

What's The Deal With Death?

Part 1

By

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Death is something that we all have to inevitably face sometime. It is a natural part of life on earth. Even though there are many differing views on what happens to the spirits & souls of humans after death (if anything happens at all), as a follower of Jesus Christ I believe that the true revelation of these things can be found within the Bible, which I am convinced is, in essence, the word of the living Creator communicated through human channels, the chosen prophets and apostles of Israel.

I have already written about this subject in archived articles, and until very recently, for many years I held to the view of soul-sleep in relation to the spirits of the dead. Many of these older articles express this view, particularly *Is There Really A Hell?* In that article I considered the state of the dead between death and the resurrection (among other things). This state is known as 'the intermediate state'. In recent months I have been seriously reassessing the whole subject of death, the intermediate state, and the nature of the resurrection. I have found that I can no longer accept some aspects of my previous position, hence the need for this present article.

It is worth mentioning from the outset that the Christian belief in soul-sleep is not that unusual, as a number of Christian groups have accepted this position. For instance, the reformer Martin Luther, as well as the Anabaptists, believed that souls simply slept between death and resurrection; that is, they were basically unconscious. I don't believe this view to be 'heretical' as some imply or insist. It needs to be noted though that this is not the same as the view commonly held by Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists. Their view appears to have more to do with non-existence of the spirit or soul after death; hence death is viewed as essentially annihilation.¹ I have never held to this particular interpretation of the intermediate state.

Anyhow, let us begin by considering what the Old Testament (OT) reveals on the subject. (All emphasis in scripture quotes is mine).

The Old Testament Revelation - Sheol

Actually, the OT sheds little light on the state of the dead. The general picture is that the body sleeps in death, while the spirit or soul continues to exist in an unseen

realm. This realm of the dead is called in Hebrew *Sheol*, while its Greek equivalent is *Hades*. It is commonly believed that both 'Sheol' & 'Hades' in their original languages mean 'that which is imperceptible' or 'unseen'. Some biblical authorities do not agree with this. For instance, Strong's Concordance says that *sheol* is based on the Hebrew root word *shael* meaning 'to inquire, request, demand'. And Vine's Expository Dictionary says the following about the Greek word *Hades*.

"It has been thought by some that the word etymologically meant "the unseen" (from *a*, negative, and *eidō*, "to see"), but this derivation is questionable; a more probable derivation is from *hadō*, signifying "all-receiving." It corresponds to "Sheol" in the OT."

It would appear that the basic meaning of Sheol & Hades has to do with its unrelenting 'demand' for 'receiving' the spirits of the dead, along with an indication of God's 'requesting' of judgment. Anyhow, whatever their initial meaning, that which really matters is their usage in Scripture, and that is, that they represent the place of the spirits of the dead. In ancient times, Sheol was viewed as being under the earth, in the depths of the earth. Take, for example, Numbers 16:28-33 where those in Korah's rebellion went down alive into Sheol as the earth opened up.

The general picture in the OT regarding the spirits of the dead in Sheol is not one of non-existence necessarily, neither is immortality viewed as an inherent possession. It is true that some texts could be interpreted to mean that the spirits of the dead are unconscious in some form of soul-sleep, but this understanding has more to do with poetic licence than a literal interpretation; yet it also appears that this description of death is not to be understood in the sense of complete non-existence – at least not in the sight of God.

After quoting the following selection of texts (Psalm 6:5; 115:17; 30:9; 88:3-7, 10-12; Genesis 3:19; Isaiah 38:10-11, 18-19; 2 Samuel 14:14; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10 & Job 3:13, 17-19), renowned New Testament scholar N. T. Wright in his mammoth work *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003, SPCK) gives this summation of the OT terms Sheol, Abaddon, the Pit, and the grave.

