

The Meaning of...

HELL or SHEOL

To the reader: Keep your Bible beside you. Always read your Bible first, then read these notes. Check the references and read them also. Invite a friend to study with you. You will be blessed.

ADAM WAS NOT LIKE THE ANIMALS

There was something very intimate and personal about God's act in creating Adam. As an artist signs his painting, so God stamped His imprint on His own work. God made man 'in His own likeness or image' (Gen 1:27).

Because man has a spirit, he can commune with God. Because God gave man an ever-living spirit as well as a body, his spirit will live on somewhere after his body dies. Man's body dies and turns to dust, but his spirit lives on.

Adam sinned against God. Now all men are born sinners. Sin is universal and God will punish sinners. He said, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23).

God prepared a place for Satan and his demons, a place of everlasting punishment. Jesus died on the cross to save men and women from the same fate. Jesus called this place of punishment "Hell." But men of old called it "Sheol." In the Greek language, this word was translated "Hades," which means "the unseen world."

In the minds of Old Testament scholars, "Sheol" was a dark, gloomy place inside the earth. They simply called it "the grave" (Amos 9:2). There spirits without bodies had a dull and inactive existence (2 Samuel 22:6).

The Hebrew people thought that both righteous and unrighteous spirits went there when the body died (Psalm 9:17).

MAN IN GOD'S IMAGE

When God said that He made man "in His own image..." (Gen 1:27-28), He meant that human beings are very different to the rest of creation:

- a) Man is a rational being. He can reason and plan (Isaiah 1:18).
- b) Man was created to rule over creation.
- c) In his moral conscience, man was created righteous. He had a right relationship to God who is holy and just (Ephesians 4:24).
- d) Man is like God in that he has a three-part nature - body, soul and spirit (1 Thess 5:23).
- e) God gave man an immortal spirit. Man's body will die and turn to dust, but his spirit will live on forever and ever.

Only some of God's 'image' was put upon man. We could think of it as the image of a king on a coin, or the likeness of one's face in an artist's drawing. The 'image' is not the person; it is only a likeness to that person.

Both men and women were created "in His (God's) own image..." The Hebrew word 'man' is generic and means both man and woman (1:27).

TALK ABOUT

1. What made man different to all the animals (1:27)?
2. What was the likeness (image) that God put on man?
3. Was God's image put on woman also?
4. What did God say about the things He created (Gen 1:31)

LIFE AFTER DEATH

The Bible speaks of the life of a person's spirit after death. In many cultures, people worship the spirits of the dead. God's word tells us not to do this.

Because man has a spirit, he can communicate with God who is Spirit (John 4:24). Because God is Spirit, man in a right relationship with his Creator can walk and talk with God as Adam did (Gen 3:8).

God created man and woman for fellowship. Now God seeks a relationship with every living person. He forgives those who confess their sins, and He receives all who believe in Jesus Christ. For them this relationship begins immediately they confess their sins to God. Those who do not repent and receive salvation in Jesus Christ are shut out of God's presence forever (1 Thess 5:9).

We speak of a person's spirit. Man was created with a body which dies and turns to dust. But what of man's spirit? Down through the ages men's bodies have been turning to dust and their spirits have been returning to God who created them (Zech 14:1; Eccl 12:7).

Since the beginning of time, men have been asking, "What does God do with the spirits of the dead?" The Bible offers no satisfactory explanation. However, it does give us assurance that those "who die in the Lord" will be with Him in heaven. To "die in the Lord" means to have put one's faith and trust in Jesus.

OLD TESTAMENT CHRISTIANS

Some people are not sure when God opened the doors of heaven and let the spirits of the righteous dead come in. When Adam and Eve sinned against God, they were thrown out of the Garden and God placed an angel with a flaming sword at the entrance to stop them from coming back (Gen 3:24). God did not want them to eat the fruit of the Tree of Life and have the human race live forever in their sin.

God did not close the way for Adam to repent and have a relationship with his Creator again. The Bible does not tell us whether Adam repented. But it does tell us that Abel, Adam's son, offered a sacrifice that was acceptable to God. He did this because he had faith in God and obeyed God's directions on how to worship Him (Gen 4:4; Heb 4:4). As far as we know, Abel was the first in a long line of men and women who were accepted by God and enjoyed fellowship with Him in this life. And their spirits were received into heaven when their bodies died. God accepted them on the basis of their faith and righteousness (Gen 15:6; Deut 6:25).

On a day of worship, Abel brought the fat parts of one of his lambs and offered them as a sacrifice to God. Cain, his older brother, brought vegetables from his garden. The Bible writer said, "By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings" (Heb 11:4).

