

understanding
the Bible's teaching

Death

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What the Bible tells us about death

Death is a fact that confronts every one of us. The lives of our friends, family and acquaintances end in death. We often see the funeral processions of people who are completely unknown to us, as they make their way to the cemetery or crematorium and we know that at some time, our own death and funeral are inevitable.

Death is no respecter of persons. Some die old, some die young, and some die in their prime. We have no idea when or how our own death will take place but we know that it will definitely happen. As Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) famously said: *'In the world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'*.

The causes of death are varied – old age, accident, illness, terrorist attack, war, murder and suicide. Most people fear death, probably because it takes them into an unknown realm. They go to great lengths to stave off the day of their death – routine health checks, vitamin supplements, medicines and hospital treatment. Occasionally death comes as a welcome relief from suffering, but for those left behind it can be a time of loss, anguish and regret – a time that cries out for some kind of hope and reassurance for the future.



Since we all face the prospect of death, you would think it is important for everyone to know what it is, why it happens, and whether they will survive beyond it in some other form of existence. In fact, many people never address these questions at all. Others leave it until death is almost upon them and it is really too late to do anything about it – even if it is possible to make some form of serious preparation for death and anything that lies beyond it. In this booklet we are going to look at some important questions and answer them from the Bible:

- ❖ Why does death happen?
- ❖ What is death?
- ❖ Is anybody exempt from death?
- ❖ Is there a life after death?
- ❖ What does the Bible say about heaven, hell and souls?

Why does death happen?

The Bible makes it very clear that death is a punishment for sin and that personal guilt in the eyes of God is the reason why we die. It all began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. They were given one very simple prohibition by God: *'... from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat'* and they were clearly warned what would happen if they did what they had been forbidden to do: *'... in the day that you eat the fruit of it you shall surely die'* (Genesis 2. 17). It was all very simple. Don't eat of the fruit of that particular tree; if you do, I (God) will punish you with death. Once they ate the fruit of that tree they would have sinned; they would have gone against God's commands and such rebellion would be punished.

The Book of Genesis explains how Adam and Eve clearly understood what the prohibition was and how they were tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. Isn't it still true of human nature that something we are told not to do seems all the more attractive because of the prohibition? They sinned by giving in to that temptation and therefore exposed themselves to the punishment of death.

In the New Testament the Apostle James explains that we all go through the same process: *'...each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death'* (James 1.14,15). This is the progression that Adam and Eve went through and which all of us experience as well:



The Apostle Paul emphasized the same principle in his letter to the Christians at Rome. He told them bluntly that *'the wages of sin is death'* (Romans 6.23). Just as wages are the deserved and lawful right of the worker who has earned them, so death is the deserved and lawful outcome for those who sin against God.

What is death?

We have seen that death is a punishment for sin. It is therefore obvious that it cannot be something pleasant. A punishment is always something that we would rather go without. It has been variously defined as:

- ❖ The authoritative imposition of something negative or unpleasant on a person in response to behaviour deemed wrong.
- ❖ Any pain, suffering, or loss inflicted on a person because of a crime or offence.
- ❖ A penalty imposed for wrongdoing.

By definition therefore, death is a punishment and has to be negative, unpleasant and a penalty. It will involve pain, suffering and loss, and this is exactly how the Bible portrays it. It is the termination of life – the end of existence. God had made man out of the earth as the book of Genesis explains: *'... the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life...'* (Genesis 2.7). After Adam sinned, God told him that death would be a reversal of that process: *'In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return'* (Genesis 3.19).

Death is often described in the Bible as a sleep. An example of this is in the words of David: *'enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death'* (Psalm 13.3). And when Jesus went to raise his friend Lazarus from the dead he said to his disciples: *'Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up'* (John 11.11). The Prophet Daniel refers to the dead as *'those who sleep in the dust of the earth'* (Daniel 12.2). When we are asleep we are in a state of unconsciousness; we are aware of nothing and our minds are blank, unless of course we are dreaming. Hours can pass by and we know nothing about what is going on around us. The Bible tells us that death is just like that – a state of sleep-like unconsciousness. Solomon, the writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes says: *'... the dead know nothing... their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished'* (Ecclesiastes 9.5,6). The Psalmist says quite bluntly: *'No-one remembers you (God) when he is dead'* (Psalm 6.5 NIV).

The Bible makes it very clear that death, this state of unconscious sleep-like termination of life, is a permanent punishment. The prophet Isaiah says of those whom he describes as the wicked: *'They are dead, they will not live; they are deceased, they will not rise... you have punished and destroyed them'* (Isaiah 26.14). Job confirms this in these words: *'...man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep'* (Job 14.12).

