

FIRST STUDY

What Happens When We Die? What does the Bible say about “hades”?

What happens when we die? Where do we go when we die?

These two questions are often answered with references to “hades.” A first step, and thus the subject of the first essay in this study, is to understand what the Bible says about “hades.”

In the second essay, I will address the question of what happens when we die.

ESSAY #1 -- What does the Bible say about “hades”?

The New Testament texts where the word “hades” is used are limited.

- Matt. 11:23, Capernaum will be brought down to “hades” (for unbelief)
- Matt. 16:18, the confession of Peter; Jesus’ comment that the “gates of hades” will not stand against the power of the kingdom
- Luke 10:15, a parallel text to Matt. 11:23
- Luke 16:23, Jesus’ teaching concerning the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man died and was in “hades”
- Acts 2:27, 31, Jesus will not remain in “hades” after his death (cited from Ps. 16, “hades” is a translation of the Heb. word *s^ol*, which is often translated “grave”)
- Rev. 1:18, Jesus has the keys of “hades” (keys signifying authority or control)
- Rev. 6:8, the rider on the fourth horse is identified as death and “hades” (symbolism, personification)
- Rev. 20:13, 14, death and “hades” (personification) give up their dead, after which death and “hades” (personified) are cast into the lake of fire

The four references in the Gospels occur in two parallel texts where “hades” seems to refer to punishment (Matt. 11:23 and Luke 10:15), Jesus’ statement that “hades” (“the gates of hades”) will not withstand the power of the kingdom (Matt. 16:18), and Jesus’ teaching about Lazarus and the rich man (Luke 16:23). These four texts must be understood in the context of historical Judaism of the first century.

The reference in Acts, citing Ps. 16, clearly refers to Jesus going to the grave and does not imply punishment. In the first of the three texts in Revelation, Jesus has the keys to (power over) “hades.” The other two texts seem parallel in their use of symbolism and personification. Death and “hades” are associated and will cease to exist, being consumed by fire.

A study of three additional words – abyss, Gehenna, Tartarus

Abyss is technically an adjective meaning bottomless or unfathomable. The adjective is used as a substantive so that it becomes a noun.

- In later Greek, the word meant “the primal deep, the primal ocean, the realm of dead, or the underworld (world of spirits).”
- The word appears about 25 times in the Septuagint (LXX), most often as a translation of the Hebrew word *t^ehom*. Examples of how the word is used include primal ocean (Gen. 1:2), deep waters (Ps. 42:7), realm of dead (Ps. 71:20). Concepts related to the realm of the dead include “interior of the earth where bodies are found” and “prison of fallen spirits.”
- In the New Testament, the word refers to the prison of demons (Luke 8:31, Rev. 9:1ff). The abyss is ruled by a prince, 9:11. A beast emerges from it, Rev. 11:7; 17:8; Satan is bound there, Rev. 20:1, 3.

Gehenna comes from a Greek word that is not used in the LXX.

- In the New Testament, Gehenna was a pre-existent entity, Mt. 25:41, a fiery abyss, eschatological punishment after the last judgment, of eternal duration. It is distinguished from “hades” which houses the dead after death.

Tartarus also comes from a Greek word.

- Thayer says it is “the name of the subterranean region, doleful and dark, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the abode of the wicked dead, where they suffer punishment for their evil deeds; it answers to

Gehenna of the Jews.” The relevant New Testament texts are 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6, referring to the disobedient angels.

There is no indication in the New Testament that these three words are synonyms for “hades.”

A study of paradise

Paradise occurs only three times in the New Testament.

The passage in Luke 23:43, where Jesus promises one of the two thieves that he (the thief) would be with Jesus in paradise on the very day of his death, is often used to show that there is a good side of “hades” where the righteous are kept for judgment. (Those who believe “hades” is only for the unrighteous identify paradise as a separate intermediate state.)

The other two occurrences seem to refer to heaven. The man caught up into paradise (2 Cor. 12:4) is usually understood as being caught up to heaven, not to an intermediate state of the dead. The promise of God that the overcomer will eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of paradise seems to be a clear reference to heaven (Rev. 2:7).

