

The Great White Throne

📖 Revelation 20:11-15

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Q: What happened to people when they died in the OT? It says, they “sleep with their fathers,” (1 Kings 1:21; 2:6, 9, 10)

A: This question came about out of curiosity concerning death in the kingdom. And we said there will be death in the kingdom, but it will be the exception, not the norm. But as far as what happened to OT saints when they died, all we’ve stated in this series is that they will be resurrected during the 75 day interval between Christ’s coming in His kingdom and the blessings of the kingdom. We know that from Daniel 12:2, compared with 12:13. But what then is the situation of an OT saints like Moses or David or Daniel who died, as we know there is a great space of time between the moment of their death and their coming resurrection and the kingdom. This is an interesting study because the results are not what I was taught. Typically, the idea is that there is a place called Sheol or Hades, and that it has two compartments and in one compartment there were all the unbelievers and in the other compartment are all the believers and that between them there was a great gulf fixed, so that one could not traverse from one compartment to the other. That idea comes solely from Luke 16. So, let’s turn to Luke 16. I studied this out a couple of years ago and what I found was that this passage was being misused, that elements from the story were being used to support ideas that are not the point of the passage. You have to be careful about doing that. That’s one of the most common errors of Bible study. People will argue something from a passage that is not the point of the passage, but an incidental. This is the illustration of a rich man and a poor man. In verse 19 the rich man, “habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day.” In verse 20 “And a 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 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.” So the two men, one rich in this life, one poor in this life, both died, the rich man went to Hades to torment. Where did the poor man go? Abraham’s bosom. People say there are two compartments to Hades and believers go to one of those. That’s not what the Bible says. It says unbelievers are in Hades, and believers are in Abraham’s bosom. What’s Abraham’s bosom. The place of faith where there is rest. To lie in one’s

bosom is to be in a position of rest. So it's where those who have faith like Abraham go to rest from the troubles of this world. Now, not only does it not say that believers who died in the OT went to Hades, but it really doesn't tell us anything about what really happens other than one is in torment and the other at rest. The reason I say that is because that is missing the point of the illustration. This is an illustration, not a depiction of reality. Who is the rich man? That's the key issue in the context. That's what you have to identify. Look back up to verse 14. "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things and were scoffing at Him." Who's the rich man? The Pharisees. And the issue is verse 15, they were trying to justify themselves in the sight of men, but God knows their hearts, so while men esteemed them, God detested them. In verse 16 they were fighting against the kingdom, forcing against it by rejecting John and now resisting Him. And He's illustrating in vv 19ff how the Pharisees lived a good life here and now but would suffer eternal torment, while those who were believing in Him as Abraham would enter into eternal rest. That is all the passage is teaching, and to go farther than that is to go beyond what the passage is teaching. Since I will now show you from the OT that the references to Sheol, which is the equivalent of Hades, only referred to the grave that is in the earth which is where the body is buried in the dust of the ground. You see, Hades was the place of the body, it says nothing about the location of the soul. It is a reference to the grave.

What it means they "sleep with their fathers" is that their bodies sleep in the grave. The soul doesn't sleep, only the body. And the grave is Sheol. For example, in Gen 37:35 Jacob said regarding the news that Joseph had been torn to pieces by a wild beast, "Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son." Jacob meant he would go to the grave in mourning over Joseph (also cf Gen 42:38, "you will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow"; 44:29, 31). It also referred to being in the ground of the earth, as in Numbers 16:30, which says, "But if the Lord brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol..." Sheol is clearly being used there for being swallowed up in the ground (Also cf Num 16:33; Deut 32:22). It is used as a synonym for "death" in 2 Sam 22:6 where it says, "The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me" (Ps 6:5). It is used as a synonym for the dust in Job 17:16, "Will it go down with me to Sheol? Shall we together go down into the dust?" And in Job 33:18 as a synonym for the pit, "He keeps back his soul from the pit, And his life from passing over into Sheol." From all this it may be concluded that Sheol is the grave in the earth where the body goes to sleep at death. But the soul and spirit are never said to go to Sheol. Well, where did they go? Daniel 12:13 says simply to "rest." That's all we really know. But several things are interesting to me. One is the instance of Enoch. Here is a man living before the Flood and it simply says, "Enoch lived 350 years and was not because God took him." Well, where did God take him? It's obvious that he took him body, soul and all. But where? We're never told. But it's hard to imagine he wasn't taken to be with God. Then you have the instance of Elijah who was caught up in a whirlwind. It never says Elijah died. Some people say he had to die and be resurrected. I don't see that in the Bible. He was just taken up. Where? It doesn't say, but again, it's hard to imagine he was taken any where other than to be with God. These people were believers. Why couldn't they be with God? If we can have God the Holy Spirit dwelling in us

while still here on earth with our sin natures and all, why can't believers be dwelling with Him in heaven? A fourth thing I find interesting is that when Paul says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, he does not indicate that this was a mystery truth. When Paul wants to introduce something new he says, "I tell you a mystery..." or something like that. But he doesn't say that. He acts like this is something already known, that when a believer dies he is in a place of rest, and this place is face to face with the Lord.

