

One Second After Death

by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

We human beings find it very easy to live life as if we will be here forever. We occasionally come face to face with death when a friend or loved one passes away. But the essence of daily living is such that it is easy to ignore the reality of death and the certainty of existence beyond the grave. It is essential that we go to the Bible and find out what will happen to each one of us—one second after death.

The Bible teaches that human beings are composite creatures. We possess a fleshly body that is composed of physical elements made from “the dust of the ground” (Genesis 2:7). This physical body is animated by a life force or life principle that we share in common with the animal kingdom (although, in the Genesis creation account, a distinction seems to be made between animals and man in the direct source of this life principle (Genesis 1:20-21,24; 2:7). In any case, the Scriptures also teach that human beings are unlike the animals in that humans also possess a **spiritual** dimension that transcends the body and physical life on Earth.

God places within each prenatal person at conception a spirit that makes each individual a unique personality. Zechariah 12:1 observed that God “forms the spirit of man within him.” Our spirits are what makes each one of us a distinct entity, a person that will survive physical death and live on immortally throughout eternity.

A number of Hebrew and Greek words are used in the Bible to identify various facets of our beings (e.g., *nephesh*, *ruach*, *neshamah*, *leb*, and *basar* in the Old Testament and *psuche*, *pneuma*, *nous*, *soma*, and *sarx* in the New Testament). These words are somewhat fluid, and are used in a variety of ways—sometimes interchangeably, sometimes in contradistinction to each other. They are translated by many different English words (e.g., “soul,” “spirit,” “breath,” “wind,” “heart,” “mind,” “self,” “body,” “flesh,” et al.). It is a mistake to seize upon a passage where “soul” refers to the **entirety** of a person’s being and conclude that man does not possess a spirit that is distinct from his animated body. Some religious thinkers tend to limit the Hebrew word *ruach* (soul or spirit) to an impersonal vital power that becomes individualized only in the *nephesh* (whole person). Thus, it is claimed that the soul or spirit cannot exist independently of the body, so that when the “life force” exits the body, the person ceases to exist.

But, by avoiding human philosophies and focusing solely upon the Bible, we learn that each person possesses a conscious spirit that ultimately leaves the body and exists separately from it in the spirit realm. For example, Genesis 35:18 states: “[I]t came to pass, as her soul was in departing, (for she died).” The author of the book of 1 Kings wrote that Elijah prayed, “let this child’s soul come into him again...and the soul of the child came into him again, and he revived” (17:21-22). Psalm 86:13 says, “You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.”

The Bible defines “death” as “**separation**”—not “extinction.” Physical death occurs when the spirit exits the body. James 2:26 notes: “[F]or as the body without the spirit is dead.” In other words, the separation of one’s spirit from one’s body results in **physical** death. **Spiritual** death, on the other hand, entails separation from God due to sin. So “death” involves the idea of separation—not extinction or unconsciousness.

A clear depiction of existence beyond death is seen in Luke 16:19-31. Some argue that this section of Scripture is a parable, which is incorrect since the story does not contain the usual indicators of parabolic discourse. However, even if the passage were a parable, a parable is not a **fairy tale**. Bible parables parallel true-life situations to teach a basic lesson of truth. They draw from reality and that which people understand as **actual earthly existence** and genuine conditions in order to drive home a spiritual point. After reading Luke 16:19-31, observe the following textual details:

1. Both men are said to have **died**.
2. Wherever Lazarus went, angels were used to transport him there.
3. The rich man was buried.
4. The rich man was in hades.
5. The rich man was being tormented in flames.
6. The rich man could see and recognize Lazarus and Abraham.
7. Abraham referred to the rich man’s former existence as “your lifetime.”
8. Abraham made clear that their respective locations were irreversible.

9. The rich man's brothers were still occupying his father's house on Earth.
10. The Law of Moses was still in effect.
11. The rich man's plea to send Lazarus to his living relatives would require Lazarus to return "from the dead" (vs. 30) and to "rise from the dead" (vs. 31).

The term translated "hell" in Luke 16:23 is the Greek word *hades*, and is not to be confused with the word *gehenna*. "*Gehenna*" is found twelve times in the New Testament, and refers to the place of eternal, everlasting punishment—the "lake of fire" where Satan, his angels, and all wicked people will be consigned after the Second Coming of Jesus and the Judgment. So *gehenna* is **hell**. "Hades," on the other hand, occurs ten times in the New Testament, and always refers to the unseen realm of the dead—the receptacle of disembodied spirits where all people who die await the Lord's return. At that time, our spirits will be reunited with our resurrection bodies (1 Corinthians 15:35-54).

Luke 16 shows us that *hades* contains two regions. One is referred to as the "bosom of Abraham" (which simply means "near" or "in the presence of" Abraham—cf. John 1:18). The other region in *hades* is described as tormenting flame. Every other passage in the New Testament that refers to *hades* harmonizes with this description of the intermediate realm of the dead where the deceased await the resurrection and judgment.

