

THIRD STUDY

What Happens When We Die?

By Bob Young

What happens when we die? Where do we go when we die?

What happens at Jesus' coming? What happens in the resurrection?

This is a study about what happens to our spirits when we die. I will use the word "spirit" (not soul) to refer to our spiritual existence after death (see the first study in this series). I will not use the word "soul" as synonymous with "spirit."

This study is about human beings (souls) who have lived on the earth, have died, and now exist as spirits in a spiritual (non-physical) realm. This study is not about spirits (spirit beings) who have never lived on earth.

The first part of this study reviews previous studies to provide a foundation. The previous essays in the series are briefly summarized below. (For more information, see the previous essays on hades, death and resurrection, and the word studies of body-soul-spirit.)

Review of the First Study

The rich man died; after his death he was in "hades" experiencing torment.

Lazarus died; after his death he is described as being in the bosom of Abraham, "hades" is not mentioned in the description of Lazarus's post-death experience.

Jesus told a thief on a cross that he would be with Jesus in paradise that day, implying that Jesus after his death was also in paradise. What does paradise mean in this passage? What would have been understood in the first century Jewish context?

According to Acts 2, after his death, Jesus was in hades, but did not experience the corruption of his body.

Paul says that after death, Christians go to be with Jesus (Phil. 1:23).

At his coming, Jesus will bring with him the Christians who have died (1 Thess. 4:14).

Note: Anyone who dies in Christ will be united with Christ (Phil. 1:23; 2 Cor. 5:8), clothed with a heavenly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:2-6). Those who die are described as participating in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:23), being under the heavenly altar (Rev. 6:9), and being before God's throne (Rev. 7:9; 14:3). These statements that departed Christians are in God's presence and before the throne of heaven are supported by 1 Thess. 4, "Jesus will lead/bring with him his saints...."

Review of the Second Lesson

Human beings on this earth exist with a dual nature – a combination of physical life and spiritual life, and are housed in a physical body. That body is physical and temporal (2 Cor. 4:16-18); the spirit is spiritual and eternal. At death, the body and the spirit separate (James 2). The body returns to dust, the spirit returns to God (Eccl. 12). The physical body is "sown" (1 Cor. 15; John 12). That body will decay and decompose. (A more detailed study of the text of 1 Cor. 15 appears below.)

What happens to the spirit at death? Where does it go?

→ Jesus said a thief would be with Him in paradise "today," the very same day. This promise speaks of something beyond death – paradise, bliss. This statement teaches that Jesus would also be in paradise. A question that must be answered is this: What do these words mean in the context of first-century Judaism?

→ Luke describes the rich man as in hades (the word signifies an unseen realm). This may mean only that he was in the grave (hades is parallel to and a translation of *sheol* in the OT). Hades is not mentioned in the description of Lazarus (perhaps suggesting that he was not buried?).

- Luke 16 says that the rich man after he died was in hades (unseen place, grave) and was in torment.
- Luke 16 says there is something after death. In the case of the rich man, he experienced torment.
- Lazarus died and enjoyed blessings; again, the Bible says that there is something after death.
- That which occurs after death can be either bad or good.

- Luke says that Lazarus died and was in Abraham's bosom. This teaching of Jesus is set in a Jewish context, before the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus spoke to the Jews in terms they would understand. The historical context of Luke 16, the lifetime of Jesus, properly belongs under the Old Testament chronologically, before the New Testament teaching that reveals that the dead go to be with Jesus. New Testament teaching about death and resurrection was set forth after Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension.

→ Jesus also went to hades (grave, s^ol, the Acts 2 passage cites Psalm 16). In this passage, hades may be only a reference to the grave (note the comment about the body of Jesus not experiencing corruption or decay).

→ The Bible says that after our death we will be united with Christ, unclothed with regard to our physical tent and clothed with our heavenly dwelling, 2 Cor. 5:1-8.

→ Revelation describes Christians who have died as being in God's presence before God's throne.

→ The spirit returns to God (to God's presence? Or to God's care?).