Now that's when people say, but in Luke 16 Jesus says that Sheol had two compartments, and believers were in one side and unbelievers in the other side. But actually, it does not say that. It only says that unbelievers are in Sheol. Believers are said to be in Abraham's bosom and this is obviously a place of rest, and I find it hard to believe that this place of rest is somewhere different from where God is.

So, what happened when a person died in the OT? Whether they were a believer or an unbeliever, the body went to the grave, which is Sheol. The believer's spirit went to a place of rest awaiting the day of resurrection during the 75 days. The unbeliever's spirit went to a place of torment, awaiting the day of resurrection after the thousand years.

Q: What happens to people who die in the millennium?

A: In the millennium death will be the exception, rather than the norm. Isa 65:20 teaches that someone who dies at age 100 will be a youth and that someone who dies before one hundred will be thought accursed. Some think that this means only unbelievers will die, and that they are dying because of their unbelief. But I've never been convinced 100% that's what the text is teaching. It doesn't say that unbelievers will die on their 100th birthday; it says someone who dies at age 100 is a youth. That just means that maturation rate will be much slower in the millennium. When it says that one who dies before their 100th birthday will be thought accursed, it seems to mean that other people will think they must have done something wrong to die at such a young age. They may be right, as in the millennium the Messiah will rule with a rod of iron and the death penalty will be exacted. But I don't see any evidence that it means only unbelievers will die and believers will not die, while I do think there is evidence that Jewish believers in the land will not die.

Let's just say that a believer could die. If that's the case, and it's hard to tell, but it would possibly explain why there are no texts that clearly attest to a resurrection of believers after the millennium. And I don't know what would happen. Since to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, it's possible that they could die and just be resurrected right then to be present with the Lord on earth and reign with Him. Just saying it's a possibility that can't be ruled out. There is one text that has been used to support a resurrection of believers after the millennium and that text is 1 Cor 15:50-57. It's the text where it says "we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet." You say, that refers to the rapture of the Church. Well, most take it that way, but there are some who argue that it's talking about millennial saints being raptured after the thousand years. Their argument is that when it says "flesh and blood cannot inherit the

kingdom of God," the phrase "kingdom of God" is referring to the eternal phase of the kingdom of God, what we know as the new heaven and new earth, which is after the millennium. And they say this because the passage also says "death will be swallowed up in victory," and it's not until after the millennium that death is swallowed up in victory. If that's the right interpretation, then believers at the end of the millennium will be raptured and resurrected just like Church saints will be raptured and resurrected. I used to hold that view, but on further reflection, I conclude that Paul is addressing Church saints at the rapture and not millennial saints. Because of that I don't know of any passages that discuss whether a millennial saint could die or what would happen to them if they did die. The only thing I can deduce is that if they did die, they would be face to face with the Lord; that seems to always be the case. Now, how those who live to the end get over from the millennial phase of the kingdom into the eternal phase, I don't know that either. All I can tell you is I know the one who does know and that He can do it and He hasn't chosen to reveal this information to us and that it's not necessary to know now, but we will find out in the future.

Now if an unbeliever dies, and they clearly can die in the millennial kingdom, then their bodies go to the grave, which is Sheol, awaiting the day of their resurrection after the millennium, when they will go to the Great White Throne Judgment. But some will live to the end of the millennium and go to the battle we spoke of last week, in Rev 20:7-10, where Satan is released and he goes out to deceive the nations, Gog and Magog, and they come up against the saints and Jerusalem. Then God sends fire from heaven and they are incinerated. So their bodies will go to the grave and then they will be resurrected and go to the Great White Throne judgment. But does every single unbelieving person on the planet come up against Israel for that final battle? I mean, do men, women and children and babies? I don't know. I don't think so. And what I'm getting at here is, there may be unbelievers left after that battle. We just aren't given a lot of details about these last things. So we're really no in a position to offer an opinion.

Our passage in Revelation 20:11-15 is about the final judgment of unbelievers, which is known as the Great White Throne. This is their judgment to determine degree of punishment when cast into the lake of fire. Let's be clear that Sheol or Hades is not the same as the lake of fire. Sheol or Hades is the grave. While their bodies are there their spirits are in torment. But after the millennium they will be resurrected and taken to this judgment to determine degree of punishment in the lake of fire. In verse 11, **Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them.** This judgment does not take place in the present heaven and earth, but in between the present heaven and earth and the future new heaven and new earth. There's a gap of time between them for this judgment. So where it takes place is not known, and what place would be in existence is not known. It appears it does not take place at a place. It is simply the one who sits on the throne and all unbelievers standing before him. The one

administering the judgment is the **one who sat upon the white throne**. This is Christ because God the Father judges no one but has given all judgment to the Son. John 5:22, "For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son..."

