

What Happens After We Die

(Special Topical Lesson)

by Chuck Pike – March 22, 2026

I. Introduction

- a. Coming from different Christian backgrounds, not everyone would answer the question, “What happens after we die?” in the same way.
 - i. Often, what we believe has been shaped by things we were taught as children, what we have heard said at funerals, or popular culture.
 - ii. The goal here is to lay out the basics regarding what Jesus and the apostles taught, which is not always what is taught in churches today.
 - iii. I hope this will help us be more unified and will benefit you in your own personal Bible study, to see how the Scriptures ‘fit together’ on this topic.
 - iv. Also, I hope it will better equip each of us as we approach death, whether our own or of those close to us.
- b. My goal is to lay out the framework, rather than to explain every detail, and to hopefully straighten out some popular misconceptions. I will strive to present how this was generally understood in the church, from the beginning.
 - i. As always, I encourage you to go back to the Scriptures and consider what is presented today, especially if it is different from what you were taught.
 - ii. For those who are already familiar with the historic understanding, I hope this will help you explain this to others in a clearer way.
- c. A reminder from Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
 - i. “The business of the Christian is nothing else than to *be ever preparing for death.*”
 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Fragments from the Lost Writings*; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 570)
 - ii. My hope is that this teaching will motivate us to focus on where we are headed and to be better prepared for that!

II. Start With Jesus and What He Taught

- a. Read **Matthew 12:38-42**.

- i. Things we learn from this passage, regarding “the judgment” and the death of Jesus:
 1. All people, from all ages, will be judged at one point in time.
 - a. The “Queen of the South” = Queen of Sheba, who came from a great distance seeking Solomon’s wisdom. This refers to events recorded in **1 Kings / 3 Kingdoms 10**, which happened c. 1000 BC.
 - b. The “men of Nineveh” reference refers to the people who repented in **Jonah 3**, c. 780 BC.
 - c. The “men of this generation” refers to those living at the time Jesus was preaching, c. 30 AD.
 - d. This demolishes the idea that each one of us will be judged individually and immediately and sent to either heaven or hell at the time of his or her death.
 - e. This idea that all people will be judged in one session, at Jesus’ Second Coming, is confirmed by His teaching on the Day of Judgment in the story he tells about the Sheep and Goats, in **Matthew 25**, which begins:
 - i. “When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. *All the nations will be gathered before Him*, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats.” (**Matthew 25:31–32**, NKJV)
 2. During the three days between the death of Jesus and His resurrection, he would be three days and nights “in the heart of the earth” (**Matthew 12:40**).
 - a. In the Apostles’ Creed, an ancient statement of the core beliefs of the Christian faith, it includes the statement, “He descended to Hades / the dead / the lowermost parts”.
 - b. While being crucified, Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross:
 - i. “...Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me *in paradise*.” (**Luke 23:43**, NKJV)

b. **Question:** Where did the spirit of Jesus go for the three days while His body was in the tomb, before He was bodily resurrected? Was He in heaven, or hell (the lake of fire), in “the heart of the earth” (whatever *that* is referring to), in Paradise, or somewhere else?

i. **Answer:** He was in *Hades*, the resting place for the souls of the dead who are awaiting the Final Judgment, according to the apostle Peter.

1. Read **Acts 2:22-31**.

a. Here Peter quotes from **Psalm 16** (designated **Psalm 15** in the LXX, the version Peter is quoting from). This is a prophecy from David where it says, “you will not leave my soul *in Hades*....”

i. Peter explains in **Acts 2:29-32** that this prophecy applied to the Christ, the promised ruler who would be descended from David.

b. While His soul went to Hades immediately after Jesus died (and while His body remained in the tomb), according to the prophecy quoted by Peter, the soul of Jesus did not *remain* there.

i. It was resurrected along with His body, and the two were reunited (and His body transformed), when He was raised from the dead on Sunday morning.

c. Hades is the Greek word corresponding to the Hebrew word ‘Sheol’, referring to the place where the souls of the dead go immediately after death.

i. In the case of Jesus, he remained there only three days. Since He was without sin, death had no hold on Him and could not contain Him.

d. Many Christians consider part of the ‘good news’ of the gospel to be that Jesus went through suffering and death so *that we don’t have to*.

i. HOWEVER, I believe that a more accurate explanation is that Jesus went through His suffering and death to show us the way that we must follow.

ii. He provided the example that we, His disciples, are called to follow!