When God cursed Adam and Eve, He said *'... in the day that you eat the fruit of it (the forbidden fruit of a certain tree) you shall surely die'* (Genesis 2.17). However, it is evident that they did not actually die on the very same day that they sinned. The Book of Genesis tells us that after their sin they lived for many years and had a family. So what does this passage in Genesis really mean?

Many Bibles have a marginal reference against the phrase *'you shall surely die'* indicating that the literal meaning of the original Hebrew text is *'dying you shall die'*. In other words, on the day that Adam and Eve sinned a process of dying started. Something within their bodies was changed by God and the ageing and dying process began. From that time onwards their bodies gradually began to age and deteriorate

until the point came when they would die. In Adam's case we are told that the process took 930 years (Genesis 5.5). All of us are familiar with this same process of getting older, of our bodies running down and becoming less efficient because, unless we die young, we all experience it; and we know that, like Adam and Eve, the process will result in us dying and returning to dust too.

Is anybody exempt from death?

The answer to this question is very simple and will be evident from what has gone before. Death is a punishment for sin and since everyone sins, everyone is punished with death. The Apostle Paul put it in exactly those terms when he wrote to the Romans: *'Therefore, just as through one man (Adam) sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...'* (Romans 5.12).

Psalm 49 refers to this tragedy of universal death and explains how life and all that we accumulate during its short span, is temporary and will not last. Here are some extracts:

'...wise men die; likewise the fool and the senseless person perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inner thought is that their houses will continue for ever, and their dwelling-places to all generations; they call their lands after their own names. Nevertheless man, though in honour, does not remain; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the way of those who are foolish... Like sheep they are laid in the grave; death shall feed on them... and their beauty shall be consumed in the grave... Do not be afraid when one becomes rich, when the glory of his house is increased; for when he dies he shall carry nothing away; his glory shall not descend after him... he shall go to the generation of his fathers; they shall never see light. Man who is in honour, yet does not understand, is like the beasts that perish'.

(Psalm 49.10-13,14,16,17,19,20)

This very personal imposition of the punishment of death because we are all individually sinners is emphasized by Moses: *'The fathers shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall the children be put to death for their fathers; a person shall be put to death for his own sin'* (Deuteronomy 24.16). Although this verse refers to the judicial arrangements under the Law of Moses, like so much of that Law, it sets out a principle on which God has worked with mankind throughout all generations.

No man or woman, not even Jesus, has been exempt from death. Although he was sinless, Jesus had to die because he shared our human nature (see Hebrews 2.14-16). However, because he was sinless and because death is the punishment for sin, he was not allowed to remain dead and stay in the grave, as the Psalmist explained when he prophesied about Jesus' resurrection: *'...you (God) will not leave my soul in Sheol (the grave), nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption'* (Psalm 16.10). The Apostle Peter quoted this very passage when he explained to the Jews of his day that God's justice would not allow Jesus to remain in the grave. He was sinless and therefore had not earned death as his *'wages'* like the rest of us have. He wrote:

'Him (Jesus), being delivered by the carefully planned intention and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it... he, (David the Psalmist) foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that his soul was not left in Hades (the grave), nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses' (Acts 2.23, 24, 31, 32).

Is there a life after death?

So far we have noted that for sinners, there appears to be no hope of life after death. Ageing and dying is a slow but inevitable process which will culminate in the ending of our life as a punishment for our sins, and for most people there is nothing better to hope for. However, the Bible does not leave us without hope for the future. On

the contrary, it tells us how it is possible to escape from that dreadful, seemingly hopeless position.

We have already referred to Daniel chapter 12 (see page 4) which describes the dead as those who *'sleep in the dust of the earth'* (Daniel 12.2). If we put those words into their context we find that they are referring to certain men and women who will be raised from the dead in the future; people who will be woken out of that sleep of death. They are described as *'your people'* (i.e. God's people) and the verse speaks about *'many'* people but not all people. The extended quotation is this:

'...your people shall be delivered, every one who is found written in the book. And many who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake' (Daniel 12.1, 2).

This concept of a future resurrection from the dead – for some but not all – was referred to by Martha, the sister of Jesus' friend Lazarus who had died. Jesus reassured her by telling her that Lazarus would rise from the dead. Jesus was planning to raise him immediately, but Martha thought that he was referring to the great resurrection which still lies in the future because she said to Jesus: *'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day'*. Jesus replied: *'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live'* (John 11.24, 25).

This future resurrection is also referred to by the Prophet Isaiah. In the passage we looked at earlier (Isaiah 26.14 – see page 4) we noticed how he refers to the wicked; those who will not be raised from the dead but who will remain dead for all time. But in this same chapter he also speaks about *'your dead'* (i.e. God's dead) when he says: *'Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust'* (Isaiah 26.19).

Exactly the same message appears in Psalm 49 which we referred to in the context of the wicked and the foolish who are *'like the beasts that perish'* (see page 5). However, the same Psalm expresses the personal

hope of the Psalmist in the resurrection: *'But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave'* (Psalm 49.15).

