

What Does God's Word Say About... What Happens at Death – Part 1

After the cross, when we die physically, or “fall asleep” (1 Thess. 4:13-15), we are immediately judged for the deeds we have done in our lifetime (Heb. 9:27) by God's word (John 12:48-50). The meaning of death is separation, “the body without the spirit is dead” and “then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it” (James 2:26; Eccl. 12:7). Those who are obedient to God's word and “fall asleep” (die physically) will immediately be with Christ who is in heaven (John 12:26; Phil. 1:23; Acts 7:55; 2 Cor. 5:6-8; 1 Thess. 5:9-10).

Before the cross, upon death the spirit of mankind went to Hades (place of the dead), the realm of the “unseen.” This realm of departed spirits (i.e. Hades) was divided into two parts: Abraham's bosom or Paradise (Luke 16:22), and the place of torment for the wicked was called Tartarus. And between the two was a great chasm (gulf), fixed, so that no one could cross to the other side. When Jesus died on the cross, He was in Paradise for three days and three nights, and He told the thief on the cross next to Him that he would be with Him in Paradise. On the day of Pentecost Peter said that David looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay (Acts 2:31). When Jesus ascended into heaven after His resurrection, an angel told the disciples...“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:10-11).

While Jesus was in Abraham's bosom (Paradise) He was not in heaven where God dwells. Jesus had not yet ascended to the Father. After the resurrection Jesus told Mary “Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God’ “ (John 20:17). The apostle Paul also wrote about Christ's ascension into heaven. Quoting from Psalm 68:18, Paul wrote, “When He ascended on high (e.g. HEAVEN), He led captive a host of captives, (Now this expression, “He ascended,” what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? (e.g. HADES) He who descended is Himself also He who ascended “far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things)” (Eph. 4:8-10). Now concerning Jesus Christ, His soul was not to be left in Hades (the realm of the dead, which included Paradise). But after His resurrection Jesus ascended to the right hand of God (i.e. HEAVEN) (Heb. 1:8, 13), reigning in His spiritual kingdom, the church (1 Cor. 15:24).

The Old Testament patriarchs who died before Christ was crucified have already been judged for their deeds done in the flesh according to the “great white throne” that the apostle John wrote about in Revelation 20:11-15. Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross covers the sins of the patriarchs when the Hebrew writer said...“but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for ALL time, sat down at the right hand of God, ...For by one offering He has perfected for ALL time those who are sanctified” (Heb. 10:12, 14).

After the cross, the apostle John wrote, “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne (where Christ sits), the books (the Scriptures) were open; and another book was open which is the book of life; and the dead were judged by the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Rev. 20:12). So, who then is being judged in this text (Rev. 20:11-15)? We are told in the text, “And the sea (i.e. masses of people) gave

up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, everyone of them according to their deeds" (Rev. 20:13). Those who were standing before God, whose deeds were being recounted, whose names either were or were not in the book of life – these are the "captives" which Jesus led captive when He ascended before His Father. Hades existed from the creation to the day of our Lord's ascension. After this Hades did not accept anymore occupants, for it ceased to exist. After being judged from the "books" the wicked and unrighteous will be thrown into the "lake of fire". "And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, (spiritual separation from God) the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14-15). Once the church came into existence, Hades ceased to exist.

Where do dead people go now? Hebrews 9:27, says, "And in as much as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes the judgment." Since there is no longer a Hades (i.e. a place for a person's spirit to go to await judgment), a person now is judged at the point of their death. How do we know this? "Whatever happened to the Day of Judgment?" Is that gone also? The explanation will be discussed in What Happens at Death – Part 2.

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