"The dark, deep regions, the land of forgetfulness. These almost interchangeable terms denote a place of gloom and despair, a place where one can no longer enjoy life, and where the presence of YHWH himself is withdrawn. It is a wilderness: a place of dust to which creatures made of dust have returned. Those who have gone there are 'the dead'; they are 'shades', *rephaim*, and they are 'asleep'. As in Homer, there is no suggestion that they are enjoying themselves; it is a dark and gloomy world. Nothing much happens there. It is not another form of real life, an alternative world where things continue as normal... The minimal sort of 'life' that the shades had in Sheol, or in the grave, approximated more to sleep than to anything else known by the living... Their normal condition was to be asleep. They were not completely non-existent, but to all intents and purposes they were, so to speak, next to nothing... The dead might be asleep; they might be almost nothing at all; but hope lived on within the covenant and promise of YHWH." (Pp. 88-93)

Here are a few select passages from the OT concerning Sheol (the realm of the dead) and the 'sleep' of death. The majority of texts that refer to Sheol, the grave, the sleep of death, etc, are found in the poetic wisdom literature of the Hebrew

Scriptures (i.e. Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job). It can be seen that this state of Death & Hades is considered to be, without the miraculous intervention of the Creator, a permanent state that no one can awake from.

⁵ For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;
they have no further reward,
and even their name is forgotten...
¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead (Heb. *Sheol*), where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

(Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10 NIV)

¹⁰ But a man dies and is laid low;
he breathes his last and is no more.
¹¹ As the water of a lake dries up
or a riverbed becomes parched and dry,
¹² so he lies down and does not rise;
till the heavens are no more, people will not awake
or be roused from their sleep.

¹³ "If only you would hide me in the grave (Heb. *Sheol*)
and conceal me till your anger has passed!
If only you would set me a time
and then remember me!

(Job 14:10-13 NIV)

¹¹ "Why did I not perish at birth,
and die as I came from the womb?
¹² Why were there knees to receive me
and breasts that I might be nursed?
¹³ For now I would be lying down in peace;
I would be asleep and at rest
¹⁴ with kings and rulers of the earth,
who built for themselves places now lying in ruins,
¹⁵ with princes who had gold,
who filled their houses with silver.
¹⁶ Or why was I not hidden away in the ground like a stillborn child,
like an infant who never saw the light of day?
¹⁷ There the wicked cease from turmoil,
and there the weary are at rest.
¹⁸ Captives also enjoy their ease;
they no longer hear the slave driver's shout.
¹⁹ The small and the great are there,
and the slaves are freed from their owners.

(Job 3:11-19 NIV)

³ Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, **or I will sleep in death,**

(Psalm 13:3 NIV)

There are a number of passages in the OT that, at the time they were written, began to reveal a distant hope of redemption from Sheol, that is, to be ransomed from death. The following texts reveal this understanding, yet it is also clear that only those who have true faith in Yahweh, the Creator and one true God, are the ones who are promised deliverance from death.

⁶“The LORD brings death **and makes alive**;
he brings down to the grave (Heb. *Sheol*) **and raises up**.

(1 Samuel 2:6 NIV)

⁷ No one can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for them—
⁸ the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough—
⁹ so that they should live on forever
and not see decay...
¹² People, despite their wealth, do not endure;
they are like the beasts that perish...

¹⁴ They are like sheep and are destined to die;
death will be their shepherd
(but the upright will prevail over them in the morning).
Their forms will decay in the grave (Heb. *Sheol*),
far from their princely mansions.

¹⁵ **But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead (Heb. *Sheol*);
he will surely take me to himself.**

(Psalm 49:7-9, 12, 14-15 NIV)

¹⁰ **because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead (Heb. *Sheol*),
nor will you let your faithful one see decay.**

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

(Psalm 16:10-11 NIV; cf. Acts 2:27, 31; Hades = Sheol)

Concerning this last passage, at the feast of Pentecost, the apostle Peter quoted this portion of Psalm 16 and applied it to Jesus' death and resurrection.

²² “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. ²⁵ **David said about him:**

“I saw the Lord always before me.
Because he is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.

²⁶ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest in hope,

²⁷ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead (*Gk. Hades*), you will not let your holy one see decay.

²⁸ You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.'

²⁹ "Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰ But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹ **Seeing what was to come, he spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead, nor did his body see decay.** ³² God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it."