What should we conclude?

- There is something beyond death, there is a time of reckoning with God.
- In the case of the righteous, the after-death experience is described in Acts 2 as hades, in Luke 23 as paradise, in Luke 16 as at Abraham's side, in other New Testament passages as being with Jesus, or as being before God's throne.
- In the case of the unrighteous, the after-death experience is described as hades (Luke 16), in torment.
- Some have tried to apply other words or names to hades, but to do so adds to the Bible. There is no indication that "hades" is a reference to Gehenna, Tartarus, or hell. The best translation of the word is to retain the original form, hades.

What will happen at Jesus' coming? What will happen at the resurrection?

- Jesus will bring with him the saints who are with him now, 1 Thess. 4:14.
- The bodies in the graves will come forth (of all the dead, not just the righteous dead), but see 1 Thess. 4 in which Paul's subject is limited to Christians who have died before the return of Jesus.
- There will be a single day of resurrection, John 5 – of all that are in the grave, either to life or to judgment
- Physical bodies that have been "planted" after physical death will be resurrected as spiritual bodies

Study of 1 Corinthians 15

The study of 1 Corinthians 15 is essential to our understanding. The message of 1 Corinthians is not difficult but it has been variously understood and often misunderstood. This study centers on the text of 1 Cor. 15:35-58. Please have your Bible open so you can understand and verify what is presented here.

The last verses of the chapter (vv. 36-58) are organized around two questions (v. 35). The questions are answered in reverse order. The second question, with what body do the dead come forth, is answered first. Paul explains that the dead, those whose physical body is "sown," receive a different body, a spiritual body. Although this explanation suggests a continuity between the physical body and the spiritual body, that one person is described may be sufficient continuity.

The first question, concerning how the dead are raised, Paul answers in vv. 50-55. (Verses 56-58 provide a victorious closing to the chapter.) Concerning those who have died, a spiritual body is raised; the physical body cannot inherit the kingdom. For those who remain alive until Jesus' coming, a change occurs. The dead (who lived in perishable bodies) will be raised imperishable, and those who remain alive until Jesus' coming will be changed, so the perishable will become imperishable and the mortal will become immortal.

Two questions: v. 35, answered in reverse order

- How are the dead raised? Answered in vv. 50-57
- With what kind of body do they come? Answered in vv. 36-49

With what kind of body do they come? (vv. 36-49)

- The body that was sown a natural physical body (capable of living in this physical realm) will come forth in resurrection, raised a spiritual body (capable of living in the spiritual realm).
- Paul's illustrations and teaching are straightforward and relatively easy to understand.
- The physical body that at death is "planted or sown" in the grave will come forth in a totally different body.

How are the dead raised? (vv. 50-57)

- The resurrection is not the restoration of a flesh and blood body; resurrection is not to a perishable body. The resurrection is not the coming forth of a physical body which is then changed. The text says that an imperishable body comes forth, raised incorruptible.
- The dead will be raised imperishable, incorruptible, not with the previous corruptible body, but with a spiritual body they have already received.
- This idea is communicated in the text with two phrases or contrasts: "perishable vs. imperishable," and "mortal vs. immortal."
- The teaching is based on a contrast between the natural-physical and the spiritual.
- The state of the physical body at the resurrection does not matter. At the resurrection, some physical bodies will no longer exist as intact bodies in the physical realm, centuries or millennia after physical death. God's resurrection work makes possible that the dead whose physical bodies were "sown" are raised incorruptible, with spiritual bodies.
- For those who are yet alive at Jesus' coming, God brings about a change that is beyond explanation. Clothing the perishable body with an imperishable body (see 2 Cor. 5:1-6) can easily be compared to creation or re-creation.
- Understanding that two separate groups are described is essential. The dead are raised (already) imperishable. Those yet alive are changed, so that the perishable body is clothed with an imperishable spiritual body.
- Note: God's work in making a new heaven and a new earth may be parallel, but that remains for another study—the fifth in this series: What will happen to this physical world at the end of time?