

FROM THE BEGINNING

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Greetings in Christ! Our new website is up and going. It is the same address just with improved functionality. Please visit the forum section where you can communicate with others and put any feedback you have regarding this newsletter or any other topic you desire. You can win a free DVD by posting a comment.

Also keep in your prayers our new book that will be coming out soon. It is on the topic of evangelism and will probably be called, “Church Monkey Business.” By using humorous stories about my childhood pet monkey and other events, including many examples of what we have seen doing street evangelism, you will learn of the “monkey business” going on in the churches today and find out what can be done to change that. I believe this is going to be a powerful motivator for believers to live a life worthy of their calling. God bless you all and we would love to hear from you on our forum.

Sheol: Where did people go after death in the Old Testament?

If Jesus had not yet come to earth to die and rise from the dead, where did people of the Old Testament go when they died? This is a question that many people don't ever think about because it is too far removed from our reality today. We know that when we die we will go to be with the Lord, therefore, we naturally think, everybody must have done so. This isn't really what the Bible says, however.

In the Old Testament, when people died, they all went to a place called *sheol*, which is often translated as “grave, pit or hell.” In Genesis we see that Jacob mourns for his son who is believed to be dead: “All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. ‘No’ he said, ‘in mourning will I go down to the *grave* to my son.’ So his father wept for him” (Gen 37:35). So great was Jacob's grief that he said he would mourn until the day he went to the grave. The word used for “grave” is *sheol*, which is simply the place of departed spirits and is seen 65 times in the Old Testament (see Job 3:13-19). Whether you were godly or ungodly, you went to *sheol*. We see that the prophecy of Christ tells us

Jesus went there as well, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in *hell*; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (Ps 16:10). Yet at the same time, the wicked receive punishment there: “For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the lowest *hell*” (Deut 32:22). Note, that this verse suggests different levels of *sheol* by saying “lowest” hell. (See also Num 16:30; Ps 9:17 and Matt 11:23). At the same time, the same place is considered to be a place of reward for the righteous (Hos 13:14; cf. 1 Cor 15:55).

To understand what *sheol* is we need to look at a story told by Jesus in the New Testament. “There was a certain rich man. . . And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table . . . the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell [hadē] he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. . . between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us” (Luke 16:19-26). The word “hell” (*hadē* in Greek) is the same word for *Sheol* in Hebrew. Here we see that both Lazarus and the rich man went to *hadē* or *sheol*.

We often think of *hadē* as the burning fires of hell but that isn't necessarily the case. I believe that this “parable” Jesus told us here isn't a parable at all, rather a true story. As you look at Jesus' parables, in none of them does He

ever use a personal name. He may say, “there once was a king,” or “there once was a man” but He never uses names. In this story Jesus names a real person named Lazarus. He also names Abraham, a real, living spirit. The “rich man” goes to the same place upon death that Lazarus does, however, it seems that this *hadē* is separated into two sections. People cannot pass from the lower portion to the upper portion. The lower portion, where the rich man is, is still a place of torment since he is very thirsty. The rich man can see the upper portion of *hadē/sheol* but there is no indication that Lazarus, who is in peace, can see into the lower portion. Lazarus went to the bosom of Abraham which is very significant. Why didn't he go to the bosom of God or Christ? Because Jesus had not come yet, thus, paradise isn't ready at this time. This may be the Bible's best indication as to what *sheol* was. Vines Biblical Dictionary even says, “Jesus' teaching in Luke 16:19-31 seems to reflect accurately the Old Testament concept of *she'ol* . . . one side of which is occupied by the suffering, unrighteous dead separated by a great chasm from the other side peopled by the righteous dead enjoying their reward” (from Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words, Copyright (c)1985, Thomas Nelson Publishers).

Understanding this concept, we may have insight into another glorious truth revealed in the Biblical Festivals discussed in earlier newsletters and on one of our DVD's in the CIA seminar series. In Ephesians we read, “When He ascended

on high, He **led captives in His train** and gave gifts to men” or in the KJV “When He ascended up on high, He led **captivity captive**, and gave gifts unto men” (Eph 4:8). What do these verses mean? Who or what was being held captive? Where did Christ lead them? What were these “gifts” given to men? I think in *sheol* lies the answer.

When Jesus died he descended into *sheol*: “By which also He went and preached unto the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19). The word for preached here means to “proclaim.” It seems that Christ proclaimed His victory to those in *sheol* before ascending. When He did ascend, however, he led captives in His train or captivity was led captive. Could these be the people who were captives in the upper, good portion of *sheol* who were now being led to paradise to be with Jesus? Is that why Ephesians says that He “gave gifts unto men?” The Scriptures may indicate so. We see that the thief on the cross was told that that very day he would be with God in paradise. The thief didn’t go to *sheol* as O.T. people did. Interestingly, we also see that when Jesus rose from the dead, so did others who had died previously. We read, “And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the saints which slept arose, And **came out of the graves after His resurrection**, and went into the holy city, and appeared unto many” (Matt 27:52-53). Is it possible that when Christ went down to *sheol*, He led the people in the upper portion free and led them in His train to paradise when He resurrected?

The Biblical Festivals may suggest this to be true. In earlier newsletters we spoke of how Christ fulfilled the Passover in every detail. Likewise, the second Festival commanded in the Bible was the Feast of Firstfruits, three days after Passover. It was this very day that Jesus rose from the dead. It was also on this day that the priests were to be taking the first fruit offering of the harvest and wave it before the Lord. God was to have the firstfruits. When Jesus rose from the dead, He offered to the Father, the firstfruits of men who had previously been in *sheol*. We read in Revelation about the saints of God, “These were redeemed from among men, being the firstfruits unto God and to the Lamb” (Rev 14:4). We also see that Christ offered Himself as the firstfruit offering as well: “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. . . Christ the firstfruits” (1 Cor 15:20-23). It makes sense that since Christ lives in us, we, too, are firstfruits. Praise be to God!

That Jesus was fulfilling the firstfruit festival is also clear when we know that the priests were to go into seclusion for three days after the Passover and not to be seen or touched by anyone until the firstfruit offering was made. When Mary ran out to the empty tomb, Jesus had already risen, but had not yet ascended and led captives to their gifts in His firstfruit offering. When Mary goes to touch Him, He says, “Touch Me not; for I am not yet ascended to My Father” (John 20:17). Yet after His ascension He tells Thomas to touch Him in Luke 24:39.

It may be good to add a little side-note to this topic as well. Jehovah’s Witnesses and 7th Day Adventists both teach that when we die today, we simply sleep until the resurrection at Christ’s return. They say that the thief on the cross was told, “Verily I say unto thee Today, shalt thou be with me in paradise” rather than, “Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise” (Note the change in commas). First of all, this would be redundant to say, “Verily I say today.” Secondly, it goes against the Scriptures that say, “We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and **to be present with the Lord**” (2 Cor 5:8). “I desire to depart and be **with Christ**” (Phil 1:23). “Whoever lives and believes in me will **never die**” (John

11:26). (See also, 1 John 5:11-13, 2 Tim 1:10 where life (*zoen*) and immortality (*aphtharsian*) are distinguished. Life is given upon belief (1 John 5:11-12) and immortality when new bodies are given to the spirit in Revelation). Thirdly, it would also go against the Festival of Firstfruits and the resurrected saints appearing to those in Jerusalem.

Clearly, as believers in Christ, we can be confident that upon death, we will not go to *sheol* in sleep, but we will be conscious of life and redemption in and with Jesus. We won’t be in the bosom of Abraham, but in the bosom of our Creator, Savior and Friend, Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel who has come in the flesh. Thank you Jesus!