(Acts 2:22-32 NIV)

The first point to highlight here is that the Hebrew word *Sheol*, taken from Psalm 16:10, is replaced by the Greek word *Hades* (cf. Acts 2:27, 31). Some versions translate Hades as 'Hell' but this is totally incorrect. Hell is of Saxon origin and had the meaning of 'covering over' something, as in the phrase 'to hell over'. It came to be associated with the grave, as in 'covering over' the body.²

In his Pentecost discourse, Peter declared that the passage from Psalm 16 was not ultimately about David but it was a prophecy about David's greater son, Jesus the Messiah. It was looking ahead to Christ's resurrection from the dead, for he was not abandoned to Hades, or the realm of the dead, and neither did his body see decay, because within three days he was raised to life by the power of God. This would've been just before the decaying process was fully underway (cp. John 11:38-39); hence Jesus' body never saw decay. This event was unique for it was the sign that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and the apostles became witnesses of this fact. (We will consider Hades in the NT a little later, so we'll come back to this text then.)

The NT writers reveal through the message of the gospel that only through Christ Jesus can resurrection to immortality be experienced, whereby Death and Hades are conquered. We'll consider this later.

One of the most explicit passages in the OT concerning resurrection is in Daniel chapter 12, so it is worth considering this important text.

Resurrection in Daniel 12

When it comes to Daniel 12:2, most biblical commentators and scholars take the view that this verse is referring to actual, concrete resurrection, as opposed to being purely symbolic or figurative. (A clear symbolic case of resurrection in the OT is Ezekiel 37:1-14; cf. Hosea 6:2; although the ultimate NT fulfilment of these texts would involve actual resurrection). This verse in Daniel is one of the few OT texts that explicitly described the resurrection of the righteous and the unrighteous – although the passage makes use of the metaphor of 'sleep' for the state of death.

N. T. Wright says the following about Daniel 12:2-3 in his book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003, SPCK).

"There is little doubt that this refers to concrete, bodily resurrection." (p. 109)

And in a footnote Wright quotes Collins (1993, 391f.),

There is "virtually unanimous agreement among modern scholars that Daniel is referring to the actual resurrection of individuals from the dead." (p. 109)

Let's remind ourselves of these verses in Daniel 12.

² **Multitudes** who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to **everlasting life**, others to **shame and everlasting contempt**.³ Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. (NIV)

In its original context, the 'multitudes' (or the 'many' as some versions render it) was most probably initially referring to the covenant people of God, i.e. Israel, which included both the righteous faithful ones, and the unrighteous unfaithful ones. Nevertheless, the NT expands this to include all nations (cf. Matthew 11:22, 24; 25:31-33).

N. T. Wright said the following about the 'many' in this passage.

Those who awake are 'many', but not, it appears, all. The passage is not attempting to offer a global theory of the ultimate destination of the whole human race, but simply to affirm that, in a renewed bodily life, God will give everlasting life to some and everlasting contempt to others...The rest – the great majority of humans, and indeed of Israelites – are simply not mentioned.³

This may be the case, due to its ancient Hebrew context (although I am not convinced that the best way of understanding this text is that '*the great majority of... Israelites... are simply not mentioned*'); yet I think the most that can be said here is that this resurrection would involve all the covenant people of God, whether the good or the bad.

Duncan W. McKenzie quotes Joyce Baldwin referring to the 'many' as follows.

The use of the word 'many' in Hebrew is not quite parallel with its use in English. Hebrew *rabbîm* 'many', tends to mean 'all', as in Deuteronomy 7:1; Isaiah 2:2, where 'all nations' becomes 'many peoples' in the parallel verse 3; and in Isaiah 52:14, 15; 53:11, 12, where this key-word occurs no less than five times, with an inclusive significance. As Jeremias... points out, the Hebrew word *kol*, 'all', means either 'totality' or 'sum'; there is no word for 'all' as a plural. For this *rabbîm* does duty, and so comes to mean 'the great multitude', 'all'; cf. 'Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth...' (NIV). The emphasis is not upon many as opposed to all, but rather on the numbers involved.⁴

I would certainly accept the overall point being made here. Either way, this verse is clearly stating that a huge number of people would be resurrected at this time, and some would receive Life (who are afterwards referred to as '*the wise*' and '*those who lead many to righteousness*') while others would receive rejection and shame. This was evidently revealing that when the resurrection would occur, it would include the righteous and the unrighteous being resurrected and judged *at the same time*, via a process of separation. And this is exactly what the NT reveals also.