In verse 12, **And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds**. The **dead** is clearly a depiction of those who are spiritually dead. They do not have eternal life. They are **standing before the throne** and **books were opened and another book**. So on one side picture a big set of **books** and on the other side picture a single **book**. The big set of **books** contains a record of the deeds of those who are spiritually dead; a list of what they did with their life, their talents, their abilities, everything God gave them. The other single book **is the book of life**, there is a list of names in this book, all the names of those who have **life**, they are spiritually alive. Note that the big set of **books was opened** and **the dead were judged only from the things written in those books, so according to their deeds**. All judgment is on the basis of deeds. There is another verse in John 5 that confuses many people into thinking that salvation is on the basis of deeds but it is actually about judgment being based on deeds. That verse is John 5:28-29, which says, "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice. And will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment." The idea some get is that salvation is by good deeds. But the context is one of resurrection unto judgment. There will be two resurrections; a resurrection unto judgment for good deeds, which is believers only, and a resurrection unto judgment for evil deeds, which is unbelievers only. The passage is not about being saved by doing good deeds or unsaved for doing evil deeds. It's about being resurrected to judgment of deeds. All judgment in the Bible is on the basis of deeds. And the judgment is to determine amount of reward for believers and amount of punishment for unbelievers. In our context of Revelation 20:11-15, it becomes quite clear that the only ones at this judgment are unbelievers, they are **the dead**, meaning spiritually dead, and they are being judged according to their deeds to determine the amount of punishment they will receive in the lake of fire. But they are not going to the lake of fire because of their deeds. They are going there, according to verse 15, because their names are not found in the book of life, that is, they have no spiritual life. Spiritual life comes only by believing the gospel. And it's my understanding that before the foundation of the world God had everyone's name who would ever be born written in that book, and that each name remains in the book unless they die in unbelief, at which time an unbeliever's name is erased from the book of life. That is why they will be cast in the lake of fire; because they died in unbelief. But the amount of punishment they will receive in the lake of fire will be based on their deeds. That means that all who are finally in the lake of fire will not receive the same degree of punishment; that there will be more punishment for some and less for others, and that will be based on Christ's evaluation of their what they did with their life, their deeds.

Verse 13 says, **And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds.** The point of the description of the **sea** is to say that even though their bodies were totally disintegrated, they will be resurrected for this judgment. The mention of **death and Hades** is an ascensive *kai* and should be translated "even." **Death, even Hades.** This refers to their bodies being resurrected from the grave to attend this judgment. Once they are raised they will be **judged, every one of them according to their deeds.**

After their judgment verse 14 says, **Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.** In other words, those who are dead and raised at this time will be **thrown in the lake of fire.** Then we are told that **This is the second death, the lake of fire.** Since this is the second death, what's the first death? Spiritual death, which is separation from God. We are all conceived spiritually dead because we all sinned in Adam. But only those who physically die in a state of spiritual death will be raised at this time and judged according to their deeds to determine the degree of punishment in **the lake of fire.** As for **the second death,** it is **the lake of fire.** This is a place of eternal separation from God. So the difference between the first death and the second death is that the first death is spiritual death in time, which can be remedied by faith in Jesus, but the second death is eternal death, which can never be remedied.

The basis of being cast in the lake of fire is verse 15, **And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.** No one will be **thrown in the lake of fire** because of what is recorded in the books that contain their deeds. Instead, they are cast in the lake of fire because their names are not found in the single book of life. So the single **book of life** has a record of everyone's name who has ever believed. None of those at this judgment will have their names in this book because they died in unbelief. Therefore, they are cast in the lake of fire along with those in verse 10, the devil, the anti-Christ and the false prophet. And there torment will be day and night forever and ever.

In conclusion, our passage is significant for our series because it tells us what will happen after the thousand years. At that time Satan will be released. He will deceive the nations into going up against the Jewish saints, Jerusalem, and the King. They will surround them. Then God will send down fire from heaven and incinerate them. At that time the devil will be cast in the lake of fire along with the anti-Christ and the false prophet. After that heaven and earth will pass away and in a place which is no place Jesus Christ will sit on a great white throne to judge the dead from all of history, who died in unbelief, but at this time will be resurrected and brought before Him for judgment. Two sets of books will be opened. One set is a massive library containing all their deeds. They will be judged according to their deeds to determine the degree of punishment they will face. The other is the single book containing the names of those who have eternal life. Since their names will not be found in this book, they will be cast in the lake of fire to be tormented forever.

One of the big lessons to take away from this, is that there is no reason for anyone to go to this judgment. Everyone's name is originally written in the book of life from before the foundation of the world. The names

remain there until a person dies in unbelief, at which time their name is erased. But there is no reason for anyone's name to be erased. All men have revelation from God in creation and conscience so that they are without excuse. Some men receive further revelation from God in the canon of Scripture. And Christ died for all men without exception. Therefore, there is no reason not to believe in Him and have your name remain written in the book of life. For those who die in unbelief their names are erased from the book of life and they will have to attend the great white throne judgment to be judged for their deeds and then cast in the lake of fire forever. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. For faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. So let us not be ashamed to preach the gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe; Christ has died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and He was raised the third day, according to the Scriptures. Believe in Him.

Next time we will begin to look at the new heaven and new earth, the second phase of the kingdom and our eternal destiny. Just a glimpse of eternity.