

# “Where Does Your Soul Go When You Die?”

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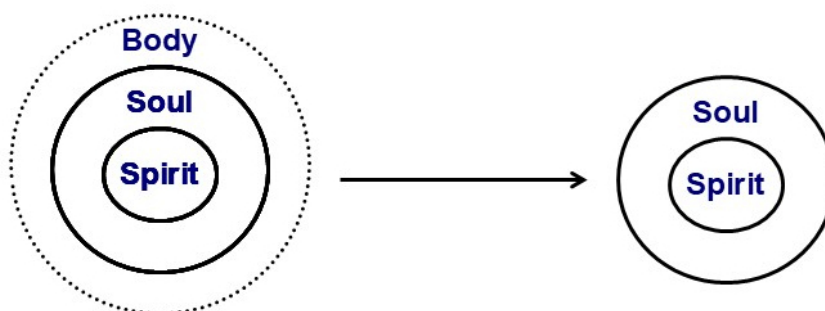
This lesson teaches that for believers in Jesus Christ, according to the Bible, our soul goes immediately to be with Jesus in heaven upon our death. This lesson also explains where the souls of the righteous and unrighteous have gone before and after the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This lesson concludes by discussing the final destiny for believers and the final destiny for unbelievers.

Scripture quotations in this lesson are taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) 2020 edition unless noted otherwise (Ref. 1).

**Consider.** Where will your soul go when you die? Why?

## 1. At your physical death, your soul and spirit will depart from your body

*"And it came about, as her soul was departing (for she died), that she named him Ben-oni; but his father called him Benjamin." (Genesis 35:18)*



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**Figure 1:** When we die, our soul and spirit leave our physical body

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When we die, our soul and spirit depart from our physical body. Physical death is the separation of our immaterial nature (our soul and spirit) from our body (Figure 1 above, Ref. 2 below). Genesis 35:18 tells us that when Rachel died, her soul departed. The next verse, Genesis 35:19, tells us, "Rachel died and was buried." Note that it was Rachel's body that was buried. Rachel's soul continued to exist. Her soul did not die or go to "sleep."

Note that when Jesus died, Jesus called out with a loud voice and said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" "And having said this he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46 ESV). Jesus' spirit continued to live after the death of his physical body.

## **2. God has made us (humans) to have a material nature (our body) and an immaterial nature (our soul and spirit)**

*"And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Genesis 2:7 KJV)*

God has made us (humans) in God's image (Genesis 1:26). God has made us to have both a physical, material nature (our body) and an immaterial nature (our soul and spirit) (Ref. 2 below). Genesis 2:7 KJV tells us that God made Adam's body from the dust of the ground. Genesis 2:7 KJV also tells us that God breathed into Adam, and Adam became "a living soul."

The Bible refers to our immaterial nature in three ways. Sometimes the Bible uses the single word "soul." Sometimes the Bible uses the single word, "spirit." Sometimes the Bible uses "soul and spirit" together. Here are some example references:

- a. "Soul" -- Genesis 35:18, Mark 8:36
- b. "Spirit" -- Job 32:8, Ecclesiastes 12:7, Luke 8:55, John 19:30, Acts 7:59
- c. "Soul and spirit" together -- 1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12

Our soul is our personality, emotions, and window to our physical world (Ref. 3, Ref. 4 below). Our spirit enables us to perceive, communicate with, serve, and worship God (1 Corinthians 2:11-14, Romans 1:9, Romans 8:15-16, Ref. 4 below).

In this lesson, the single word, "soul," and the single word, "spirit," are intended to mean our entire immaterial nature as distinguished from our physical body.

### 3. Our Soul Continues to Live After Our Physical Death

After our death, our soul continues to live consciously and does not cease to exist, "go to sleep," or become extinct when our body dies (Figure 1 above, Ref. 5 below). Consider these three examples from the scriptures.

#### 3.1. *Elijah, the Widow, and the Widow's Son*

In 1 Kings 17:8-16, God sent Elijah to Zarephath during a drought. There God provided a miracle of continual flour and oil for Elijah, the widow, and her son until rain returned (1 Kings 17:14).

