades to preach to the saints who were there. It was at this time that all of these pre-Jesus saints were saved and moved to Heaven, where they now await the Resurrection of their bodies. All believers who have died since then go directly to Heaven and join them. Hades still exists, but it now contains only the souls of dead *unbelievers*, past and present. Thus, when an unbeliever today dies, he joins Old Testament unbelievers in Hades. At the Final Judgment the souls inhabiting Hades will all be resurrected (ie. Hades will be ‘emptied’), judged and sent to Hell (Rev 20:13-14); at this time, Hades itself will be destroyed (Rev 20:14). [Note: the ‘lake of fire’ spoken of in Revelation 20 is Hell.]
- Proof for the above statements:
 1. ***Proof that something switched after Jesus death, with regards to the location of dead saints:***
 - ◇ Before Jesus’ death (as noted above), the Bible always describes the saints as being in Sheol/Hades, which is ‘down’ in the earth, whereas *after* Jesus’ death, the Bible always describes the saints as being in Heaven, a radically different place, obviously, which the Bible always describes as far ‘up’ above us. Below are a number of Scripture passages contrasting what the Bible says about the whereabouts of dead saints before and after Jesus’ death:
 - a) BEFORE Jesus’ death, the Bible says the saints are in Sheol (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 2 Sam 22:6; Job 14:13; Psalm 88:3; Eccl 9:10; Isa 38:10; Jonah 2:2), which is ‘down’ in the earth (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29; 44:31; Num 16:33; 1 Sam 2:6, etc.). In the New Testament the word Hades is used of Sheol, and before His death Jesus taught that the righteous went there (Lk 16:19-31, cf. v 23).
 - b) AFTER Jesus’ death, the Bible says the saints are in Heaven with God (Heb 12:22-24, cf. v 23b; Rev 6:9), which is ‘up’ (John 6:33, 38; Acts 1:9-12; 2 Cor 12:2-3; Rev 4:1b, etc.).
 - Here are some more passages of Scripture which teach that believers immediately go to Heaven after they die:
 - 1) In Acts 7:55 Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God, just before he was stoned to death; moments later as he was dying, he prayed “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (v. 59). In other words, Stephen expected to go to Jesus immediately after he died.
 - 2) *For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep.* – 1 Thess 4:14 (ESV) According to this passage of Scripture, when Jesus returns to earth He will bring ‘with Him’ those who ‘have fallen asleep,’ speaking of dead believers. But if dead believers are ‘with Him,’ that means they are in Heaven right now, where He is.

¹ See Acts 2:27 where Peter uses the term ‘Hades’ in place of the word ‘Sheol’ when quoting Psalm 16:10; see also Lk 16:23 and Rev 20:13-14.

² Note: The Greek word Jesus uses in Luke 16:23 is Hades, not Hell. But some popular translations, like the NIV and KJV translations use the word Hell – this could cause some confusion. The NASB, ESV and NKJV (the most trusted modern translations) however all keep the word as it actually is in Greek – Hades.

3) In Philippians Paul talks about being torn between his desire to continue serving God on the earth and his desire to go and be with God: *I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.* – Phil 1:23 (ESV) Clearly, Paul believed that when he died he would go directly to Heaven to be with Jesus.

4) Elsewhere, in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul reiterates this point: *So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, ⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight. ⁸Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.* – 2 Cor 5:6-8 (ESV) Paul clearly states here the fact that, after a believer dies ('away from the body') they go 'home' to be 'with the Lord.' We know that Jesus is in Heaven; thus, dead believers go straight to Heaven after they die.

◇ **Conclusion:** It is clear from Scripture that a major shift occurred regarding the dwelling place of the souls of dead saints, after Jesus' death and resurrection. *Before* His death and resurrection, the souls of the righteous went to a holding place called Sheol (Old Testament) or Hades (New Testament). *After* His death and resurrection all of the souls of the righteous who were in Sheol/Hades were transported to Heaven to be with God, and now, whenever a saint today dies, he or she goes directly to Heaven to be with Jesus. At what exact point were the souls of the righteous in Hades transferred to Heaven? That is the question tackled in the next paragraph . . .