This resurrection of some of the dead, will take place in the future when Jesus returns to set up God's kingdom here on earth. Job, who was severely tested but maintained his faith in God, expressed his hope of a resurrection from the dead like this: *'... I know that my Redeemer lives, and he shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God'* (Job 19.25,26). Job was clearly not expecting his resurrection to take place immediately he died, or even soon after he died. It would happen *'at last'*; at the time when his *'Redeemer'* (a reference to Jesus) was standing on the earth. This agrees with what Martha expected for her brother Lazarus. She expected him to *'rise again in the resurrection at the last day'*.

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the 1st Century Christians at Corinth he also explained that the resurrection of many in the graves would

A first century rock tomb near Jerusalem



take place when Jesus returns to the earth – at a time which is still in the future. This is what he wrote in what is sometimes referred to as ‘the resurrection chapter’:

“But now Christ has risen from the dead, and has become the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man (Adam) came death, by man (Jesus) also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the first-fruits, afterwards those who are Christ’s at his coming” (1 Corinthians 15.20-23).

What does the Bible say about heaven?

There is a common belief among Christians that when they die their immortal soul will go to heaven and receive its eternal reward there. This goes against Bible teaching in a number of respects:

1. As we have just seen, faithful men and women of the Bible did not believe that they would receive their reward immediately at death. They consistently believed that it would be received a long way off in the future, when Jesus has returned to the earth.
2. They did not believe in an immortal soul that would be rewarded. Instead they understood that their physical bodies would be raised from the dead.
3. They believed that all God’s faithful servants would receive their reward at the same time in the distant future. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament makes precisely that point. In chapter eleven he refers to a number of men and women of great faith and says that, though they lived thousands of years ago, they have not yet received their reward because they are waiting in the grave for men and women of faith in the future to live their lives and then all of them will be rewarded together. He wrote: *‘These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect’* (Hebrews 11.39,40 NIV).

4. The Bible clearly says that the reward for the resurrected faithful is on the earth and **not** in heaven. One of the most godly men who have ever lived was David king of Israel, the writer of many of the Psalms in the Old Testament. He was such a godly man that God himself described him as a man *'after my own heart'* (Acts 13.22). Yet the Apostle Peter in his preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, emphasized that David had not gone to heaven but that he was still asleep in death, resting in his grave awaiting the day of resurrection. This is what Peter said: *'...let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day...For David did not ascend into the heavens...'* (Acts 2.29, 34). Someone as godly as David has not gone to heaven because that is not the reward that God has offered to mankind.

Think also about the people that Jesus raised from the dead, particularly his close friend Lazarus as recorded in John chapter 11. Jesus raised Lazarus several days after he had died. Why would Jesus have taken his friend away from his reward in heaven to bring him back to earth to live for a few more years and then eventually die again? The answer of course is that he did nothing of the sort. Lazarus, like David, was in his tomb asleep in death. In the normal course of events he would have stayed there awaiting the return of Jesus to the earth and the day of resurrection and his reward on the earth in the coming Kingdom of God.

The Bible tells us that heaven is the dwelling place of God. For example, in Psalm 123 the writer says to God: *'Unto you I lift up my eyes, O you who dwell in the heavens'* (Psalm 123.1). A phrase which constantly recurs in the Bible is *'The God of heaven'*. There are hundreds of references to heaven or the heavens in the Bible and they are mainly associated with God and not one of them promises mankind a reward in heaven at death, or any other opportunity to go to heaven. Indeed, the Psalmist makes a clear distinction between God and men in this regard: *'The heaven, even the heavens, are the LORD'S; but the earth he has given to the children of men'* (Psalm 115.16).

There are some Bible references which appear to support the idea of a reward in heaven but when these passages are understood in the light of the overall clear teaching of the Bible about death and what happens after death it becomes obvious that the traditional Christian view of a person's immortal soul leaving the body at death to go to heaven is not taught in the Bible. Jesus confirmed this teaching in some words addressed to one of the religious leaders of the Jews. He said to this man, Nicodemus: *'No one has ever gone into heaven...'* (John 3.13 NIV)

What does the Bible say about hell?

The idea that the immortal souls of wicked people go to hell to endure eternal torment as a punishment for their sins, is rather played down by most Christian churches today. More importantly, it does not reflect Bible teaching. The word 'hell' appears in the New King James version more than thirty times and in the Old Testament is a translation of the original Hebrew word 'sheol' which seems to imply a 'deep place'. Wikipedia describes it as *'a place of darkness to which all the dead go, both the righteous and the unrighteous, regardless of the moral choices made in life, a place of stillness and darkness cut off from God'*.