For example, in John 5:28-29 Jesus was reaffirming the text of Daniel 12:2-3; and at the same time declaring that *all* who were dead would be resurrected – righteous and unrighteous together. It was revealed later that this 'rising' would occur on '*the last day,*' that is, at the royal appearing or Parousia of Christ in the Day of the Lord (cf. John 11:24; 6:39-40, 44 & 54). [For further details on the Day of the Lord, see my series *The Day of the Lord, the Royal Appearing.*]

The Appearing of Samuel's Spirit

Before we move on to consider the NT teaching on this subject, there is one particular incident in the OT that is worth considering here – the appearing of Samuel's spirit to the medium at Endor in 1 Samuel 28:7-19.

¹¹ Then the woman asked, "Whom shall I bring up for you?"

"Bring up Samuel," he said.

¹² When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out at the top of her voice and said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!"

¹³ The king said to her, "Don't be afraid. What do you see?"

The woman said, "**I see a ghostly figure** (*lit. gods or spirits*) **coming up out of the earth.**"

¹⁴ "What does he look like?" he asked.

"An old man wearing a robe is coming up," she said.

Then Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed down and prostrated himself with his face to the ground.

¹⁵ **Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?"**

"I am in great distress," Saul said. "The Philistines are fighting against me, and God has departed from me. He no longer answers me, either by prophets or by dreams. So I have called on you to tell me what to do."

¹⁶ Samuel said, "Why do you consult me, now that the LORD has departed from you and become your enemy? ¹⁷ The LORD has done what he predicted through me. The LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hands and given it to one of your neighbors—to David. ¹⁸ Because you did not obey the LORD or carry out his fierce wrath against the Amalekites, the LORD has done this to you today. ¹⁹ The LORD will deliver both Israel and you into the hands of the Philistines, **and tomorrow you and your sons will be with me.** The LORD will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines." (NIV)

This event is very much an exception to the rule in the OT. Consulting the spirits of the dead was forbidden in the law of God, and king Saul himself had banished the mediums and spiritists from the land. Saul became so terrified of the Philistine army that he desperately sought the guidance of Yahweh. The prophet Samuel was already dead and none of the other legitimate means of enquiring of the Lord was

working, so Saul decides to seek out a medium in hiding to try and contact the dead Samuel.

Even though this was a huge mistake on Saul's part, a strange thing happened through a particular medium at Endor. After Saul asked the woman to bring up Samuel's spirit, the woman shrieked with shock and surprise for she actually saw a spiritual form or ghostly figure rise up from the ground. Her reaction suggests that this was not an everyday occurrence, although it is possible that she may have recognised Samuel, causing her to shout at the top of her voice. It would appear as though Saul and his companions could not see the spirit; only the medium had eyes to see.

When asked to describe what she saw, Saul knew that it was Samuel just from her description. Initially, the woman had said, "*I see gods (or spirits) rising out of the earth*". The Hebrew word translated 'gods' or 'spirits' is *elohim*, which is the usual word translated either as God, god or gods. That is, the medium clearly saw the vision of a spiritual figure, and the text itself says that it was the spirit of Samuel.

It is very interesting to note that Samuel said to Saul, "*Why have you disturbed me*". This also indicates that Samuel's spirit was resting in Sheol, and yet God allowed him to be disturbed from his 'sleep' and to appear before the medium. This was a rebuke to Saul and the medium for doing something in complete disobedience to the law of God. Saul had decided to seek out a banished medium instead because God was no longer talking to him! Nevertheless, God used this incident to prophesy to Saul what was about to happen to Israel – that the Philistines would kill Saul and his sons so that they would soon be with Samuel in Sheol.

