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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Afterlife

Most Christians know that when people die, they either go to heaven or hell. Not all realize, however, that heaven is not the final habitation of the righteous, and that *Hades* is not the final habitation of the unrighteous.

When followers of Jesus Christ die, their spirits/souls immediately go to heaven where God lives (see 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-23; 1 Thes. 4:14). Sometime in the future, however, God will create a new heaven and earth, and the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven to earth (see 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-2). There the righteous will live forever.

When the unrighteous die, they immediately go to *Hades*, but Hades is only a place where they will temporarily wait for their bodies to be resurrected. When that day arrives, they will stand before God's judgment seat and then be cast into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, referred to as *Gehenna* in the Bible. All of this we will consider in much more detail from Scripture.

When the Unrighteous Die

In order to better understand what happens to the unrighteous after death, we must study one Old Testament Hebrew word and three New Testament Greek words. Although these Hebrew and Greek words actually describe three different places, they are often all translated *hell* in certain Bible translations, which can be misleading to readers.

First, let's consider the Old Testament Hebrew word *Sheol*.

The word *Sheol* is mentioned more than sixty times in the Old Testament. It clearly refers to the after-death abode of the unrighteous. For example, when Korah and his followers rebelled against Moses in the wilderness, God punished them by opening up the ground, which swallowed them and all their possessions. Scripture says they fell into Sheol:

So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to *Sheol*; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly (Num. 16:33, emphasis added).

Later in Israel's history, God warned them that His wrath kindled a fire that burns in Sheol:

For a fire is kindled in My anger, and burns to the lowest part of *Sheol*, and consumes the earth with its yield, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains (Deut. 32:22, emphasis added).

King David declared that,

The wicked will return to *Sheol*, even all the nations who forget God (Ps. 9:17, emphasis added).

And he prayed against the unrighteous by requesting,

Let death come deceitfully upon them; let them go down alive to *Sheol*, for evil is in their dwelling, in their midst (Ps. 55:15, emphasis added).

Warning young men of the wiles of the harlot, wise Solomon wrote,

Her house is the way to *Sheol*, descending to the chambers of death...he does not know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of *Sheol* (Prov. 7:27; 9:18, emphasis added).

Solomon wrote other proverbs that lead us to believe that it is certainly not the righteous who end up in *Sheol*:

The path of life leads upward for the wise, that he may keep away from *Sheol* below (Prov. 15:24, emphasis added).

You shall beat him [your child] with the rod, and deliver his soul from *Sheol* (Prov. 23:14, emphasis added)

Finally, foreshadowing Jesus' description of hell, Isaiah prophetically spoke to the king of Babylon, who had exalted himself but who would be thrust down into *Sheol*:

Sheol from beneath is excited over you to meet you when you come; it arouses for you the spirits of the dead, all the leaders of the earth; it raises all the kings of the nations from their thrones. They will all respond and say to you, "Even you have been made weak as we, you have become like us. Your pomp and the music of your harps have been brought down to *Sheol*; maggots are spread out as your bed beneath you, and worms are your covering." How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High." Nevertheless you will be thrust down to *Sheol*, to the recesses of the pit. Those who see you will gaze at you, they will ponder over you, saying, "Is this the man who made the earth tremble, who shook kingdoms, who made the world like a wilderness and overthrew its cities, who did not allow his prisoners to go home?" (Isa. 14:9-17, emphasis added).

These scriptures and others like them lead us to believe that *Sheol* has always been and still is the tormenting place where the unrighteous are incarcerated after their deaths. And there is more proof.

Hades

It is clear that the New Testament Greek word, *Hades*, refers to the same place as the Old Testament Hebrew word *Sheol*. For proof of this, all we need do is compare Psalm 16:10 with Acts 2:27 where it is quoted:

Thou wilt not abandon my soul to *Sheol*; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay (Ps. 16:10, emphasis added).

Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to *Hades*, nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay (Acts 2:27, emphasis added).

This being so, it is interesting that in all ten instances where *Hades* is mentioned in the New Testament, it is always spoken of in a negative sense and often as a tormenting place where the wicked are incarcerated after death (see Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15; 16:23; Acts 2:27; 2:31; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14). Again, all of this indicates that *Sheol/Hades* was and is an after-death abode for the unrighteous, a place of torment.¹

Did Jesus Go to Sheol/Hades?

Let us further consider Psalm 16:10 and its quotation by Peter recorded in Acts 2:27, two verses that indicate that *Sheol* and *Hades* are the same place. According to Peter's Pentecost sermon, David was not speaking in Psalm 16:10 of himself, but prophetically speaking of Christ, because David's body, unlike Christ's, did undergo decay (see Act 2:29-31). This being so, we realize that it was actually Jesus speaking to His Father in Psalm 16:10, declaring His belief that His Father would not abandon His soul to *Sheol* or allow His body to undergo decay.