It is possible for a word to have more than one meaning or application, but good reasons should be given for an alternate understanding. Is the reference in Luke 23:43 to a different place than 2 Cor. 12:4 or Rev. 2:7? If so, why?

What does the Bible teach about “hades?”

As a first step to understanding the use of the word, and the breadth of meaning through the centuries, carefully study the following survey of the chronological development of the use of the word.

Septuagint (LXX). The word is used more than 100 times, mostly to translate s^ol, the grave, or the underworld that receives all the dead. The meaning of s^ol in the Old Testament is varied.

- s^ol is “darkness where God is not remembered.” This use of the word is difficult to integrate with references to the family grave, the grave of ancestors.
- In s^ol, Yahweh does not remember the dead, meaning that they are cut off from him, they are outside his activity in history. Recall that in Judaism, the dead are unclean.
- s^ol is on the border of what lies beyond. The psalmist had been in s^ol, but was rescued by Yahweh. s^ol describes the wilderness (Jer. 2:6, 31). In the reality of death, s^ol begins (Job 12:24ff).

In Rabbinic Judaism, the concept of immortality developed and this altered the concept of “hades.” Reward and punishment begin after death, in “hades.” This was the thinking of Pharisees and Essenes, but not of the Sadducees. A later view said that the souls of the righteous enter blessedness, but the souls of the ungodly are punished in “hades.” Thus, “hades” ceased to be a resting place for all and was associated with punishment for the ungodly. With the subsequent development of the doctrine of the resurrection, “hades” lost its role as an eternal resting place for souls and became a temporary resting place for souls until the resurrection.

In the New Testament, the word has a limited use. The words studied above are more common -- abyss, Gehenna. In the New Testament are multiple descriptions that are hard to reconcile, especially since several of the references occur in apocalyptic literature (Revelation) where one should expect symbolism and figurative language. “Hades” lies within the earth; one goes down to it (compare the phrase “in the heart of earth”). It is a prison, it has gates like a city, Christ has the key. In Rev. 20:14, like death, “hades” can be described with personal qualities, it is personified. At the resurrection, “hades” will give up its dead, suggesting that it is temporary and not eternal. From Luke (Gospel and Acts), all of the dead are in “hades.” Rev 20:13f may suggest that only the ungodly are in “hades.” (A repeated word of warning: let us be careful about drawing conclusions based on symbolic language in apocalyptic literature, recognizing the tendency to read apocalyptic literature literally.)

Summary of the Study of “hades”

The word “hades” has limited use in the New Testament, the word literally means “unseen realm.” New Testament usage, especially in the Gospels, must be understood against the background of Judaism.

The Old Testament (Septuagint, LXX) commonly uses “hades” to translate s^ol. The Hebrew word, s^ol, has a variety of uses and meanings in the Old Testament, but often means “grave.”

Rabbinic Judaism, with the development of the concept of immortality, altered the concept of “hades” in Judaism. The idea developed that reward and punishment begin in “hades” after death.

A later view suggested that only the ungodly are punished in “hades,” that the righteous enter blessedness. In this view, “hades” refers only to punishment.

With the development of the doctrine of resurrection in Judaism, “hades” could not be eternal and was seen as a temporary place for (all) souls until the resurrection.

A summary of New Testament teaching about “hades”: Christ has the key to “hades.” “Hades” will be overcome by Christ’s church. Generally, heaven is up and “hades” is down where it may represent judgment. The rich man was in “hades.” Jesus was in “hades” (the grave) after his death. “Hades” is associated with death, both death and “hades” are personified as enemies, death and “hades” will give up the dead, death and “hades” will cease to exist (be thrown into the lake of fire).

New Testament teaching related to death and resurrection must be considered in the development of one’s view. Jesus’ resurrection was to an everlasting life. Jesus removed the power of death and the devil from human beings. Jesus judges the dead and the living. “Hades” is overcome by the church and Christ has authority over “hades.” Those who die are united with Christ (although their bodies return to the earth, figuratively meaning that they are buried, in this physical world). Some of those who died are described as being in heavenly Jerusalem, under the heavenly altar, or before God’s throne. Jesus will bring saints with him at his return.