I used to believe that this was just a vision, and not the real spirit of Samuel, but the whole tone of the passage seems to suggest very strongly that this was in fact Samuel's spirit (though it is also true to say that spiritual manifestations are often experienced as visions; this doesn't suggest that a true 'vision' is not 'real'). It must be noted though that the text does not state or even imply that this was a resurrection. It was a somewhat unique event of the genuine appearing of a spirit from the dead.

There are many strange things that are difficult to comprehend even in the natural world around us, let alone trying to understand the spirit world and the realm of the dead.

Enoch, Elijah and Moses

A similar incident of the appearing of the spirits of the dead also occurs in the NT involving Moses and Elijah (although in this instance they appeared with a transfigured Jesus upon a mountain cf. Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-10 & Luke 9:28-36). Even though Peter refers to this event as a vision (cf. 2 Peter 1:16-18), it is evident from the Gospel accounts that Peter, James and John actually saw Jesus' appearance change before them. And they also saw the spiritual forms of Moses and Elijah, both of whom talked to Jesus about his coming departure via his death at Jerusalem. It would appear as though they were actually present with Christ, talking to him about what was ahead.

This vision was picturing the coming kingdom of God being shared with the Israel of God in resurrection glory. Nevertheless, there isn't any indication that this was in any sense an actual resurrection of Moses and Elijah, but it was clearly a unique appearing of the spirits of two righteous men of God being manifested in glory alongside the transfigured Son of God himself. As Christ went on to teach about the righteous dead,

"(God) is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

(Cf. Luke 20:37-38 NIV)

It is also interesting to note that Elijah had not actually died, but had been taken into the spirit world alive (cf. 2 Kings 2:1-18). Something similar had happened to the ancient prophet Enoch also (cf. Genesis 5:21-24; Hebrews 11:5). Again, these were unique instances, which were a foreshadowing of what was going to occur to those who would be alive at Christ's Parousia (i.e. his Presence or Coming; cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).⁵

In part 2 we shall consider the NT revelation on this whole subject.

Endnotes

¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (1994, Eerdmans Publishing Co.), pp. 92-95.

²

[Middle English helle, from Old English; see kel-¹ in Indo-European roots.]

Word History: *Hell* comes to us directly from Old English *hel*. Because the Roman Church prevailed in England from an early date, the Roman that is, Mediterranean belief that hell was hot prevailed there too; in Old English *hel* is a black and fiery place of eternal torment for the damned. But because the Vikings were converted to Christianity centuries after the Anglo-Saxons, the Old Norse *hel*, from the same source as Old English *hel*, retained its earlier pagan senses as both a place and a person. As a place, *hel* is the abode of oathbreakers, other evil persons, and those unlucky enough not to have died in battle. It contrasts sharply with *Valhalla*, the hall of slain heroes. Unlike the Mediterranean hell, the Old Norse *hel* is very cold. *Hel* is also the name of the goddess or giantess who presides in *hel*, the half blue-black, half white daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrbotha. The Indo-European root behind these Germanic words is **kel-*, "to cover, conceal" (so *hell* is the "concealed place"); it also gives us *hall*, *hole*, *hollow*, and *helmet*.

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(Taken from <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/hell>)

³ Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, p. 110.

⁴ McKenzie, *The Antichrist and the Second Coming: A Preterist Examination – Volume I: Daniel and 2 Thessalonians*, p. 210, (Xulon Press, 2009).

⁵ These instances bring up lots of questions and doctrinal dilemmas that are difficult to answer satisfactorily; in particular, what happened to the bodies of Enoch and Elijah? Paul teaches that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and that resurrection and transformation of those in Christ occurs at Christ's Parousia. Did Enoch and Elijah inherit their spiritual bodies early? If so, how could this occur before Christ's death and resurrection, for he alone has immortality as Firstborn from among the dead? What form do the spirits of the righteous dead take? And they are always wearing clothes of some kind! Are there spiritual clothes? (I'm being serious here).

There are many questions that can't really be answered (and some may be a little foolish), because we are seeking to relate to a world that is not a part of this natural creation. Time will tell, for we shall all see it eventually.

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