Right after that miracle, the widow's son died (he was no longer breathing) (1 Kings 17:17-18). The distraught widow spoke to Elijah, and Elijah prayed for the child (1 Kings 17:19-21 KJV). Elijah prayed, "O Lord my God, I pray thee, let this child's soul come into him again" (1 Kings 17:21 KJV). The Hebrew word *nephesh* translated as "soul" in 1 Kings 17:21 KJV is the same word the Bible uses for "soul" in Genesis 2:7. The Lord heard Elijah's prayer, and "the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived" (1 Kings 17:22 KJV).

#### 3.2. *Jesus Raises Jairus' Daughter*

*"And they began laughing at Him, knowing that she had died. He, however, took her by the hand and spoke forcefully, saying, 'Child, arise!' And her spirit returned, and she got up immediately; and He ordered that something be given her to eat." (Luke 8:53-55)*

For the whole story, read Luke 8:40-56.

The scripture tells us that the girl had died, that is, her material body had died (Luke 8:49, 53). It is interesting that Jesus said, "Stop weeping, for she has not died, but is asleep" (Luke 8:52). When Jesus said that she was "asleep" (Luke 8:52), he was referring to her dead body, not to her spirit (Ref. 6). The girl's spirit had not died and was still very much alive, and had

departed from her dead body. When Jesus took her by the hand and said, "Arise," her spirit returned to her (Luke 8:54-55).

The metaphorical term "sleep" applied to the dead physical body (but not the soul and spirit) also occurs in Acts 7:59-60, 1 Corinthians 15:3-6, and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14.

### ***3.3. Jesus and the Penitent Thief***

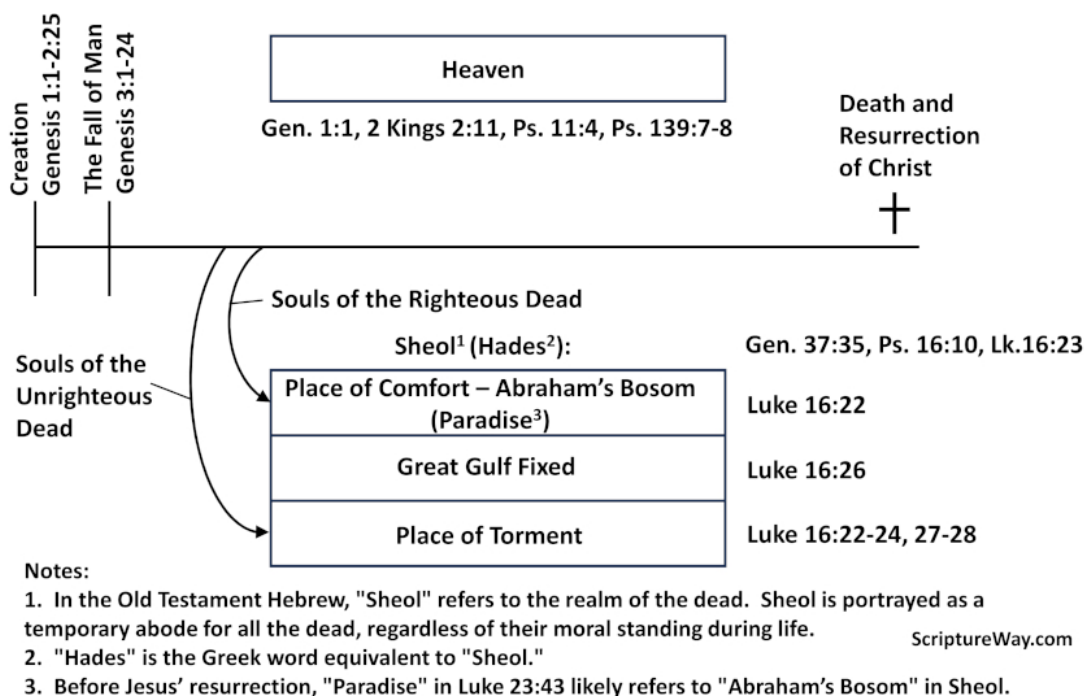
When Jesus was crucified, two criminals (two thieves) were crucified with him (Luke 23:22-23, Mark 15:27 KJV). When the three were on their crosses dying together, the impenitent (unrepentant) thief hurled abuse at Jesus (Luke 23:39). The other thief (the penitent thief) said to Jesus, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!" (Luke 23:42).