Some interpret this declaration of Jesus as proof that His soul went to *Sheol/Hades* during the three days between His death and resurrection. That, however, is not actually implied. Note again exactly what Jesus said to His Father:

Thou wilt not abandon my soul to *Sheol*; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay (Ps. 16:10).

Jesus was not saying to His Father, "I know that my soul will spend a few days in *Sheol/Hades*, but I believe You won't abandon Me there." Rather He was saying, "I believe that when I die I will not be treated like the unrighteous, my soul being abandoned to *Sheol/Hades*. I won't even spend a minute there. No, I believe Your plan is to resurrect Me in three days, and You won't even allow My body to undergo decay."

This interpretation is certainly warranted. When Jesus said, "Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay," we don't interpret that to mean that Jesus' body progressively decayed for three days until it was restored at His resurrection. Rather, we interpret it to mean that His body never went through *any* decay *whatsoever* from the time of His death until His resurrection.

Likewise, His statement that His soul would not be abandoned to *Sheol/Hades* does not need to be interpreted that He was left in *Sheol/Hades* for a few days but was ultimately not abandoned there.² Rather, it should be interpreted to mean that His soul would not be

¹ Some try to make a case by means of a few scriptures, such as Gen. 37:35, Job 14:13, Ps. 89:48, Eccl. 9:10 and Isa. 38:9-10, that *Sheol* was a place that the *righteous* also went after their deaths. The scriptural evidence for this idea is not very compelling. If *Sheol* was a place where both unrighteous and righteous went at death, then *Sheol* must have consisted of two separate compartments, one a hell and one a paradise, which is what is usually argued by the proponents of this idea.

² Those who do subscribe to this particular interpretation must then subscribe to one of two other theories. One is the theory that *Sheol/Hades* was the name for an after-death abode of the unrighteous *and* righteous that was divided into two compartments, a place of torment and a place of paradise to which Jesus went. The other theory is that Jesus endured

treated like an unrighteous soul that would be abandoned to Sheol/Hades. His soul would never spend a single minute there. Notice also that Jesus said, "Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol," not, "Thou wilt not abandon my soul *in* Sheol."

Where Was Jesus' Soul During the Three Days?

Remember that Jesus told His disciples that He would spend three days and nights in the heart of the earth (see Matt. 12:40). This does not seem to be a likely reference to His body being in a tomb for three days, as a tomb would hardly be considered to be at "the heart of the earth." Rather, Jesus must have been speaking of His spirit/soul being deep in the earth. Therefore we can conclude that His spirit/soul was not in heaven between His death and resurrection. Jesus affirmed this at His resurrection when He told Mary that He had not yet ascended to His Father (see John 20:17).

Keep in mind that Jesus also told the repentant thief on the cross that he would be with Him that very day in Paradise (see Luke 23:43). Putting all these facts together, we know that Jesus' spirit/soul spent three days and nights in the heart of the earth. At least part of that time He was in a place He called "Paradise," which certainly doesn't sound like an acceptable synonym for the place of torment called Sheol/Hades!

All of this leads me to think that there must be a place in the heart of the earth besides Sheol/Hades, a place called *Paradise*. This idea is certainly buttressed by a story Jesus once told of two people who died, one unrighteous and one righteous, the rich man and Lazarus. Let's read the story:

Now there was a certain man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to *Abraham's bosom*; and the rich man died and was buried. And in *Hades* he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received the good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us" (Luke 16:19-26, emphasis added).

Of course, both Lazarus and the rich man were not in their bodies once they died, but they had traveled to their respective places as spirits/souls.

Where Was Lazarus?

Notice that the rich man found himself in *Hades*, but he could see Lazarus in *another place* with Abraham. In fact, Lazarus is spoken of as being in "Abraham's bosom," not a name for the place but probably a reference to the comfort Lazarus was receiving from Abraham upon his arrival in that place.

the torments of the damned for three days and nights in the fires of Sheol/Hades as He suffered the full extent of the penalty of sin as our substitute. Both of these theories are difficult to prove from Scripture, and neither are necessary if Jesus never spent any time in Sheol/Hades. That is what His declaration actually means. In regard to the second theory, Jesus did not suffer the torments of the damned for three days and nights between His death and resurrection, because our redemption was purchased through His sufferings on the cross (see Col. 1:22), not through his alleged sufferings in Sheol/Hades.

How great of a distance was there between the rich man and Lazarus after they had died?

