

Hades, Abode of the Dead

Lesson 26

In the New Testament, “Hades” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew “Sheol” and likewise describes the place which is the abode of the dead. According to the Old Testament, the grave is the resting place of one’s body as it returns to dust, while the departed human spirit goes to Sheol, which is described as being located in the depths of the earth (Num 16:30-34; Deu 32:22; Ps 63:9; 86:13). In Old Testament times, after dying, everyone went to Sheol to await judgment by God; generally, Sheol is the place where one is “gathered with one’s ancestors” (Gen 15:15; 25:8, 17; 49:33).

Various Old Testament accounts mention Sheol and those who are or will go there. The first mention is when Jacob thinks that Joseph is dead and exclaims that he will grieve until he meets his son again in Sheol: “For I will go down unto my son mourning into Sheol” (Gen 37:35). Another notable mention is when Korah and his family rebel against God and Moses, and the whole family is judged when the earth swallows them alive, taking them down to Sheol (Num 16:30-34).

An enlightening narrative is found in 1 Samuel, when King Saul is troubled because “the Lord has _____ from [him]” (28:16). Saul desires counsel about the next day’s battle from Samuel, who is dead and thus in Sheol. Saul asks a witch (necromancer) to call Samuel’s spirit from Sheol. Samuel appears and tells Saul that the battle will not go well: “And _____ you and your sons will be with me [in Sheol]” (28:19).

According to Jewish tradition, Sheol/Hades is divided into several compartments for the righteous and the unrighteous. Jesus confirms some of what Jewish tradition commonly taught about Sheol/Hades in His narrative concerning Lazarus and the rich man (Lk 16:19-31). Only what Jesus confirms of Jewish tradition should be considered certain, and He does confirm some interesting facts about Hades. The righteous (Lazarus) and the unrighteous (rich man) both go to Hades after they die, confirming that, at that time, all who died went to Hades. Jesus also confirms that only those in the comforting compartment of Hades, called “Abraham’s _____,” have access to water (Lk 16:22). Another fact Jesus confirms is that Hades has boundaries, one of which is described as a “great _____” which stops inhabitants from passing from one compartment of Hades to another (Lk 16:26).

Sheol/Hades is also described as a “prison” (Job 17:16; Pr 1:12; Isa 24:22), because its residents are awaiting their day in court before the Almighty God who will judge everyone according to their works. Peter describes Sheol/Hades as a “prison” when he reports that Jesus Christ visited those who died before and during Noah’s flood (1Pe 3:19-20). Paul writes about Jesus’ visit to Sheol/Hades, saying that before He “ascended on high [to Heaven],” He “first descended into the lowest parts of the earth,” from whence “He led captivity captive” (Eph 4:8-9), meaning that He released some “prisoners from the prison” (Isa 42:7; 61:1). In fact, some of these prisoners whom Jesus released from prison in Sheol/Hades are the saints who then are seen walking the streets of Jerusalem after Jesus’ resurrection (Mt 27:53).

How was Jesus able to release believers from Sheol/Hades, who were, like everyone there, awaiting God’s judgment for their deeds/works? By definition, a “believer” has believed the gospel and is justified by faith. When someone is justified by faith, the name of the one who believes the gospel is recorded in God’s Book of Life and a gift-credit of righteousness is accounted to him. Most important to this question is that each believer, like Abraham, the father of all believers, is also forgiven of his sin (Rom 4:1-12).

But if the LORD make a new thing, and the earth open her mouth, and swallow them up, with all that appertain unto them, and they go down quick into Sheol; then ye shall understand that these men have provoked the LORD. – Numbers 14:30

Then Samuel said: “So why do you ask me, seeing the LORD has departed from you and has become your enemy? . . . Because you did not obey the voice of the LORD nor execute His fierce wrath upon Amalek, therefore the LORD has done this thing to you this day. Moreover the Lord will also deliver Israel with you into the hand of the Philistines. And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me. – 1 Samuel 28:16-19

So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in [Abraham’s] bosom.

Then he cried and said, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” But Abraham said, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

– Luke 16:22-26

They will be gathered together, As prisoners are gathered in the pit, And will be shut up in the prison; After many days they will be punished. – Isaiah 24:22

*I will ransom them from the power of Sheol;
I will redeem them from death.
O Death, I will be your plagues!
O Sheol, I will be your destruction!*
– Hosea 13:14

We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.
– 2 Corinthians 5:8

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works. Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire
– Revelation 20:11-15

After Jesus' death, He is able to release believers from the prison of Hades because His death, which is the everlasting sacrifice for sin, pays the price (debt) which man owes because of his sin. After Christ's sacrifice, a believer, having believed the gospel and having received the gifts of salvation, does not have to stand before God to be judged for his sin. After Jesus' resurrection, all believers go directly to Heaven when they die—none have to go to Sheol/Hades to await judgment for their sin.

Jesus makes an interesting comment about the gates of Hades. When Peter confesses his belief in Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), Jesus responds:

Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it (Mt 16:17-18).

When Jesus says that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it," He seems to indicate that Hades will not imprison His church (New Covenant believers). In fact, Paul clearly indicates that now, when a New Covenant believer dies, his next destination is Heaven instead of Hades: "to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord" (2Co 5:8; cf. Ac 7:55-59; Php 1:23; Rev 6:10).

On the other hand, unbelievers are still in Sheol/Hades. Because they did not believe the gospel and have not been justified by faith, they were not released from prison after Jesus' death and resurrection and must stay imprisoned until their day of judgment before God. Furthermore, every unbeliever who has died since Christ's resurrection also goes to Sheol/Hades to wait for Judgment Day.

Judgment Day for the unbeliever is described in Revelation 20. First of all, the unbeliever has no part in the "first resurrection," which only concerns believers: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the Second Death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years" (Rev 20:6).

In the second resurrection, unbelievers will be released from Hades and raised from the dead to stand before God's Great White Throne Judgment. Only unbelievers will be judged at this event (remember, believers will have their works judged at Christ's Bema Seat, 1Co 3:11-15; 2Co 5:10). All unbelievers, whether great or small, will be judged by God according to His books. Both the Book of Life and God's many books recording the deeds of men will be consulted by the court: "they [will be] judged, each according to his works" (Rev 20:12-13).

After unbelievers are judged, they, along with Death and Hades, will be cast into the Lake of Fire:

Then Death and Hades [will be] cast into the Lake of Fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life [will be] cast into the Lake of Fire (Rev 20:14-15).

After the Great White Throne Judgment of God, Sheol/Hades loses its power and will finally be destroyed in the Lake of Fire.

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1. The dead in Hades/Sheol are awaiting what event?
 2. Why was Jesus able to release believers from the prison of Hades?
 3. How many believers will be judged at the Great White Throne Judgment?