

# What Happens When We Die?

*by Bryan Gibson*

The body—we know what happens to it when we die, but what about the soul or spirit? When spirit separates from body (James 2:26), where exactly does it go?

Ecclesiastes 12:7 provides at least a partial answer: “Then the dust (the body) will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” A good start, but more passages provide more detail.

One such detail is found in the death of Jesus, and in particular, the destination of His soul. According to Acts 2:27, 31, His soul went to Hades, if only temporarily. The KJV uses the word hell, but the Greek word is Hades, which is how just about every other translation renders it. In fact, unlike the KJV, other translations distinguish between Hades and hell. For additional study, note that Hades occurs 11 times in the N.T. (Matthew 11:23; 16:18; Luke 10:15, 16:23; Acts 2:27, 31; 1 Corinthians 15:55; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14). Note, too, in your additional study how in four of those passages (1 Corinthians 15:55; Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14), death and Hades are very closely linked together.

Still other passages provide detail about Hades. Shortly before He was crucified, Jesus promised one of the thieves he would be in the same place with Him—“today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). So the soul of Jesus (and the thief) would go to Hades, to some place called Paradise. Now, let’s contrast that with the description of a rich man in Luke 16:23, a rich man who had died: “And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.” That’s interesting—both Jesus and the rich man went to Hades, but one was in Paradise, the other in torments. Read the full story (Luke 16:19-31), and you can see that Lazarus, too, went to Paradise, or as it’s called here, “Abraham’s bosom” (Luke 16:22).

What becomes obvious then is that Hades has two divisions: a “place of torment” (Luke 16:28), where the rich man suffered; and a place of comfort (Luke 16:25), a place known as Paradise or Abraham’s bosom. What all this means is that when we die, our soul goes to Hades, to either Paradise or a place of torment (2 Peter 2:4 likely describes this same place of torment). And what terrible torment it is, because according to this account in Luke 16, one is fully conscious of his torment (Luke 16:24); he’s powerless to do anything about it (Luke 16:26); and he is further tormented by the fact that others close to him may join him in the same place (Luke 16:27-31).

Hades, however, is not eternal—our eternal fate is fixed, but we are not yet in our eternal home, regardless of which “division” we may be in. Read carefully: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is *the Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. 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. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:12-15).

Hades may not be everlasting, but this “lake of fire” certainly is. Jesus made that clear: “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41), a fire He elsewhere described as “the fire that shall never be quenched” (Mark 9:43, 45). This everlasting place of destruction (2 Thessalonians 1:9) is called hell, from the Greek word, gehenna, and it’s found 12 times in the New Testament (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6).

Contrary then to popular belief, the Biblical evidence points to the fact that we do not immediately go to either heaven or hell when we die. The soul goes to Hades, where we await what Jesus describes as the “last day” (John 6:39-40, 44, 54; 11:24), the day when Jesus returns, the day when He raises “all who are in the graves” (John 5:28), the day when He will render His final judgment. The righteous will spend eternity with the Lord in heaven (John 14:1-3; Matthew 25:46); the rest will live forever in hell with the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41; Revelation 21:8).