Scripture says the rich man saw Lazarus “far away,” and we are told there was a “great chasm fixed” between them. So the distance between them is a matter of speculation. It seems reasonable to conclude, however, that the distance between them was not so great as the distance between the heart of the earth and heaven. Otherwise, it would seem that it would have been quite impossible for the rich man to have been able to see Lazarus (apart from divine help), and there would hardly have been a need to mention or even have a “great chasm fixed” between the two locations specifically to prevent anyone from crossing from one to the other. Moreover, the rich man “cried out” to Abraham and Abraham spoke back to him. This would lead us to think they were fairly close to one another as they spoke across the “great chasm.”

All of this leads me to believe that Lazarus was not in what we call heaven, but rather in a separate compartment within the earth.³ It must have been the place that Jesus referred to as *Paradise* to the repentant thief. It was to this Paradise in the heart of the earth that the Old Testament righteous went after their deaths. It was where Lazarus went and where Jesus and the repentant thief went.

It is also apparently where the prophet Samuel went after his death. We read in 1 Samuel 28 that when God permitted the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel to appear and speak prophetically to Saul, the medium of En-dor described Samuel as “a divine being coming up out of the earth” (1 Sam. 28:13, emphasis added). Samuel himself said to Saul, “Why have you disturbed me by *bringing me up?*” (1 Sam. 28:15, emphasis added). Apparently, Samuel’s spirit/soul had been in Paradise in the earth.

Scripture seems to support the fact that at Christ’s resurrection, Paradise was emptied, and those righteous people who died during the time of the Old Testament were taken to heaven with Jesus. The Bible says that when Jesus ascended to heaven from the lower parts of the earth, “He led captive a host of captives” (Eph. 4:8-9; Ps. 68:18). Those captives I assume to be all those who were living in Paradise. Jesus certainly didn’t release people from Sheol/Hades!⁴

Jesus Preached to Spirits in Prison

Scripture also tells us that Jesus made a proclamation to a group of people, disembodied spirits, at some point in time between His death and resurrection. We read in 1 Peter 3:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through the water (1 Pet. 3:18-20).

This passage of Scripture certainly raises some questions to which I don’t have answers. Why would Jesus make a proclamation specifically to some disobedient people who died during Noah’s flood? What did He tell them?

In any case, this scripture does seem to support the fact that Jesus did not spend the entire three days and nights from His death to His resurrection in Paradise.

³ Notice also that both Lazarus and the rich man, although separated from their bodies, were conscious and possessed all their faculties such as sight, touch and hearing. They could experience pain and comfort and remember past experiences. This disproves the theory of “soul sleep,” the idea that people go into an unconscious state when they die, awaiting to regain consciousness at the resurrection of their bodies.

⁴ It is thought by some, and perhaps rightfully, that the captives spoken of in Ephesians 4:8-9 are all of us where were captive to sin, now made free through Christ’s resurrection.

Gehenna

Today when the bodies of the righteous die, their spirits/souls go immediately to heaven (see 2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21-23; 1 Thes. 4:14).

The unrighteous still go to Sheol/Hades where they are tormented and await the resurrection of their bodies, their final judgment, and their being cast into “the lake of fire,” a place that is different and separate from Sheol/Hades.

This lake of fire is described by a third word that is also sometimes translated *hell*, the Greek word *Gehenna*. This word was derived from the name of a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem in the valley of Hinnom, a rotting heap that was infested with worms and maggots, and part of which perpetually smoked and burned with fire.

When Jesus spoke of Gehenna, He spoke of it as a place where people would be cast *bodily*. For example, He said in Matthew’s gospel:

And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than for your whole *body* to go into hell [Gehenna]....And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and *body* in hell [Gehenna] (Matt. 5:30, 10:28, emphasis added).

Gehenna and Hades couldn’t be the same place because Scripture says that the unrighteous are sent to Hades as disembodied spirits/souls. It is only after the thousand-year reign of Christ when the bodies of the unrighteous will be resurrected and face judgment before God that they will then be cast into *the lake of fire*, or Ghenna (see Rev. 20:5, 11-15). Moreover, one day Hades itself will be cast into that lake of fire (see Rev. 20:14), so it must be a different place than the lake of fire.

Tartaros

The fourth word often translated *hell* in Scripture is the Greek word *tartaros*. It is found only once in the New Testament:

For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell [tartaros] and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment (2 Pet. 2:4).

Tartaros is normally thought of as a special prison for certain angels who sinned; therefore, it is not Sheol/Hades or Gehenna. Jude also wrote of angels who are being detained:

And angels who did not keep their own domain, but abandoned their proper abode, He has kept in eternal bonds under darkness for the judgment of the great day (Jude 6).

The Horrors of Hell

Once an unrepentant person dies, he is given no further opportunity for repentance. His fate is sealed. The Bible says, “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27).