Right at the beginning of recorded history, God said there would be two lines of people - those who would love and serve Him and those who would reject Him, the sons of Satan the devil (Gen 3:15; John 8:44). Some men and women would receive Him gladly and some would reject His rule in their lives.

Cain proved that he was a son of the devil. He was angry because God did not accept his offering. He was angry at God and angry at Abel.

"Let's go out to the field," he said to Abel. While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?"

The Lord answered, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground" (Genesis 4:8-10).

TALK ABOUT

1. What part of a person lives on after their body dies?
2. What does it mean to "die in the Lord"?
3. What happens to the spirits of those who "die in the Lord"?
4. Why did God accept Abel's sacrifice and not Cain's (Heb 11:4)?
5. Why did Cain kill his brother Abel (Gen 4:4-10)?

GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE

Many centuries later, God chose Abraham to begin a new line of faithful men and women. They were called Hebrews. In Jacob they became twelve tribes and suffered 430 years of slavery in Egypt. Then God chose Moses to go to Egypt and lead His people out.

At Mt Sinai, God gave Moses laws that would govern every part of the lives of His people. If they obeyed His laws, God promised to bless them. If they did not, He warned them that terrible judgments would come upon them. He did not threaten the wicked with a place in Sheol, the place of the dead, but most people believed that is where the spirits of the dead went.

The word is found most often in the writings of the prophets. By examining the context, we can guess at the meaning intended by the writer. The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology gives six ways in which the word is used. For the most part these are translated as "grave" in the New International Bible.

1. Once a spirit arrives in Sheol, it cannot save itself or escape the terrible surroundings (Psalm 89:48; Job 17:13-16). It is a place of no return (Job 7:9). There is no activity in Sheol and no spirit in Sheol thinks of God (Psalm 88:10-12).
2. In Genesis the word is used as the place where all people go after they die (Gen 38:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31).
3. A place equal to 'hell' in the New Testament. The spirits of the wicked go when they die (Psalms 9:17; 31:17; 49:14). David prayed that his enemies would go there (Psalm 55:15).
4. Sheol is not a place for righteous spirits. The prophet wrote that God would "redeem them from death" (Hosea 13:14). Whoever the prophet is speaking of, and there are several interpretations, only Jesus Christ can save us from spiritual death. He gave His life "a ransom for many..." (Matt 20:28).
5. God's wrath burns in Sheol (Deut 32:22). This thought is brought out by many Old Testament writers - David in Psalms, Solomon, Job, Amos, Samuel - so it was well established among God's people at that time.
6. The word was used as a picture of sin and wickedness. Both the righteous and the wicked go to Sheol when they die. The righteous are delivered from it, but the wicked are held fast forever.

TALK ABOUT

1. When Israel's prophets spoke of God's judgments, did they use the word 'Sheol'?
2. What did the word mean to Old Testament readers?
3. Was 'Sheol' in the Old Testament equal to 'hell' in the New?

SHEOL IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When 70 scholars sat down to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek for New Testament readers, they used the word "hades" in place of Sheol sixty-one times (see LXX or Septuagint Version). In most places where it is used, it means a place of God's judgment (Matt 11:23; Luke 10:15; Acts 13:35).

Sheol is also translated *Gehenna*, the Greek form of the Hebrew phrase that means "The Vale of Hinnom." This was a valley south of Jerusalem. The Canaanites worshipped their god Baal there and sacrificed their children to the god Molech. Judah's kings Ahaz and Manasseh took part in this abomination (2 Chron 28:3; 33:6).

FIRE BURNED THERE NIGHT AND DAY

Jeremiah said this Valley would be called "The Valley of Slaughter" (Jer 7:31-34). The Valley reminded New Testament writers of hell, a place where the fire never goes out (Matt 9:44, 45). The city's garbage was dumped in the Valley of Hinnom and burned day and night.

Gehenna was probably what Jesus had in mind when He said, “and they will weed out of the Kingdom everything that causes sin and all that do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 13:41-42).

Sheol is not for the believer. Jesus told us this when He spoke to the thief on the cross beside Him. The thief rebuked his companion saying, “Don’t you fear God?” He said, “Seeing you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserved. But this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41-43).

THE PROMISE OF PARADISE

With his last breath, the other criminal turned and spoke to Jesus. He said, “Jesus, remember me when You come into Your Kingdom.”

At that very same moment Jesus answered him, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise.” The word ‘paradise’ has its root meaning in a Persian word for “the hanging gardens” built by King Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon, which were world famous.