- iii. Just as Jesus faced temptation, suffered, died, was buried, spent time in Hades, and then was bodily resurrected, IF WE FOLLOW HIM, WE SHOULD EXPECT OUR LIVES TO FOLLOW THE SAME PATTERN.
 1. Therefore, after we die, if we follow Him, we should expect that our souls will go to Hades, or “paradise” (the better region of Hades) while we await our bodies and spirits to be reunited and raised at the resurrection.
 - iv. He showed us the way in His life, as well as in what will happen to us after our own deaths!
2. There is one other place where Peter refers to the place where Jesus went during the time between His death and resurrection.
 - a. “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and *preached to the spirits in prison*, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.” (1 Peter 3:18–20, NKJV)
 - b. Early Christians understood this reference to Christ “preaching to the spirits in prison” as referring to what He was doing during the three days He was in Hades. Here, Hades is figuratively described as a “prison” where souls are detained after death. Perhaps because they were unable to escape from there before Jesus came. While there, He “preached to the spirits in prison”, apparently addressing the spirits of those who were in Hades at that time. Since Jesus was without sin, death had no hold on Him. He alone had the power to break free from that prison, and ultimately to open a way for others to escape, as well.
 - i. For more on this topic, see an audio lesson by David Bercot, *What the Early Christians Believed About Christ’s Descent into Hades*; available through Scroll Publishing, or online at The Historic Faith website.

c. **Question:** What else do we know about Hades?

i. Read **Luke 16:19-31**.

1. Upon death, angels escort the soul of Lazarus to “Abraham’s bosom”.
 - a. Early Christians saw this place, which also could be referred to as “paradise”, as a pleasant place where the righteous would await final judgment.
 - b. Abraham’s bosom = paradise = the pleasant region of Hades. Therefore, when Jesus said to the thief he would that day be with him in paradise (not hell!), this is what He was referring to.
2. The wicked rich man is escorted to ‘Hades’, where he is in torment.
 - a. There is a chasm fixed between the two regions. Those present are conscious of one another and can communicate (not just asleep).
 - b. After death, it is too late for the rich man to repent and thereby change his outcome. He had his opportunity when he was still alive, but squandered it.
 - i. Now the only thing he can do is hope that his family members, still living, cannot repeat the same mistakes he made in life!
3. I have heard a claim by some that after we die, we will be unconscious, unaware of anything, (figuratively) ‘asleep’ until the time of Final Judgment. However, it certainly appears from this story that those in Hades are *conscious of what is going on around them*.

ii. At the end, Hades will be emptied and destroyed, as it says at the end of **Revelation**.

1. “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.” (**Revelation 20:13–14**, NKJV)

iii. There is some confusion regarding ‘Hades’ versus ‘hell’, particularly for those who are most familiar with the King James Version (KJV).

1. In the KJV, it says “hell” rather than “Hades / Sheol / the dead” in some of the key passages we have considered thus far (**Luke 16:23**, **Acts 2:27**, and **Acts 2:31**). Since that has led to a lot of confusion over the years, a further explanation is warranted.
 - a. Our English word “hell”, at the time the KJV translation was made, could refer to EITHER of two places (see Noah Webster’s 1828 American Dictionary of the English Language, which explains the practical meaning of English words KJV):
 - i. The place of eternal punishment for the wicked after death, the lake of fire (Greek: gehenna), OR
 - ii. The place for the souls after death, the lower regions or the grave (in Greek ‘Hades’, or Hebrew ‘Sheol’).
 - b. We can see this problem (two different Greek terms being translated into the same English word) on display in **Revelation 20:14** in the KJV:
 - i. “And death and *hell* were cast into the *lake of fire*. This is the second death.” (**Revelation 20:14**, KJV 1900)
 1. **Question:** How could “hell” be cast into “hell” (the lake of fire)?
 - a. That would not make any sense!
 - b. Compare this to the NKJV rendering of the same passage, below.
 - ii. “Then Death and *Hades* were cast into the *lake of fire*. This is the second death.” (**Revelation 20:14**, NKJV)
 1. **Obvious Conclusion:** *Hades* (resting place for souls of the dead awaiting Final Judgment) and *gehenna* (the lake of fire, place where the condemned will be sent to after Final Judgment, a place of eternal torment) are two entirely different places.
 - d. Jesus’ teaching regarding the resurrection of our bodies, after we die

- i. “Most assuredly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live. For as the Father has life in Himself, so He has granted the Son to have life in Himself, and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming in which *all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth*—those who have done good, to *the resurrection of life*, and those who have done evil, to *the resurrection of condemnation*.” (**John 5:25–29**, NKJV)
 1. Jesus taught that all who are in their graves (the bodies of those who have died) will come forth (as Lazarus did, and as Jesus Himself also did).
 2. We will be bodily resurrected, both the righteous and unrighteous, before we are judged.
 3. The idea that our spirits will be saved but our bodies will simply decompose forever, which is what many believe today, was not what Jesus taught!
 4. Resurrection of the body and eternal judgment are two of the six elementary teachings in **Hebrews 6**!
 - a. Practically all of **1 Corinthians chapter 15** deals with the significance of the foundational Christian belief that we will all be bodily raised (and bodies transformed) at the Day of Judgment.
- ii. When challenged by the Sadducees, who did not believe in the bodily resurrection:
 1. “Jesus answered and said to them, ‘You are mistaken, *not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God*. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but *are like angels of God in heaven*. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.’ And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching.” (**Matthew 22:29–33**, NKJV)
 - a. Jesus did NOT teach here that we will become disembodied spirits after the resurrection. He taught that after the resurrection, we will become like the angels in that *we will not be married*. (Note: in the

Scriptures, angels appeared in bodily form to Abraham, as well as to many others.)