The references to “hades” in the New Testament are limited. The “unseen realm” may be nothing more than a reference to the grave. Jesus’ words about Capernaum seem to relate to judgment. Understanding “hades” as parallel to the grave, a translation of *sōol* which is a reference to the grave, would make sense in almost all of the New Testament occurrences of the word.

The conclusion to be drawn from this essay about “hades” is that we must look elsewhere, beyond the word “hades,” to answer our questions, “Where are the dead? What happens when we die?”

Essay #2 – What happens when we die? Where are the dead?

Because the New Testament is not as explicit as we would like concerning details of the beyond and the temporary state, statements of Scripture have often been enlarged upon and added to by human imagination. We want answers, but the number of extended biblical contexts available to answer our questions about life beyond this life is limited. We have experienced the helplessness and hopelessness of death and the grave. Our language betrays us: our loved ones are described in phrases such as “they passed,” “they are gone,” or “they left.” In such times of separation, with the absence of those who have died, we experience uncertainty. We experience the sting of death. Christians in the late first century, in the midst of the martyrdom of their brothers and sisters in Christ, experienced the same feelings. The book of Revelation, consistent with the goal of apocalyptic literature to comfort, gave an answer to their concerns.

I believe that the New Testament -- the death and resurrection of Jesus, a number of Bible texts and teachings, and the book of Revelation -- testifies to a different reality than what is normally presented. What I call the “traditional view” is not supported by New Testament teachings concerning Jesus’ death and resurrection. The continual repetition in our day of the traditional view occurs (1) because studies of “hades” have failed to take into account the Old Testament (Septuagint, LXX) uses of the word, the influence of Rabbinic Judaism, and the historical and literary context of the few NT passages where the word “hades” is used, and (2) because the death and resurrection of Jesus are not seen as normative, despite NT verses that say his death and resurrection are promise for our death and resurrection.

The traditional view. Allow me to briefly set forth the “traditional view” and to note some problems with this view. Here is a summary of the traditional view.

At death, everyone passes to an intermediate state. Many describe this intermediate state as *sōol* or “hades,” that is, the place of the dead. There is disagreement about whether “hades” is for all the dead or only for the unrighteous dead. Some identify the intermediate state of the righteous dead as “paradise” and the

intermediate state of the unrighteous dead as “hades.” This understanding is drawn largely from Luke 16 and Jesus’ account of Lazarus and the rich man.

The traditional view does not adequately deal with Hebrews 9:27: what follows death is judgment. The understanding that “hades” is only for the unrighteous does not reconcile with Acts 2 where Jesus is described as being in “hades” after his death. Giving a unique meaning to “paradise” in Luke 23:43, saying that the meaning of the word in Luke 23:43 is not the same as in 2 Cor. 12:4 and Rev. 2:7, must be justified and explained. The traditional understanding does not explain how the author of Hebrews can say that the new covenant brings us into the very presence of God (Heb. 10:19ff).

Other problems with the traditional view will be seen in a study of what the New Testament teaches about death, the grave, and resurrection. The death and resurrection of Jesus, and the promise of our participation in his resurrection through out baptism (Rom. 6), give a different picture of how victory over the grave (death and “hades”) is achieved so that we experience embodied, resurrected immortality.

New Testament teaching. A quick overview of a few of the teachings of the New Testament concerning death and resurrection raises several questions about how one should understand the New Testament references to “hades.”

The New Testament makes clear that there is something beyond death and the grave (Luke 16). The result of sin is death and the grave. The NT says that Jesus, in conquering sin and death, took away death’s power so that the promise of continuing life is possible. Jesus has risen to an eternal life (Heb. 7:16), he has taken away from human beings the threat of the power of death and the devil (Heb. 2:14), Jesus is judge of both the dead and of the living (Rom. 14:9).