There was no thought of Sheol here. Jesus promised the dying thief immediate bliss, with the Saviour at his side, in heaven. Here was a sinner repenting at the very last moment, but he was genuine. Maybe this man had never had an offer of Salvation in Jesus Christ before, but now the Son of God hung beside him.

The dying thief agreed with God that he was getting what he rightly deserved. He accepted the justice of God. Many don’t. They argue and blame God when it is entirely their condition in life and death is their own fault.

Perhaps this man had never prayed before, yet he was heard because prayer comes from the heart as well as the lips. And his heart acknowledged Christ as Lord – Lord in life and Lord in death. That He was going to a kingdom that was not of this world, but far better (John 18:36).

This man was humble. In his dying prayer he asked for nothing, except to be remembered. Christ’s answer was much more than he asked. He would not only be remembered, he would enjoy the presence of Jesus forever. The greatest sinner who truly repents is promised a place at the Saviour’s side. What a comfort: the door of the kingdom stands open to all who repent and are truly sorry for their sins.

Jesus Christ told us where He was going THAT DAY, not tomorrow or after three days, but “today” (Luke 23:43). When all believers die, they, too, go to be with Him in this paradise, which is heaven (Rev 2:7).

TALK ABOUT

1. Where do the spirits of believers go when they die (Eccl 12:7)?
2. What of the thief who was on the cross beside Jesus? What happened to his spirit (Luke 23:43)?

THE GREAT SEPARATION

Jesus told a parable to show us a great truth. A deep and wide chasm separates the spirits of those who die in the Lord and those who don’t give any attention to His great salvation while they are alive in this life.

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) makes it quite plain that Lazarus enjoyed the blessings of heaven when he died while the Rich Man was in the torments of hell. It is not a sin to be rich, but to set our hearts on our possessions and on them alone is wrong.

The Bible speaks of spiritual things, not things we often talk about. An unnamed rich man....In many other parables Jesus spoke of hell as a place of darkness and torment, “where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt 25:30).

THE RICH FOOL

Jesus told a parable of another man who prided his own work and its success (Luke 12:16-21). Jesus did not say so, but this man probably spent all his wealth on himself.

The life of our spirit does not depend on what we own of the goods of this world. We forget the poor, the sick and the stranger at our own peril. There is no second chance to help our fellow man. When God calls us away from this world, we stand naked before Him to give account of the things done while we lived here on earth (Romans 12:14),

God said to this foolish farmer, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself" (Luke 12:20).

Many who thought going to church or doing good deeds in their community would get them into heaven will be disappointed. To them, the Master will say, "I never knew you. Away from Me, you evildoers" (Matt 7:23).

TALK ABOUT

1. Jesus told many parables about the rich and the poor. Can you name some of them?
2. Did Jesus say it was wrong to be rich?
3. When someone asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbour" what did He say (Luke 10:33)?

RESURRECTED BODIES

Hell was prepared for Satan and his demon spirits. There is no reason why any man should ever be sent there. Except...Adam chose to follow Satan and not God. Adam and Eve sinned against God and their punishment for sin was everlasting separation from God and His eternal life. Those who received Jesus as their Saviour will receive a body "like His (Jesus') glorious body" (Phil 3:21). Those who rejected the Saviour will receive a body subject to "shame and contempt" (Daniel 12:2). They will stand before Almighty God on that final judgment day "and the books will be opened" (Rev 20:11-15).

SATAN AND HIS FOLLOWERS

Satan was once an angel in heaven, but he was proud and 'lifted up' in his heart. He wanted to be equal to God and set on God's throne. Pride made Satan rebel against God. Pride is sin and God cannot look on sin.

God cannot keep company with sinners, so Satan was thrown out of heaven. Many angels followed Satan into sin and they were thrown out of heaven with him. We do not know when this happened.

Fallen angels still follow Satan. The angel spirits who follow him are called evil spirits or demons. They are Satan's messengers and he keeps them busy carrying out his wicked plans. Bible writers tell of evil spirits coming to earth to trouble men and women. In Bible times, they seem to have been 'a part of the landscape' as we say. They still are, yet they always obey authority taken over them in the name of Jesus (1 Sam 16:14-16; Acts 19:12).

JESUS SPOKE OFTEN OF HELL

Hell is a real place. Only Jesus spoke of hell and only the apostle John used the word in The Revelation. John in his vision saw "a lake of fire burning with brimstone" (Rev 19:20; 20:10). Jesus spoke of "outer darkness and a furnace of fire, where there will be wailing, weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt 8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30).

