

In the Bible, the words “heaven” and “hell” have several different uses. This can be very confusing, because our English words do not make the difference clear. We have to rely on the context and the original Greek and Hebrew words to distinguish. But by careful study, we can see that the differences are very significant.

Heaven the Firmament

In Gen. 1:6-10, we see God constructing a firmament, which he calls Heaven in v.8. This Heaven is the Sky. We read that its role is to separate the waters above from the waters below. And in v.10, the waters below are called the Seas. A few verses later, in Gen. 1:14-18, God describes the lights he puts in the firmament. He says that they are for “signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years.” These are the stars. He also goes on to talk about the great light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night. These lights are the Sun and the Moon. So we can clearly see that in the first chapter of Genesis, the word “Heaven” is used to describe the sky or space.

The Heavenly Realms

This is where God dwelt before he began making the Kingdom of Heaven. In Rev. 12:7-9, a war is waged in heaven, and Satan was cast down to earth. This heaven is where God dwelt before he began making the Kingdom of Heaven. We know that it existed first, because Satan was on earth back in the time of Adam and Eve, in the guise of the serpent. And the war was waged before he was cast down. So this is clearly a different place from the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Hadean Realm: Paradise and Torment

If a person dies before the Judgment Day, where does their soul go? Only after the Judgment will God send souls into the Kingdom of Heaven or the lake of fire. So where are the souls of the dead in the meantime? Let’s look at a few verses to find out. We’ll begin in Luke 16: 19-31. In these verses, Jesus tells us the story of a certain rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. As we read, we see that both men die and their souls end up in different places. We’ll start with the rich man. In v.23 it says “And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments...” Here the word “hell” is simply referring to the afterlife. The Greek word is “Hades.” This is important to note, because over in Acts 2:31 we are told that Jesus’ soul was “not left in hell.” Here again the word “hell” translates from the Greek word “Hades.” Obviously, our Lord and Savior did not go to a lake of fire and darkness when he died, but simply to the afterlife. So now that we know that we understand Hades, let’s go back to the rich man. In v.23 the rich man “lifted up his eyes, being in torments.” In the NIV version it reads “where he was in torment.” He was tormented by flame, to the point where he begs just for a drop of water to cool his tongue (v.24). Lazarus, on the other hand, is in Abraham’s bosom (v.22). This story doesn’t tell too much about where Lazarus is except that he is comforted, whereas the rich man is tormented (v.25). But in Luke 23:43, Jesus tells the other man on the cross that on that day they would be in paradise together. And remember Acts 2:31? These two verses tell us that Jesus went to paradise in the afterlife. So now we have to places described in the afterlife, the Hadean Realm: Torment and Paradise. We are also told that there exists a great gulf in between them, so that souls cannot pass from one to the other (v.26). This means that they are not a sort of Limbo or Purgatory. Once a person dies and their soul arrives at Torment or Paradise, it stays there till Judgment Day.

Heaven and Hell: The Final Resting Place

In Revelation chapter 21, John describes a heaven he saw in his vision. This heaven is the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven is where the righteous shall dwell for all eternity after Judgment Day. It is also known as New Jerusalem. This is the place most people think of when they hear the word “heaven.” But no souls are there yet. In John 14: 2-3, Jesus says that he goes to prepare a place for us, and when He comes again, he will receive us to him that we may be where He is. Because He not yet returned, He cannot have received us to where he is. He is still preparing for us a place.

When people hear the word “hell” they usually think of the fiery place where the wicked will be sent on Judgment Day. Jesus describes this place as a place of darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth in Matt. 25:30. This Hell is also called the second death, or described as a lake of fire. Indeed, in Rev. 20: 13-15, we see that after Death and Hades deliver up their dead, they are cast into the lake of fire. This shows that Hades is not Hell. After the dead are taken from the Hadean Realm and judged, there is no more need for Hades, and it is cast into Hell.

Again, this can be a very confusing topic, when one word can refer to three or four different places. However, by careful study of the Bible, we have clearer understanding of where we go when we die. Do you know which place you are going?