Hell is eternal, and those who are confined there have no hope of escape. Speaking of the future condemnation of the unrighteous, Jesus said, “And these will go away into *eternal* punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:46, emphasis added). The punishment of the unrighteous in hell is just as much eternal as is eternal life for the righteous.

Similarly, Paul wrote:

For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you...when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of *eternal* destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power (2 Thes. 1:6-9, emphasis added).

Hell is a place of indescribable agony because it will be a *never-ending* punishment. Confined there forever, the unrighteous will bear their eternal guilt and suffer the wrath of God in an unquenchable fire.

Jesus described hell as a place of "outer darkness," where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth," and a place "where their worm does not die, and their fire is not quenched" (Matt. 22:13; Mark 9:44). Oh, how we need to warn people of that place and tell them of the salvation provided only in Christ!

One particular denomination teaches the concept of purgatory, a place where believers will suffer for a time to be purged of their sins and thus be made worthy for heaven. This idea, however, is nowhere taught in the Bible.

The Righteous After Death

When a believer dies, his spirit goes immediately to heaven to be with the Lord. Paul made this fact very clear when he wrote of his own death:

For to me, to live is Christ, and *to die is gain*. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire *to depart and be with Christ*, for this is very much better (Phil. 1:21-23, emphasis added).

Notice that Paul said he had the desire to depart and that if he did depart, he would then be with Christ. His spirit would not go into some unconscious state, waiting for the resurrection (as some unfortunately think).

Also notice that Paul said that for him, to die would be *gain*. That would only be true if he went to heaven when he died.

Paul also declared in his second letter to the Corinthians that if a believer's spirit left his body, he was then "at home with the Lord":

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord...and prefer to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6-8).

In further support, Paul also wrote:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. (1 Thes. 4:13-14).

If Jesus is going to bring back from heaven with Him at His return "those who have fallen asleep," they must then be in heaven with Him now.

Heaven Foreseen

What is heaven like? In our finite minds we could never fully grasp all of the glories that await us there, and the Bible gives us only a glimpse. The most exciting fact about heaven for believers is that we will see our Lord and Savior, Jesus, and God our Father face to face. We will live in “the Father’s house”:

In My Father’s house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (John 14:2-3).

When we get to heaven, many mysteries that our minds cannot currently comprehend will be understood. Paul wrote,

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I have been fully known (1 Cor. 13:12).

The book of Revelation gives us the best picture of what heaven is like. Described as a place of great activity, wonderful beauty, unlimited variation, and inexpressible joy, heaven won’t be a place where the people just sit around on clouds and strum harps all day!

John, who was once given a vision of heaven, first noticed the throne of God, the center of the universe:

Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne was standing in heaven, and One sitting on the throne. And He who was sitting was like a jasper stone and a sardius in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, like an emerald in appearance. And around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns upon their heads. And from the throne proceed flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God; and before the throne there was, as it were, a sea of glass like crystal; and in the center and around the throne, four living creatures full of eyes in front and behind. And the first creature was like a lion, and the second creature like a calf, and the third creature had a face like that of a man, and the fourth creature was like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each one of them having six wings, are full of eyes around and within; and day and night they do not cease to say, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and who is and who is to come.” And when the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, to Him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders will fall down before Him who sits on the throne, and will worship Him who lives forever and ever, and will cast their crowns before the throne, saying, “Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created” (Rev. 4:2-11).

John did his best to describe in earthly terms what can hardly be compared to anything on earth. Obviously, there is no way we are going to comprehend everything he saw until we see it ourselves. But it certainly makes for inspiring reading.

The most inspiring passages about heaven are found in Revelation chapters 21 and 22, where John described the New Jerusalem, which is presently in heaven but will come down to earth after the thousand-year reign of Christ:

And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. It had a great and high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels....And the one who spoke with me had a gold measuring rod to measure the city, and its gates and its wall. And the city is laid out as a square, and its length is as great as the width; and he measured the city with the rod, fifteen hundred miles; its length and width and height are equal....And the material of the wall was jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass....And the twelve gates were twelve pearls; each one of the gates was a single pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass. And I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are its temple. And the city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God has illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb.....And he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb, in the middle of its street. And on either side of the river was the tree of life, bearing twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit every month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His bond-servants shall serve Him; and they shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And there shall no longer be any night; and they shall not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall illumine them; and they shall reign forever and ever” (Rev. 21:10-22:5).

Every follower of Jesus can look forward to all of these wonders, as long as he continues in the faith. No doubt, we’ll spend our first few days in heaven saying to one another, “Oh! So that’s what John was trying to describe in the book of Revelation!”