Jesus told the penitent thief (but not the unrepentant thief), "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43, underline added). Not tomorrow. Not some time in the future. Today. Even though their bodies would be dead soon on their crosses and in their earthly tomb or grave (Luke 23:50-53), the souls of the Savior and the penitent thief were both alive together in Paradise that very day (Ref. 7, Figure 2). Likewise, as believers in Jesus Christ, we can look forward to our soul going to be with Jesus immediately upon the death of our physical body (Figure 3).

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#### 4. Before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the souls of the righteous and the unrighteous all went to Sheol (Hades)

*"Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom." (Luke 16:22-23 NASB 1995)*



**Figure 2:** Before the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the souls of the righteous and the unrighteous went to Sheol (Hades).

##### 4.1. Sheol in the Old Testament

Throughout the Old Testament, *sh'owl* (pronounced *sheh-OL*) is the transliteration of the Hebrew word for *the realm of the dead* (Ref. 8). *Sh'owl* occurs 66 times in the Old Testament. The New American Standard Bible (NASB) translates the Hebrew word all 66 times as "Sheol" (Ref. 9). The King James Version (KJV) translates *sh'owl* thirty times as "hell," thirty-one times as "grave," and three times as "pit" (Ref. 9). In the ancient culture, Sheol was a temporary place where the souls of all the departed dead -- righteous and unrighteous -- awaited their final destiny (Ref. 8).

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Example Old Testament verses about Sheol:

- (1). Jacob expected to go there. "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son" (verse 35 in [Genesis 37:31-35](#)).
- (2). The place for the wicked - "The wicked will return to Sheol, All the nations who forget God" ([Psalm 9:17](#)).
- (3). David expected to go to Sheol, but his time in Sheol would be temporary. "For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol" ([Psalm 16:10](#)). David also wrote, "But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, For He will receive me" ([Psalm 49:15](#)).

#### *4.2. Jesus' Teaching About Sheol (Hades)*

Jesus taught that Sheol has two destinations for the departed souls of the dead (Figure 2). Note that this teaching describes Sheol (Hades) before the death and resurrection of Jesus. "Hades" is the Greek word in the New Testament equivalent to "Sheol" in the Old Testament Hebrew ("Sheol" - [Ref. 8](#), "Hades" - [Ref. 10](#)).

Read the entire account of the rich man and the poor man ("Lazarus") in [Luke 16:19-31](#). Jesus said that when the poor man died the angels carried him to Abraham's Bosom, which was the place of comfort ([Luke 16:22, 25 KJV](#)). In contrast, Jesus said that when the rich man died he was buried, and (his soul) went to the place of torment in Hades ([Luke 16:22-28](#), Figure 2). Jesus also stated that there is a great gulf fixed to keep those who wish to cross over from crossing over ([Luke 16:26 KJV](#)).

Think about why the rich man went to the place of torment in Hades when he died.