2. It seems likely, from Scripture, that Jesus went to Hades after His death to preach to the righteous saints who were there (after this they would have been transported to Heaven, where they now live). Consider the following three passages:

a) *With respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them in the same flood of debauchery, and they malign you; ⁵but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. ⁶For this is why the gospel was preached EVEN to those who are DEAD, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.* – 1 Pet 4:4-6 (ESV)

- In this passage the apostle Peter writes that the Gospel was preached 'even to those who are dead,' an incredible statement that mystifies many Christians. Who are the dead people Peter is talking about, and when/how did they have the Gospel preached to them?

b) The previous chapter gives us a clue: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, ¹⁹in which he [Jesus] went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, ²⁰because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water.* – 1 Pet 3:18-20 (ESV)

- In this passage Peter writes that while Jesus was 'dead in the flesh' (v 18b) in the three days after His crucifixion, He was active and 'alive in the spirit' (v 18c) – He 'went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison' (v 19b). So during the three days that Jesus was dead, He went to a prison and preached to some spirits (the Greek word 'proclaimed' can also be translated *preached*) who were disobedient during the days of Noah. Who are these spirits? And what/where is this 'prison?'

c) 2 Peter chapter 2 gives us the answer: *"For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into Hell [Greek: Tartarus] and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly . . ."* – 2 Pet 2:4-5 (ESV)

- The word translated 'Hell' in verse 4 should not be translated 'Hell;' it is not the Greek word for Hell (which is *gehenna*) but a separate word, *tartarus*, used nowhere else in the Bible. Tartarus means 'a dark and doleful

subterranean region or pit.³ Thus, Tartarus fits the biblical description of Sheol (see OT passages listed above) and must refer to Sheol/Hades, not Hell (see footnote below for further reasoning).⁴

- According to this passage God has locked up some wicked angels in Tartarus (ie. Sheol/Hades) because they sinned. We know from other passages of Scripture that God hasn't locked up all the wicked angels yet, because Satan and his demons are still wreaking havoc on the world (1 Pet 5:8; Eph 6:12; Lk 9:42, etc.). So what is this group of angels that sinned, who Peter speaks of in 2 Peter 2:4? Verse 5 links these angels to the time of Noah, the time just before God brought the Flood on the ungodly. This is a direct reference to Genesis 6:1-4, which tells the story of powerful angelic princes (called 'the sons of God' in Genesis 6) who mingled with human women and produced gigantic and evil offspring (the 'nephilim'). According to Peter, the wickedness of these angels was so great that they have been locked up *already* (see also Jude 6) – unlike Satan and the rest of the demons and fallen angels, who will continue to roam the earth until Jesus' Return.

C. Bringing 2 Peter 2:4-5 (angels locked in Tartarus) together with 1 Peter 3:18-20 (Jesus preached to 'spirits in prison') in order to make sense of 1 Peter 4:6 ('the gospel was preached even to the DEAD') in 3 steps:

1. Step #1: Putting 2 Peter 2:4-5 together with 1 Peter 3:18-20 reveals that, in the 1 Peter 3:18-20 passage, when Peter states that Jesus preached to the 'spirits in prison' after His death, He must have been preaching to the angels who were locked up in Tartarus (2 Pet 2:4) because they procreated with women (Gen 6:1-4; Jude 6; 2 Pet 2:4).⁵
2. Step #2: This Tartarus is just another name for Sheol/Hades (see arguments above). Thus, we know that Jesus went to Hades during the 3 days that He was dead, after the crucifixion.
3. Step #3: When we bring these two facts together with 1 Peter 4:6, where Peter says that the 'gospel was preached even to those who are DEAD,' we can reasonably conclude that while Jesus was in Hades preaching to the angels who were locked up, He also preached to the Old Testament Saints who were in Hades awaiting their salvation. (Recall from Luke 16:19-31, that Hades was divided into two sections at this time – one a place of comfort for the righteous, and the other a place of torment for the wicked.)
 - ◇ What other options are there? Who else could the dead in 1 Peter 4:6 be to whom the gospel was preached? And who else could have preached the gospel to these dead souls, but Jesus?