The reality is always greater than the symbol. It is beyond human language and comprehension to describe heaven and hell. Heaven is more glorious than words can describe. Speaking of heaven, the prophet wrote, "No eye has seen, nor ear has heard, nor mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him - "(Isaiah 64:4).

No prophet attempted to describe hell, but all the prophets warned God's people not to turn away from the Lord to follow the evil ways of the heathen. Ezekiel supplied a description of what it would be like in Jerusalem in the days of siege and famine. He said, "They will be appalled at the sight of each other and will waste away because of their sin" (Ezek 4:17).

The famine and siege in Samaria was so great that the people ate each others' children (2 Kings 6:26-30). "And a donkey's head was sold for eighty shekels of silver."

But all these tragic events were short lived and those who survived returned to life as usual. Hell is forever and forever. There is no escape from the judgment of God Almighty.

GOD REIGNS OVER ALL

We know that God reigns over all, both the living and the dead. Jesus said, "I hold the keys of death and Hades (Hell)" (Rev 1:18). He also said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me..." (Matt 28:18).

Satan may be busy, using death and destruction to put fear into our hearts, but he does not have the last word. God created us and loves us dearly. He controls our days and knows all about us.

Jesus asked, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt 6:27). The eternal destiny of our spirits is in His hands. Yet He has given man the choice. We can choose eternal life or eternal death for our spirits.

LIFE OR DEATH?

Moses said to the people, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you that I have set before you life and death...Now choose life...love the Lord your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the Lord is your life..." (Deut 30:19-20). Should we not give the Lord God all our worship and our love? This is what He commands us to do (Deut 6:5).

Elijah faced his own people. They worshipped the idol Baal. They knew God was greater than idols, but they did not follow Him with all their hearts. Elijah challenged them with the words, "If the Lord is God, follow Him; if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). The people were ashamed and did not reply.

TALK ABOUT

1. What is the greatest choice God gives to a person (Deut 30:19-20)?
2. Where do the spirits of people go when they die (Eccl 12:7)?
3. Why do some people worship the spirits of their ancestors?
4. Do evil spirits live in trees or rocks?

GOD HAS NO PLACE FOR DEAD BODIES

Some men go to a lot of trouble and pay large sums of money to prepare a place for their body to be buried after they die. The Pharaohs of Egypt instructed that their bodies be embalmed. This practice of embalming preserved the dead body. Some bodies remain to this day as mummies. The Pharaohs built elaborate tombs for their bodies. Their families gathered their possessions and buried them with the dead body, thinking these things would be needed in the dead person's 'after life.'

The Greeks cremated dead bodies. The Hebrews buried their dead the same day or the next day after the person died, because dead bodies decayed quickly in the hot climate of Palestine.

In Bible times men of wealth cut tombs in the rocky cliffs. The tomb was made secure by a heavy stone rolled across the mouth or entrance (Mark 16:3-4). Joseph and Nicodemus took Jesus' body and laid it in a new tomb.

God made no command about disposing of a dead body. He said that the dead body would soon turn to dust (Gen 3:19) according to His command.

Solomon knew this. He said: "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it" (Eccl 12:7). God has charge of the spirits of the dead, but for those who rejected Jesus in this life, there is nothing but judgment on that last great day (2 Thess 1:9).

Jesus told the Pharisees, “He (God) is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Mark 12:24-27). God spoke to Moses about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who had died long before. He implied that He was still caring for their spirits and, in the resurrection, their new bodies would rise from the dust (Dan 12:2).

THE ANGELS WHO REBELLED

Satan was once a beautiful angel in heaven. He wanted greater power and authority. He drew a lot of angels into his rebellion against God. When Satan was thrown out of heaven, these wicked angels were punished. Some serve Satan even now. Jesus called Satan “the prince of this world” (John 12:31). He has a lot of power, but God’s power is greater. The Bible says, “The One who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

The Bible calls the followers of Satan demons or evil spirits. In Jesus’ day and now, too, they possess human beings. Jesus cast them out. He gave His disciples authority to cast demons out of those who were possessed (Mark 3:12-15).

Some angels who rebelled against God were locked away in dark place to await final judgment (Jude 6). We don’t know why God did this. Perhaps they led others in rebelling against God’s authority.

God prepared hell for Satan and his angels. And Satan will remain there forever (Rev 20:10).

TALK ABOUT

1. Should we spend a lot of money to get a special place to bury our dead relatives? Why not?
2. Bodies turn to dust. What will happen to the dust when Jesus comes in the clouds (Dan 12:2)?
3. What will be the end of Satan and his demon spirits (Rev 20:10)?

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