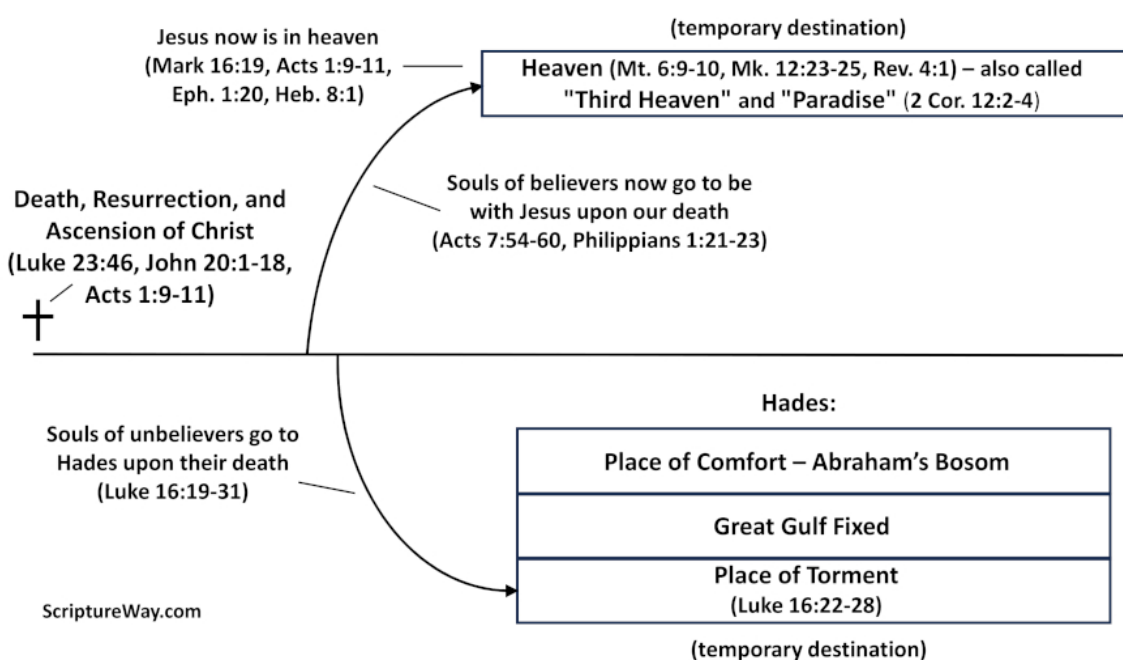
- (1). He was indifferent to the needs of the poor man outside his gate ([Luke 16:19-21, 25](#)). Note the similar outcome for the future judgment of the "goats" in [Matthew 25:31-33](#) and [Matthew 25:41-46](#).
- (2). He was indifferent to God. He had not listened to Moses and the Prophets ([Luke 16:27-31](#)). He would not have been persuaded even "if someone rises from the dead" ([Luke 16:31](#)).

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## 5. Now, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the souls of believers go immediately to heaven to be with Jesus when we die

*"But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55)*

*"And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.' And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.' And when he had said this, he fell asleep." (Acts 7:59-60)*



**Figure 3:** After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the souls of the righteous go to heaven to be with Jesus.

### 5.1. Heaven - Destination for Believers

Because of Jesus' sacrificial death for us and his resurrection, the souls of believers now go immediately to heaven to be with Jesus upon our death (Figure 3). Our destination is to be where he is. Jesus, since his ascension, now is in heaven (Acts 1:9-11, Hebrews 8:1). Recall that Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26).

## Example - Stephen's Death

Let's take a look at the example set by Stephen, the first Christian martyr (read [Acts 7:54-60](#)). As Stephen's opposers were about to stone him, Stephen gazed (up) into heaven and supernaturally saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God ([Acts 7:55](#)). Other scriptures such as [Mark 16:19](#) and [Hebrews 8:1](#) say that Jesus, after his ascension, was seated at the right hand of God. It is interesting that in [Acts 7:55](#) Jesus is standing, likely to welcome his faithful martyr, Stephen ([Ref. 11](#)). It is comforting to know that Jesus is in heaven to welcome us.

As the men were stoning Stephen to death, Stephen called upon the Lord, and said, "Lord Jesus, receive [*welcome*] my spirit" ([Acts 7:59](#), bracket added, [Ref. 12](#)). Here, the single word, "spirit," refers to Stephen's immaterial nature (soul and spirit) which was about to leave his physical body (Figure 1). Then, in [Acts 7:60](#), Stephen cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" "Having said this, he fell asleep" ([Acts 7:60](#)).

As we discussed above in Section 3.2, the metaphorical term "sleep" refers to the death of Stephen's body. Stephen's body died as the result of the stoning. Stephen's soul and spirit went to be with Jesus in heaven (where Jesus is) ([Acts 7:55, 59](#), Figure 3). As the Apostle Paul said, when we become absent from the body, we will be "at home with the Lord" ([2 Corinthians 5:8](#)).

