

Definitions of Terms Related to the Afterlife

1. Sheol: This is the Old Testament (Hebrew) word for the realm of the dead. The O. T. teaches that after death all people went to Sheol, a place of conscious existence. (Ps 16:10, Mt 11:23, Acts 2:27) The wicked were there (Psalm 9:17; 31:17; 49:14; Isaiah 5:14) and so were the righteous (Genesis 37:35; Job 14:13; Psalm 6:5; 16:10; 88:3; Isaiah 38:10).

PLEASE NOTE: many of the passages—Job, Psalms, e.g.— are poetic and use symbolic language rather than an exact description.

- a. Below the earth's surface: Ez 31:15, 17; Ps 86:13
- b. Place of dust: Job 17:16
- c. Place of darkness: Job 10:21
- d. Place of silence: Ps 94:17
- e. Place of forgetfulness: Ps 88:12
- f. Other pictures in Is 14:9; Ez 32:27
- g. Sometimes it is punitive: Ps 49:13-14
- h. God is present there: Ps 139:8
- i. God can deliver dead from there: Ps 16:10

2. Hades: NT Greek word used as the equivalent of Sheol

- a. Used referring to death of Jesus in Acts 2:27, 31 (quotes Ps 16:10)
- b. Gates of Hades will not prevail against Church in Mt 16:18
- c. Christ holds keys of death and Hades: Rev. 1:18
- d. Power of death and Hades is broken: Rev. 6:8
- e. Hades and death sent to Lake of Fire: Rev. 20:13-24

3. Gehenna: The literal meaning is “valley of the sons of Hinnom” The valley is near Jerusalem (Josh. 15:8; 18:16). Children were sacrificed in the fire there by pagans: 2 Ki 23:10; 2 Chr 28:3; 33:6, Jer. 7:31; 32:35. This comes the closest to what we normally think of in regard to the word “hell.” It is not the same as more general terms Hades or Sheol, but specifically for a place of punishment that is within the realm of Hades or Sheol.

- a. Came to mean a place of punishment by fire (Dt 32:22, Dn 7:10)
- b. The fire of hell/gehenna is unquenchable Mk 9:43
- c. It is eternal: Mt 18:8
- d. It is opposite of eternal life: Mt 25:46
- e. It is the source of evil: Jas 3:6 (Like the pit in Rev. 9:1ff, 11:7)
- f. Also described as darkness (Mt 25:30, 2 Pet 2:17)
- g. And death (Rev. 2:11)
- h. And destruction/exclusion from presence of the Lord (2 Thess 1:9, Mt 7:21-23)
- i. And likened to a debt to pay (Mt 5:25-26)

4. Tartarus: This is classical Greek word for a place of eternal punishment, but in 2nd Pet 2:4 “cast into hell” it refers to an intermediate place of punishment for fallen angels (demons) before the final judgement. The New Testament also uses equivalent words: “abyss,” “pit,” “Abaddon.”

5. Hell means “conceal.” It usually is used to refer to a place of punishment for the dead. But we must be careful. Different Bible translations will use “hell” as the word for Sheol, Tartarus, Hades, or even Gehenna. This adds to the confusion of our common use of the word “hell.” In the Apostle’s Creed, for example, some versions say Jesus “descended into hell.” The actual word is Hades, the realm of the dead, and not Gehenna or Tartarus, a place of punishment.

6. Paradise is a word borrowed from ancient Persia/Iran that meant a walled garden. means “pleasure ground; park.” It is not used in O.T. as a word referring to the afterlife, but Jews came to believe that the coming of the Messiah would bring them to a Paradise like the one in Garden of Eden. They believed it was still in existence (see Genesis, angels guarding the way), but hidden from view. It was where they believed the righteous who died went.

- a. Also called “with Abraham” or “in the bosom of Abraham” (Lk 16:22)
- b. Dwelling of the righteous (Luke 23:43, Rev. 2:7)
- c. In Luke 23:43 The word Jesus used for paradise is paradeisos, a Greek word taken from the Hebrew word pardes which means “a park: - forest, orchard.”
- d. Jesus said "Today you shall be with me "en paradeisos" not "en nephele" which is Greek for “in the clouds.” The popular conception of heaven being a place where angels sit on clouds and play harps comes more from a classical Greek conception, not from the Bible at all.
- e. Third heaven, i.e., dwelling of God (2nd Cor 12:2-4)
- f. Used as a synonym for Heaven (2nd Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7).

7. Heaven: In the O.T. and the gospels, this is NOT the abode of the dead, but the abode of God (Dt 26:15, Jon 1:9, Ezr 1:2, Mt 5:45) and God’s angels (Neh 9:6 Mk 13:32). The New Testament also describes heaven as the place where God lives and rules.

- a. The angels who announced the birth of Jesus praise God in heaven (Luke 2:14).
- b. When Jesus was baptized, God’s voice came from heaven and called Jesus “my own dear Son” (Luke 3:22).
- c. Jesus described God as a Father in heaven (Matt 6:1,9; 18:4; John 6:32).
- d. Jesus himself came from heaven (John 6:38-42) and returned there after death (Luke 24:50,51).
- e. Jesus will come back from heaven in the future (Matt 24:30,31; 1 Thes 4:16).
- f. Our inheritance is kept there: 1st Pet 1:4
- g. Also used as a way of saying “God.” Lk 15:18,21; Jn 3:27. In Matthew “Kingdom of Heaven” is equivalent to “Kingdom of God.”
- h. There will be a new heaven and earth where God, Christ, and people will dwell together: Is 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet 3:10-13; Rev 21:1