III. Early Christian Understanding – Rooted in the Example of Jesus Himself

- a. From Irenaeus, writing c. 180 (correcting a heresy that some in his day held, that the spirits of the righteous proceed directly to heaven immediately after death):
 - i. “The heretics ... do not acknowledge the salvation of their flesh ... but claim that immediately upon their death, they will pass above the heavens.... For they do not choose to understand, that if these things are as they say, the Lord Himself, in whom they profess to believe, did not rise again upon the third day. Rather, immediately upon His expiring on the cross, He undoubtedly departed on high, leaving His body to the earth....
 - ii. “The Lord *observed the law of the dead* so that He might become the First-Begotten from the dead. And He waited until the third day ‘in the lower parts of the earth.’ ... [Accordingly,] these men [the Gnostics, who taught there was no resurrection of the body] must be put to confusion, who allege that ‘the lower parts’ refer to this world of ours, but that their inner man, leaving the body here, ascends into the super-celestial place....
 - iii. “The Lord ‘went away in the midst of the shadow of death,’ where the souls of the dead were. However, afterwards, He arose in the body. And after the resurrection, He was taken up [into heaven]. From this, it is clear that the souls of His disciples also (upon whose account the Lord underwent these things) will go away into the invisible place allotted to them by God. And they will remain there until the resurrection, awaiting that event. Then receiving their bodies, and rising in their entirety (that is, bodily), just as the Lord arose, they will come in that manner into the presence of God.
 - iv. “...‘No disciple is above the Master.’ (**Luke 6:40**) ... Our Master, therefore, did not at once depart, taking flight [to heaven]. Rather, He awaited the time of His resurrection, as determined by the Father... *Likewise, we also should await the time of our resurrection determined by God.*”
 1. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, book 5, chapter 32; original found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 560-561; as quoted in *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, p. 192)

2. The basic principle explained by Irenaeus here is that if we want to understand what happens to us when we die, we must look to what happened to Jesus.
 - a. After all, “No student is above his Master... but everyone who is perfect (= complete) shall be like his Master” (**Luke 6:40**).
 - b. Jesus did not go straight to heaven in spirit immediately after He died. His spirit went to Hades, in “the heart of the earth” for the three days, then was reunited with His transformed body when He was raised from the dead.
 - c. Therefore, we, who are His students, can hope for no more than to follow in the pattern that He, our Master, set. We will NOT proceed directly to heaven as disembodied spirits, because *even Jesus* did not do that!
- b. For additional quotes from early Christians on the topic of what happens after we die, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, entries on ‘Dead, Intermediate State of the’, and on ‘Resurrection of the Dead’.

IV. Will We Be in Heaven, or On the Earth?

- a. Many early Christians believed that prior to going to heaven, the righteous would reign on earth, after the first resurrection (of the righteous) for 1,000 years.
- b. This belief is based on **Revelation 20:1-6**, where it speaks of Satan being bound, and the righteous living and reigning with Christ for 1,000 years, “who take part in the first resurrection”.
 - i. This is a VERY DIFFERENT understanding from modern Dispensationalists or Premillennialists, who tie this in with ideas about a state of Israel being part of the fulfillment of prophecy.
- c. Certainly, there are many things in **Revelation** that express truths about the future in allegorical or figurative language. There were different opinions among early Christians regarding this, but there was no cause for division and no attempt to plot everything out in detail (unlike today in some circles).
 - i. For more on this, see *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, entries on ‘Millennium’, ‘Eschatology’, and ‘Resurrection of the Dead’.

- ii. See also The Historic Faith website (www.thehistoricfaith.com), or Scroll Publishing, teaching messages on *What Happens After We Die*, *Millennium and Rapture*, etc.
- d. Perhaps this understanding that we will be enjoying a restored earth for a time may be touched on in a few places in Scripture, for example:
 - i. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” (**Matthew 5:5**, NKJV)
 - ii. “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens *and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*” (**2 Peter 3:10–13**, NKJV)

V. Conclusion and Takeaways

- e. We can expect to follow the path set before us by Jesus afterlife, if we follow Him in this life.
 - i. At death, our bodies will rest in the earth, while our souls will be escorted to Hades.
 - ii. The righteous, like Lazarus in **Luke 16**, will await in a pleasant place, “paradise” or “Abraham’s bosom”, conscious and able to communicate with others who also are waiting there.
 - iii. At the resurrection (when Jesus returns), we will be bodily raised. The tombs will be emptied, souls and bodies reunited, and the bodies transformed.
 - iv. Judgment of all people, from all ages, will take place when Jesus returns. We will receive judgment in body and spirit. We will have our bodies, but no longer be married.
 - v. Ultimately, the righteous will be in heaven. The wicked will be cast into the lake of fire, gehenna, the fire prepared for Satan and his angels; a place of eternal torment.
 - vi. Perhaps there will be a period of time for the righteous to reign here on a restored earth. (Either way, we will find out, and it will be great.)

- vii. Let us always be preparing for death, and not be worried about it. As Peter concluded,
 - 1. “Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless....” (**2 Peter 3:14**, NKJV)