## 5.2. What is the "Third Heaven"?

The Old Testament begins, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" ([Genesis 1:1](#)). Note that in [Genesis 1:1](#) the English word, "heavens," is plural. The Hebrew word for "heavens" is *shamayim*, pronounced shah-MAH-yeem ([Ref. 13](#)). In ancient Hebrew cosmology, *shamayim* was understood as a multi-layered expanse ([Ref. 13](#)):

- The "first" heaven was the atmosphere where birds fly and rain and snow come down ([Psalm 104:12](#) ESV, [Isaiah 55:10](#))
- The "second" heaven was the realm of the stars and celestial bodies ([Psalm 8:3-5](#), [Isaiah 13:10](#))
- The "third" heaven was considered the dwelling place of God ([Psalm 33:13-14](#))

In 2 Corinthians 12:2, the Apostle Paul refers to heaven as the "third heaven" and in 2 Corinthians 12:4 as "Paradise" (Figure 3). However, before the death and resurrection of Jesus, "Paradise" likely referred to the place of comfort in Hades (see Note 3 in Figure 2). As the result of Jesus' death and resurrection, it appears that "Paradise" has moved to what we commonly call "heaven" (Figure 3 above, Ref. 14 below). Since the death and resurrection of Jesus, "Third Heaven" and "Paradise" are now synonymous (Ref. 15 below).

### ***5.3. Hades - Destination for Unbelievers***

Jesus' teaching in Luke 16:22-28 about the souls of the unrighteous going to the place of torment in Hades -- still applies (see Section 4.2, Figure 2, and Figure 3). The souls of the unrighteous (unbelievers) go to the place of torment in Hades to be reserved there until the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20:11-15, Figure 4).

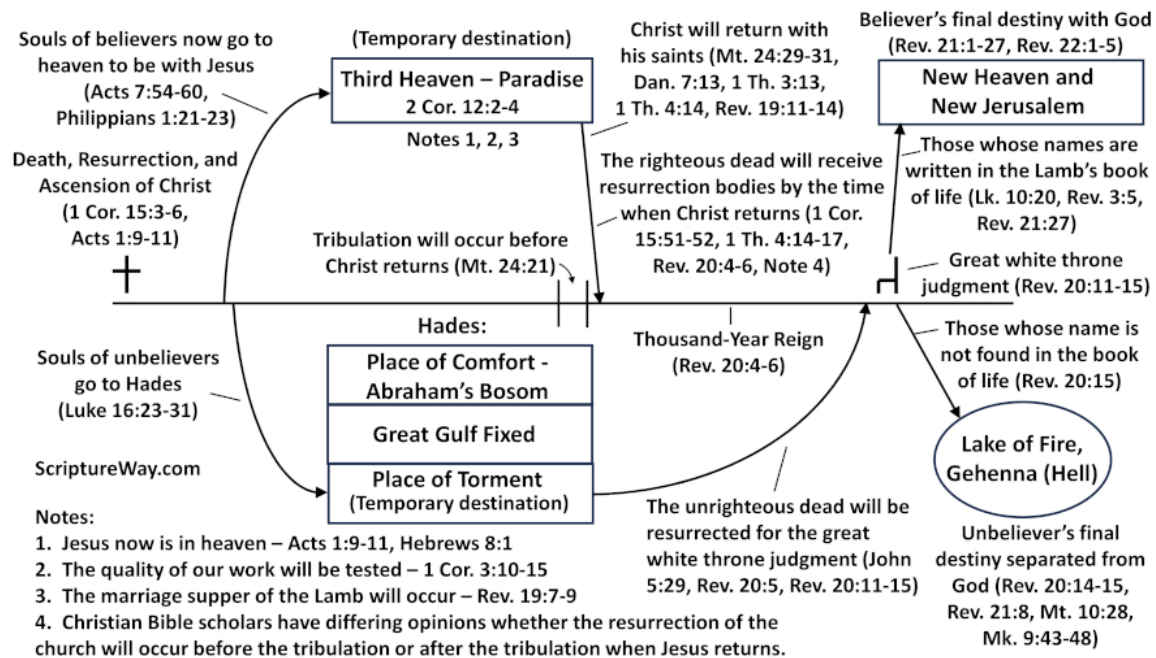
Unbelief, and its consequent indifference to God, results in eternal torment (Luke 16:27-31, Ref. 16 below, Revelation 20:11-15). Instead, decide in this life (while you are still alive) to believe in Jesus Christ, and you will be saved (John 3:36, Acts 4:10-12, Acts 16:29-31, Ephesians 2:4-9).

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## 6. For believers, our final destiny is the new heaven and new Jerusalem

We have established that the souls of those who have died in Christ are with him in heaven now. Likewise, as believers in Christ, when we die, our souls will go to heaven to be with him (Acts 7:54-60, Figures 3 and 4).