D. Conclusion: 2 biblical stories of significance, in light of this truth about Sheol/Hades.

1. ***The thief on the cross was the first believer to go directly to Heaven, without having to first stop in Hades.***
 - ◇ Up until the time of Jesus' crucifixion, every single person who had ever died, both righteous and wicked alike, went to Sheol/Hades (as discussed above). But just moments before His death, Jesus indicated the dawn of a new age, saying to the thief on the cross beside Him, "*Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in PARADISE*" (Luke 23:43 ESV). Paradise is in Heaven, not Hades (see the Heaven paper)! Thus, Jesus' death was the end of the Hades holding tank for believers; there would be no more in-between stage for God's people – from that point on, whenever a believer dies, he/she goes straight to Heaven and into the presence of God.
 - ◇ Note: We know that Jesus died sometime before the criminals beside Him (John 19:32-33), but we don't know exactly how long before – perhaps three hours? Not much more than that, but perhaps about that. We know that Jesus died in the ninth hour of the day (Mk 15:34), which corresponds to the ninth hour of daylight, which is roughly 3pm in the afternoon. The Bible also tells us that Joseph of Arimathea went to retrieve Jesus' body for

³ See Strong's Concordance online: <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong's=G5020&t=KJV> (accessed Mar 28, 2012).

⁴ Some people may still be wondering here if Tartarus could be referring to Hell, instead of Sheol/Hades. Tartarus cannot be Hell, since no spirits will be sent to Hell (ie. the 'lake of fire') until the Final Judgment (see Rev 20:13-14). Notice how these angels are being 'kept until judgment' (2 Pet 2:4b); in other words, this *Tartarus* is a temporary holding place for these angels, until the final judgment, which is hell.

⁵ Note: this will not have been the kind of preaching which seeks to bring repentance – these angels are beyond repentance and are being 'kept until Judgment Day' (2 Pet 2:4b). Probably what Jesus did was proclaim a message of triumph over their evil schemes.

burial in the 'evening' (Mk 15:42), which corresponds to the setting of the sun, about 6pm. It was at this same time that the soldiers had to finish off the two thieves on either side of Jesus because they were still alive (John 19:31). Thus, the thief on the cross who was waiting to meet Jesus in Paradise, was alive for about 3 hours after Jesus had died. Sometime during those 3 hours Jesus went down into Hades (see above passages) to preach to the evil angels in bondage, and to the Old Testament saints awaiting salvation. At this point all of the righteous souls in Hades were transported to Heaven, so that when the thief on the cross finally died, he could go straight to Heaven and join them!

2. *God did not send the children of Dathan and Abiram to Hell for the sins of their fathers (Numbers 16:27, 31-34).*

- ◇ In Numbers 16 we have recorded the story of Korah's rebellion against Moses. Dathan and Abiram were important leaders from the tribe of Reuben who sided with Korah in this rebellion. In the story, God judges the rebels by causing the earth to open up and swallow them 'down alive into Sheol' (Num 16:33). What bothers many people about the story is that a number of the 'little' children of Dathan and Abiram (16:27), and some of the other leaders, clearly went down into Sheol with their fathers (16:27, 32).
- ◇ Because most people's understanding of Sheol is fairly limited (many preachers and teachers simply equate it with Hell), a number of Christians have been horrified by this story, thinking that God sent the little children of these men to Hell, along with their fathers. No! God would never do such a thing – He is just and good and loving and merciful. The key to understanding this passage lies in properly understanding Sheol, as per the discussion in this paper: firstly, Sheol is not Hell; and secondly, in Old Testament times Sheol consisted of 2 parts – one, a place of comfort for the righteous, and two, a place of torment for the wicked (as discussed at the beginning of this paper, see Luke 16:19-31).
- ◇ Thus we can safely conclude that though the children in Numbers 16 went down into Sheol along with their rebellious fathers, God did not send them to the place of torment where the wicked await the final judgment and Hell; instead, they will have gone to the place of comfort at 'Abraham's side' (Lk 16:22). A further confirmation of this truth is the fact that Scripture repeatedly states that God would never punish children for the sins their fathers commit (Ez 18:20; Deut 24:16; 2 Chron 25:4; 2 Kings 14:6); He only punishes people for the sins they actually personally commit themselves (Jer 31:29-30; Ez 18:4; 2 Cor 5:10).