Jesus overcomes death for the believer. Jesus’ resurrection is the first fruits of the resurrection of Christians (1 Cor. 15). The promise of participating in his resurrection is secured for the Christian at baptism (Rom. 6). Jesus conquered sin, death, and the grave. In parallel, “hades” cannot stand up against the church. In fact, “hades” is overcome by the conquering church and is under the authority of Christ (Mt. 16:18; Rev. 1:18).

Anyone who dies in Christ is united with Christ (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8); putting off the physical body allows one to be clothed with a heavenly dwelling and what is mortal is swallowed up by life (2 Cor. 5:2ff). The physical body is raised a celestial body at the resurrection (1 Cor. 15). Several NT descriptions are given of the situation of those who are in Christ or have died in Christ. Christians come to the heavenly Jerusalem and are numbered among the assembly of those who are enrolled in heaven (Heb. 12:23). Some Christians who have died are under the heavenly altar (Rev. 6:9) or before God’s throne (Rev. 7:9; 14:3). That a believer who dies is united with Christ (Phil. 1:23) is supported by 1 Thessalonians 4 where the text says that Jesus will bring (lead) with him his saints (referring to those who have died).

In Revelation John watches the unsealing of the scroll from the perspective of heaven, before God’s throne (chap. 4). God’s servants on earth are sealed (protected) (7:1-8), but John also sees a group of believers before the throne, those who have come through great persecution for their obedient witness. These, probably martyrs, were faithful followers of Jesus. Passing through trials and death, they come into God’s presence in the heavenly throne room to serve him day and night. The book of Revelation encourages those who read it in the midst of life’s trials and uncertainties to be faithful and to endure because death brings one into God’s presence.

An alternative possibility. As I conclude this essay, I set forth an alternative view concerning those who die in the Lord. Let me begin by saying that one’s belief about life after death is not going to alter our eternal destiny and our security of being with God eternally. I simply encourage you to read, contemplate, study, and analyze what the Bible says, taking into account its historical, textual, and literary contexts.

We live in this world in a physical body, but we are also spiritual beings. We are human beings with two natures. At death, the spirit being separates from the body. The body experiences death and the grave (s^ol, “hades”), the result of sin. The body returns to dust, the spirit returns to God who gave it.

The spirit of one who dies continues to exist. To die is to be with the Lord (Phil. 1:21), Paul says being away from this physical body is being at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8). Those who die in the Lord are transported to paradise (in the parallel sense to 2 Cor. 12:4, Rev. 2:7) where they serve God before the heavenly

throne. They are granted access to the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus who intercedes at God's right hand (Heb. 10). Revelation describes the spiritual life they experience.

At his coming, Jesus will bring with him those who have died in him. The bodies of the dead in Christ will be raised (as celestial bodies), those who are yet alive (whose bodies will be transformed) will meet Jesus in the air and all of God's people will be with the Lord forever (1 Cor. 15, 1 Thess. 4). In the resurrection of those in the tombs, some are resurrected to life and some to judgment (John 5:29). God's judgment will be pronounced on those who are separated from him.

[This brief summary does not answer every question that can be raised. You will find additional orientation for your study in my companion essay concerning body, soul, and spirit.]

Final Words. New Testament teachings are designed to comfort and encourage us (1 Thess. 4:18), to instruct, correct, and train (2 Tim. 3:16-17). The Old Testament was given so we will be encouraged and will endure (Rom. 15:4). For me personally, theories about an "intermediate state" are not nearly as comforting as God's assurance that death leads to God's presence. In that assurance I find power to persevere and hope in the face of death's hopelessness. God's divine faithfulness does not wait until some future time when I will declare that I am depending totally on Jesus's forgiveness so that I can enter God's presence. I read about those who before God's throne and I know that the number includes my faith heroes – my mother, preachers and teachers who have mentored me, grandparents, dear friends, coworkers in the kingdom. They have passed through death and the grave to life everlasting, experiencing the constant presence of God who sits on the throne and is worthy of all praise, honor, and glory.