

## WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT THE DEAD

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### DEATH IN GENERAL

Human death came into the world through Adam's sin (Gen 2:17; 1 Cor 15:21).

Death is considered normal from Adam on (Gen 5).

Being buried at a good old age is a good thing (Gen 15:15). Jacob considered his life short at 120 (Gen 47:9).

The expression "fathers" usually refers to one's dead ancestors (Gen 15:15; John 6:58; hundreds of other places).

Death is sometimes referred to as to *lie with one's fathers*, *go to one's fathers*, *be gathered to one's people*, *be buried with one's fathers*, or *sleep with one's fathers* (Gen 15:15; 47:30; Deut 31:16; 1 Kgs 1:21; 11:21; 2 Kgs 21:21).

### MOURNING

Mourning for the dead is common (Gen 23:2; 50:4; Deut 34:8; 1 Sam 25:1; 2 Sam 1:10-11; Luke 8:52).

Burning fires in respect for a king when he died was normal, and not to do so was a sign of disdain (2 Chr 21:19).

As for rhetorically addressing the dead in a time of mourning, David did so for Jonathan and Saul, but he clearly was not actually trying to communicate with them (2 Sam 1:17-27; see below, "consulting the dead").

### THE STATE OF THE DEAD

There is a progression of information from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This does not mean things changed, but that more was made known.

OLD TESTAMENT: The OT does not provide much information about the state of the dead.

(As for communication with the dead, see below under "The Dead and The Living".)

Sometimes "Sheol" is used as a term for where all the dead go, or the fate of the righteous and the wicked dead seems to be the same (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Pss 30:9; 39:4-5; 49:7-9, 14, 17; 146:4).

Other times the eternal fate of the righteous and the wicked is distinguished (Pss 9:17; 28:4; 16:10;-11; 26:9; 30:3; 69:28). In these instances it is unclear what happens to the righteous dead, but the notion of a book of life which one could be blotted out of occurs (Ps 69:28), and the tone appears to be positive for the righteous (Ps 103:4).

And yet other times "Sheol" is basically a term for death (2 Sam 22:6; 1 Kgs 2:9; Prov 5:5; 27:20). These varying uses indicate that the term means different things to different writers at different times.

Sleep is sometimes a euphemism for death (1 Kgs 1:21; Dan 12:2; Ps 13:3). This should not be taken to mean "soul-sleep" as some groups teach.

Later OT texts mention resurrection (Isa 26:9?). Daniel explicitly speaks of a resurrection of the righteous and the wicked. The righteous will "awake" to everlasting life, and the wicked to disgrace and everlasting contempt (Dan 12:1-2).

There are instances of short-term (not eternal resurrection in the OT: a widow's son (1 Kgs 17:17-24), the Shunammite's son (2 Kgs 4:18-37), and a man tossed into Elisha's tomb (2 Kgs 8:5).

#### NEW TESTAMENT:

Similar to the OT, the NT also sometimes uses "sleep" as euphemism for death (Matt 27:52; John 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 11:30; 15:18,51; 1 Thess 4:14-15; 5:10; 2 Pet 3:4), and likewise should not be taken to mean "soul-sleep" as some groups teach (see Jesus' explanation in John 11:11-13).

The pre-resurrection state of the dead is apparently conscious. Moses spoke with Jesus at the Transfiguration (Matt 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:30),\* to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6-10), and martyrs are shown as conscious and conversing with God (Rev 6:9-11). Similarly, in the story about the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man was quite aware of his situation of punishment, and had concern for his still-living relatives (Luke 16:19-31). But this is an incomplete state, awaiting resurrection. \*[Note: when Jesus spoke with Moses it was not necromancy {a practice forbidden for ordinary mortals}, for Jesus is God.]

However, the emphasis of the NT is eternal resurrection, not dying and being set free from the body (1 Cor 15; 1 Thess 4:13-18; ).

There are numerous examples of short-term resurrection in the NT: many unspecified (Matt 11:5; Luke 7:22); Jesus told his disciples to raise the dead (Matt 10:8); Jairus' daughter (Matt 9:24-26); Lazarus (John 11); the widow of Nain's son (Luke 7:11-17); Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42); many dead saints around the time Jesus was raised from the dead (Matt 27:51-53); and Euticus who fell out of the window (Acts 20:9-10). Presumably all of these people died again, although the Bible does not explicitly say that.

Jesus' eternal resurrection: it was predicted (Matt 16:21; 17:23; Mark 9:9; Luke 9:22; 13:32), happened (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20; Acts 10:40; etc.), many, many people witnessed that He was alive (Matt 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20; Acts 1; 1 Cor 15:6), and this is reiterated many times in the NT.

Jesus taught the resurrection of people, and that it would apply to the righteous and the wicked (John 5:21-29; Rev 20:4-6, 12-15; cf. Dan 12). The righteous will have a resurrection of life (John 5:29), and the wicked a resurrection of punishment, which is the second death (John 5:29; Rev 20:4-6, 12-15). Paul said that without resurrection we are wasting our time as Christians (1 Cor 15:12-19). Jesus said He is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). There will be rewards in the resurrection (Luke 14:14), and we will get new bodies (2 Cor 5:1-9). As for the order of the resurrection, the dead in Christ will rise first (1 Thess 4:16), followed by Christians who are still alive.

## THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

Consulting the dead (necromancy) is forbidden (Deut 18:11; Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27). Saul used a medium to call up Samuel from the dead (1 Sam 28:3-20), and it is considered as evil as anything else Saul ever did (1 Chr 10:13). While scholars disagree, the Bible indicates that Samuel actually showed up, not a demon who was imitating him.

Some groups misunderstand the expression "witnesses" in Hebrews 12:1 to imply that the dead view what is occurring on earth, and that they can intercede for God's people. However, the expression "witnesses", referring to the dead who served God with distinction, speaks of people who saw what God did and bear witness (testify) to God's faithfulness, encouraging us to be faithful by the record of their life (Heb 11). Further, there is one mediator between us and God the Father (1 Tim 2:5) and who intercedes on our behalf (Rom 8:34). The Holy Spirit is also described as interceding for us according to the will of God (Rom 8:27). We are not to call upon the dead to intercede for us.

There is no hint in Scripture that the dead view what is happening on earth, except for martyrs being aware if God brought vengeance on those who killed or not (Rev 6:9-11). No ancestors are watching people get married, participate in sporting events, or any other actions, nor are they offering guidance or protection. Some argue that Luke 16:19-31 (the rich man and Lazarus) means that the dead are aware of what their relatives are doing. However, I think it is more plausible to say that the rich man in Hades knew the character of his living relatives, rather than that he was observing them from his place of torment.

But will we know who other believers are in the resurrection? In 1 Thess 4:13-5:11, Paul encourages Christians about the fate of the dead in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 15), which seems to imply that we will see them again.

## ULTIMATELY DEATH WILL BE ELIMINATED

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband.

And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away.' And He who sits on the throne said, 'Behold, I

am making all things new.' And He said, 'Write, for these words are faithful and true.'  
Then He said to me, 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. I will  
give to the one who thirsts from the spring of the water of life without cost.  
He who overcomes will inherit these things, and I will be his God and he will be My son" (Rev 21:1-  
7).