This section, Section 6, discusses when Christ returns (6.1), the great white throne judgment (6.2), the book of life (6.3), the final destiny for unbelievers (6.4), and the final destiny for believers (6.5).



**Figure 4** - As believers, our final destiny will be with God in the new heaven and new Jerusalem

### 6.1. When Christ Returns

1 Thessalonians 4:14 tells us that when Christ returns, he "will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep through Jesus" (Figure 4). Then, "We who are alive, who remain, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Take comfort that we, as believers in Jesus, will always be with him. We will be with him in heaven after our physical bodies die (Acts 7:54-60, Figure 4). We will be with him when we receive our resurrection bodies and Jesus returns to earth to begin the thousand-year

reign (Matthew 24:29-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, Revelation 20:4-6, Figure 4).

## 6.2. *The Great White Throne Judgment*

The Bible tells us that after the thousand-year reign of Christ, the unrighteous dead will be resurrected (John 5:28-29, Revelation 20:4-6, Figure 4). They will stand before the "great white throne" for their final judgment (Revelation 20:11-12). The books will be opened, including the "book of life" (Revelation 20:12). Our Lord -- the Son of God and the Son of Man -- will judge them "from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds" (John 5:25-27, Revelation 20:12). Revelation 20:15 tells us that if anyone's name is not found in the book of life, they will be thrown into the "lake of fire."

Note that as believers in Christ, we will have nothing to fear from this judgment of unbelievers. Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life (John 5:24).

## 6.3. *The Book of Life*

Note how valuable it is to have our names written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 21:10, 27). Having our names written in the Lamb's book of life is far more valuable for us than all earthly power and possessions (Ref. 17). Because our names (believer's names) are written in the Lamb's book of life (Revelation 3:5), we will enter into our final destiny -- new Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2, 27; Figure 4). Jesus told his disciples (and tells us) that having our names "recorded in heaven" is a cause for rejoicing (Luke 10:20).

## 6.4. *The Final Destiny for Unbelievers -- Lake of Fire (Gehenna, Hell)*

*"Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire." (Revelation 20:14-15)*

The New Testament gives us two names for the final destiny of eternal punishment for the unrighteous -- the "lake of fire," and "Gehenna" or "hell" (Figure 4).

### 6.4.1 Lake of Fire

The name, "lake of fire," occurs only in the book of Revelation (Revelation 19:20, 20:10, 20:14, 20:15, and 21:8). The Bible tells us that the torment in the lake of fire is "day and night forever" (Rev. 20:10). The Bible also tells us that the lake of fire burns perpetually with brimstone [*sulfur*] (Rev. 19:20, Rev. 20:10, Rev. 21:8, Ref. 18). The presence of brimstone reminds us of the Lord's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:29, Genesis 19:24).

All of the wicked reserved temporarily in Hades will be delivered up and resurrected for the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:12-13, Figure 4). Those whose name is not found in the book of life will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15).

### 6.4.2 Gehenna (Hell)

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus referred to the final destiny of eternal punishment as "Gehenna" (Greek, "hell" in English) (Figure 4).

#### 6.4.2.1 Biblical background – Gehenna

The word, "Gehenna," [*hell*] -- originally came from Hebrew and meant *the valley of the son of Hinnom* (Ben-hinnom) (Joshua 15:8, Ref. 19). The history of the valley of Hinnom (west and south of Jerusalem) is horrible. Jeremiah 7:31 tells us that the sons of Judah "built the high places of Topheth, which is in the Valley of Ben-hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind." (Compare with Leviticus 18:21 AMP.)

King Josiah later reformed this terrible situation. 2 Kings 23:10 says, "He also defiled Topheth, which is in the Valley of the Son of Hinnom, so that no one would make his son or his daughter pass through the fire for Molech." The Bible does not tell us what Josiah did to make Topheth abhorrent to the Jewish people. However, the prophet Jeremiah does tell us that Topheth in the valley of the son of Hinnom would become a burial place for bodies, some of which would not be interred and would become food for birds and animals (Jeremiah 7:31-33).