For example, while fastened to the cross, Jesus told the thief, "Today, you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The word **paradise** is of Persian derivation, and means a "garden" or "park." Where was it that Jesus and the thief went on that very day? Certainly not to extinction! Extinction would not be "paradise"! They did not go to the grave together. The thief was not placed in the tomb with Jesus, and the tomb certainly would not be a "paradise." Nor did Jesus go to heaven, for in John 20:17 after His resurrection, Jesus reassured Mary that **He had not yet ascended to the Father**. So where is "paradise"? Where did Jesus and the thief go after dying on the cross? Where had Jesus been for those three days between His death and resurrection?

Peter gave the answer to that question in his sermon in Acts 2 when he quoted Psalm 16. Acts 2:27 states that God would not abandon Christ's soul in *hades* nor allow Christ to undergo decay. So while Christ's body was placed in a tomb for three days, Christ's spirit went to *hades*. Peter argued that David, who penned the 16th Psalm, was not referring to himself. How do we know? David's body was still in the tomb (Acts 2:29). David's spirit was still in the *hadean* realm because Peter also said that David had not yet ascended into heaven (Acts 2:34). Acts 2, by itself, proves that a person does not go straight to heaven or hell when he dies, and that a person does not become extinct, cease to exist, or pass into a state of unconsciousness at death.

Jesus previously predicted that His death and entrance into the *Hadean* realm would not prevent Him from accomplishing His divine purposes. Matthew 16:18 reads: "Upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of *hades* shall not prevail against it." In other words, though He would die on the cross, though His body would be placed in the tomb, and though His spirit would descend into *hades*, nevertheless, the gates of *hades* would not prevent Him from coming back out of *hades* (i.e., resurrection) and then setting up the kingdom a few days later in Acts 2. At that time, Peter and the apostles employed the "keys of the kingdom" (Matthew 16:19) with the help of the Holy Spirit sent by Jesus (Acts 2:33).

It was through Jesus' death and subsequent departure from *hades* that Jesus rendered powerless "him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:26,54-57). Jesus' personal victory over death and the *Hadean* realm explains why He could declare in Revelation 1:18—I am He who lives; and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen. And I have the keys of *hades* and of death."

While Jesus, the thief, and Lazarus went to the *paradise* portion of *hades*, the rich man went to the unpleasant area which included torment and flame. This is the same region of *hades*, referred to in 2 Peter 2:4, where angels who sinned were committed by God. The term that Peter used was *tartaros*, or Tartarus, and is described as "pits of darkness" where they are "reserved for judgment." The parallel in Jude 6 speaks of these angels as having abandoned their proper place and having failed to keep their own domain. They are depicted as existing in "everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day." This region of the *Hadean* realm must also be in view in Moses' allusion to the anger of God which kindles fire that "shall burn to the lowest part of Sheol" (Deuteronomy 32:22)—*sheol* being a general Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *hades*.

Notice what will happen to this intermediate receptacle of spirits. In Revelation 20, beginning in verse 11, we are presented with a portrait of the final judgment before the great white throne of God. Everyone who has ever lived will be there. Verse 13 says that "death and *hades*" will be cast into the lake of fire. That means that ***hades*** will be cast into **hell**. The unseen realm of the dead, where conscious spirits reside until judgment, will have served its purpose, and all people who have ever lived will then be consigned to one of two places: heaven or hell.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). “[I]t is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27). “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 5:28-29). Paul referred to the occasion “when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

Look carefully at the word “everlasting.” Does the human spirit exist beyond physical death and the grave in a conscious state? Or, at death, does the soul cease to exist in a state of “soul sleep”? Does a person’s consciousness become **extinct**? Is the soul **annihilated** at death? The Sadducees denied the existence of the spirit realm. According to Acts 23:8, they denied the immortality of the soul, believing in “neither angel nor spirit.” Josephus stated that the Sadducees believed that “souls die with the bodies” (18:1:4). There are religious groups today who teach the same thing.

In Luke 20, Jesus showed the fallacy of such thinking by showing that when Moses was at the burning bush in Exodus 3, God declared Himself to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. At the time God made that statement, the bodies of those three patriarchs had been in the grave for hundreds of years. Yet Jesus concluded: “For He is not the God of the dead but of the living” (Luke 20:38). That proves that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—though separated from their physical bodies—were still in existence. They were not extinct. They would one day be reunited with their bodies in the resurrection.

Many other passages indicate the perpetuation of conscious spiritual life beyond physical death. Revelation 6:9-11 speaks of the souls of those who had been martyred for the Christian cause. They are depicted as spirits—not bodies—who are conscious, who are aware of the means by which they were killed, and who knew that their blood had not yet been avenged.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul described an experience that he, or someone he knew, had in the “third heaven.” The “third heaven” in scriptural thought is the spirit realm where God and other celestial beings reside (Deuteronomy 10:14; 26:15; 1 Kings 8:27,30). It often is referred to as the “heaven of heavens”—a Semitism wherein the genitive is used for the superlative degree—meaning the highest or ultimate heaven (cf. “Song of songs,” “King of kings,” “Lord of lords”). The “first heaven” is the Earth’s atmosphere—the “sky”—where the birds fly (Genesis 1:20; 8:2; Isaiah 55:10; Luke 13:19). The “second heaven” is “outer space”—where the Sun, Moon, and stars are situated (Genesis 15:5; 22:17; Deuteronomy 4:19; Nahum 3:16). Twice Paul stated that he was not certain whether the person described was “in the body, or out of the body” (vss. 2-3). That proves that Paul acknowledged the possibility of the spirit of a human being existing in a conscious state apart from the body. To say that the spirit ceases to exist at death makes Paul imply what is not true.

Both accounts, of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16, and the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43, prove that conscious existence continues after the death of the body. Hebrews 12:23 speaks of “the spirits of just men made perfect”—a reference to deceased saints who remained faithful to God during their life on Earth, but who had since passed into the spirit realm. That passage makes no sense if “spirits” refers to the wind or breath of a person. These people were like Stephen in Acts 7:59 who, as life was being stoned from his body, said to the Lord whom he could see in the heavens: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” If “spirit” is simply the life force of the body that goes extinct the moment it no longer animates the body, then Stephen was speaking out of ignorance to think that he had a spirit that could be received by Jesus.

The Bible frequently speaks of the ultimate state of both the good and the wicked as being “eternal.” For example, read Hebrews 6:2 which speaks of “eternal judgment,” or 2 Thessalonians 1:9 which speaks of “eternal destruction,” or Revelation 20:10 where Satan will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, and tormented there “day and night forever and ever.” Jude 7 speaks of those who will suffer “the vengeance (punishment) of eternal fire.”

Matthew 18:8-9 identifies the fire of hell (*gehenna*) as “everlasting fire.” The parallel passage in Mark 9:43 states that this fire “shall never be quenched.” Mark 9:48 states that hell is a place “where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” The image is taken from Isaiah 66:24, and is unquestionably intended to make the point that the fire of hell will be unquenchable—always burning, yet never consuming.

In His description of the final Judgment in Matthew 25:46, Jesus used the same word *aionion* (eternal) to refer to the respective conditions of both the good and evil people who inhabited the Earth. If eternal punishment is not “eternal,” then life eternal is not “eternal” either. The word “punishment” clearly implies pain that is inflicted. Listen to Peter, who said, “The Lord knows how to deliver the

godly out of temptation, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment for the day of judgment” (2 Peter 2:9). The same word is used to refer to the punishment that the apostles narrowly avoided in Acts 4:21.

Some say the word “destroy” (or “destruction”) means “annihilation” (or “extinction”). They go to a passage like Matthew 10:28 where Jesus said, “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” They insist that “destroy” in this passage means “annihilation.” But that cannot be. For if physical death inflicted by one’s fellowman brings extinction and unconsciousness of the soul, what is there to fear from God? Why would Jesus say there is no need to fear other people—who can take your physical life? For in taking your physical life, they also would cause your soul to be annihilated, in which case they have as much power as God, and the comparison that Jesus makes is no comparison at all. If the soul dies with the body, then he who kills the body kills the soul, too.

The parallel passage in Luke 12:4-5 makes this point even clearer. Luke wrote: “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He hath killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!” If physical death brings annihilation of the soul, then it is ridiculous to speak of casting the soul into hell **after** killing the body.

In addition, the Greek term that underlies our English word “destroy” does not mean “annihilation.” W.E. Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, explained: “The idea is not extinction but ruin, loss, not of being, but of well-being” (1966, p. 302). He cited Matthew 10:28 as an example, as well as John 17:12 where Judas, who had not yet hung himself, was called the “son of perdition.” Obviously, Judas was not extinct or annihilated. But he was destroyed in the sense that he lost **spiritual well-being**. He had perished spiritually.

Lexicographer Joseph H. Thayer agreed with this assessment when he said that “destroy” in Matthew 10:28 means “to devote or give over to eternal misery” (1901, p. 64). Albrecht Oepke commented on the meaning of destroy: “definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades” (Kittel, 1:396).

What must be concluded from these passages of Scripture? God gives people this life on Earth to prepare their spirits for their eternal abode. When a person dies, his or her body goes into the grave, while the conscious spirit enters the Hadean realm to await the final Judgment. At the Second Coming of Christ, all spirits will come forth from hades and be resurrected in immortal bodies. All will then face God in judgment, receive the pronouncement of eternal sentence, and then be consigned to heaven or hell for eternity. Listen closely to the inspired words of the apostle Peter:

Therefore, since all these things shall 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? ...You therefore, beloved, since you know these things beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being lead away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen” (2 Peter 3:11-12,17-18).

[NOTE: For an audio sermon on this topic, [click here](#).]

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