#### 6.4.2.2 What did Jesus say about hell (Gehenna)?

Jesus, as a master teacher, used something the people knew -- the terrible reputation of the Valley of Ben-himmon -- to teach them (and us) about the final destiny of eternal punishment for the wicked. Jesus spoke of Gehenna (hell) by name. Refer to Matthew 5:22, 5:29-30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15; Mark 9:43-48; and Luke 12:5.

For example, Jesus said, *"And do not be afraid of 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]"* (Matthew 10:28, bracket added).

Jesus also said, *"And if your eye is causing you to sin, throw it away; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be thrown into hell [Gehenna], where their worm does not die, and the fire is not extinguished"* (Mark 9:47-48 bracket added).

Note what Jesus is saying about the eternal hell, Gehenna (Figure 4):

- After judgment, the unrighteous will be sent to the final hell (Gehenna) with soul and resurrected body (Matthew 10:28, Mark 9:47, John 5:29, Rev. 20:5-6, Rev. 20:12-15)
- The agony of hell will be unending (Mark 9:43-48)

Note that in the scriptures Jesus also spoke of Hades -- the temporary abode of the unrighteous dead (not Gehenna). Refer to Matthew 11:23, Matthew 16:18 NKJV ("the gates of Hades shall not prevail"), and Luke 16:23 (Figures 2, 3, and 4).

The terrible destination for unbelievers and the wicked -- Hades and Gehenna -- can be avoided (Figure 4). Turn to Jesus. Now, in this life, while you are still alive, repent from your sins (1 John 1:9). Put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior (John 20:27-29; Acts 4:10-12; Acts 16:29-31). Accept the gift that God has already offered in love to you and all the world - his Son (John 3:16). Believe in him, trust him, and you will also receive God's gift of eternal life (John 3:16, Romans 6:23).

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## 6.5. The Final Destiny for Believers -- New Heaven and New Jerusalem

*"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." (Revelation 21:1-2)*

As believers in Jesus Christ, our final destiny is to be with God in the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem that God will provide (Rev. 21:1-27, Rev. 22:1-5, Figure 4). Rev. 21:2 and Rev. 21:10 tell us that the holy city, the new Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven from God.

### 6.5.1 A Wonderful Place

The Bible tells us why the new heaven, new earth, and new Jerusalem will be a wonderful place.

- God will make it new (Rev. 21:1, Rev 21:5). The Greek word here for "new" is *kainos*. *Kainos* means *new in quality, fresh, and superior to what it succeeds* (Ref. 20).
- There, God will dwell among and be among his people (Rev. 21:3). Note, the Greek word for "people" used here is plural -- "peoples" -- the saved from all nations (Ref. 21, Ref. 22).
- God will wipe away every tear from our eyes. There will no longer be any causes for tears -- no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4).
- The new Jerusalem will be brilliantly beautiful, illuminated by the glory of God and the Lamb (Rev. 21:10-11, Rev. 21:23, Rev. 21:25).
- The new Jerusalem will have plenty of room for all believers (Rev. 21:16). Recall that Jesus said, "In My Father's house are many rooms" (John 14:2).
- As believers and ones made holy by God, we will come into the new Jerusalem because our names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27, Figure 4).

### 6.5.2 The Price of Admission Has Already Been Paid for You

*"Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life, and may enter the city by the gates." (Revelation 22:14)*

Referring to the new Jerusalem, God says through his word that those who "may enter the city by the gates" are those "who wash their robes" (Rev. 22:14). More specifically, they are ones who have washed their robes and "made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). It is the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, that washes away our sins and cleanses us (John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:18-19, 1 John 1:7).

By God's grace, Jesus Christ through his shed blood has paid the admission price for us to enter heaven and the new Jerusalem. Accept God's gift of his Son, Jesus Christ, and the price he has paid for you (John 3:16, 1 Peter 1:18-19). Then you will have God's gift of eternal life, and your soul will go to heaven to be with Jesus when your body dies.

**Prayer.** Thank you, Jesus, for dying for us that we may live forever with you. Help us to live faithfully for you in this life on earth. Then, thank you for receiving our souls into your presence in heaven.

### Related Lessons

"Paradise, Jesus, and the Penitent Thief" - Luke 23:42-43

"God's Offer of Salvation and Eternal Life" - John 3:16

"What Is Eternal Life?" - John 17:3

"What is the Tree of Life in the Bible?" - Revelation 2:7

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