It will readily be seen how this definition agrees with the Biblical description of the state and place of the dead as explained earlier in this booklet. 'Sheol' or 'hell' is used consistently in the Old Testament simply to refer to the grave – a deep place where all the dead, both righteous and unrighteous go when their life ends. Some will remain there for all time but as we have already noted, some will be raised from the dead when Jesus returns to the earth.

It is interesting to see how translators of the Bible into English have reflected the use of the Hebrew word 'sheol'. Psalm 16 verse 10 refers to Jesus being in the grave temporarily for just three days between his crucifixion and resurrection. In the King James or Authorised Version of the Bible, dating back to AD 1611, the verse has been translated as *'... thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption'*. It is a perfectly acceptable translation and

it is saying that Jesus lay asleep in death in the tomb for that short period.

However, when the New King James Version was published nearly four hundred years later the translators thought that the word hell was inappropriate in the context of the death of the Son of God and so translated the verse as: *'...you will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will you allow your Holy One to see corruption'*. They added a note indicating that *'Sheol'* represents *'the abode of the dead'*. Later, when the New International Version was published, it went even further by fully recognizing and understanding what the Bible means by *'hell'* when it translated the same verse: *'... you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay'*.

In the New Testament the Greek word translated as *'hell'* is sometimes the Greek word *'hades'*. This is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *'Sheol'* and again simply refers to the grave. Quite often though,

The valley of Ben Hinnom just south of Jerusalem



the New Testament uses another word, the Greek word 'Gehenna'. This refers to a specific place, sometimes called 'the valley of Ben Hinnom', a place just outside the city of Jerusalem. This valley had a chequered history, being associated with idol worship (including child sacrifice), burning the corpses of criminals and animals and being used as the City's rubbish dump.

In the time of Jesus the place was called 'Gehenna'. The fires that burned in this valley were never allowed to go out and would have been a common sight for the inhabitants of Jerusalem. This explains the words of Jesus where he refers to bodies being cast into 'hell' or 'Gehenna' (see Matthew 5.29). He was using figurative language to make the point that those who were wicked would ultimately be destroyed in the grave as completely as were the bodies of the criminals who were thrown into 'the valley of Ben Hinnom' to be burned.

There is one other passage in the New Testament which, on a superficial reading, could be interpreted as supporting the view that the immortal soul of a wicked person suffers eternally in hell. Jesus told a parable about the rich man and Lazarus (see Luke 16. 19-31). However, it is almost universally recognized that Jesus was here using the false beliefs of the Pharisees, to ridicule them and to show them in their true colours. The renowned Jewish historian Josephus (himself a Pharisee) confirms that the parable accurately depicts the beliefs of this sect and we know from the gospel records how far astray from Bible truth many of their beliefs and practices were. Jesus was not in any way condoning or supporting their erroneous beliefs which clearly fly in the face of the clear Bible teaching that we have already considered in this booklet.

What does the Bible say about souls?

It is interesting to note that in the Psalm already referred to, it is the soul of Jesus that went to '*sheol*' or the grave (Psalm 16.10). Furthermore, the prophet Ezekiel makes it very clear on more than one occasion that souls can and will die and are not therefore immortal. For example, he records God's words: '*The soul who sins shall die. The*

son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself' (Ezekiel 18.20).

This confirms the principle that death is a personal punishment for personal sins. These words tell us that a soul can itself sin and will therefore have to die. Later in the same chapter God says that a sinning soul can repent and therefore avoid the permanent penalty of death: *'...when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive'* (or as the KJV puts it *'he shall save his soul alive'* Ezekiel 18.27).

In order to understand what a soul is, we need to look at the Old Testament (Hebrew) and New Testament (Greek) words from which it is translated. In Hebrew the word is 'nephesh' and means simply a living, breathing being. In other words it is the person and not something separate within us. We referred earlier to Genesis chapter two which explained how the first man became a living, breathing being: *'...the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being'* (or 'nephesh' Genesis 2.7). The death of a soul ('nephesh') is the reversal of that process.

A soul is no more than a living, breathing being and this is confirmed by the fact that the same word is used to describe animals. An example is in the first chapter of Genesis: *'Then God said, "Let the earth bring forth the living creature (nephesh) according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, each according to its kind"'* (Genesis 1.24).

In the New Testament the Greek word translated 'soul' is 'psuche'. This is the equivalent of the Hebrew word 'nephesh' and has the same meaning. An example is the reference made earlier where the Apostle Peter quoted from the Psalms about Jesus' 'soul' ('psuche') being in 'hades' (the grave) but not being left there (Acts 2.27).

No true Christian should believe that they have an immortal soul because the Bible simply does not teach that. It is an erroneous doctrine which was based on the ideas of Greek philosophers such as Plato, and introduced into Church teaching after the time of Jesus and the Apostles.

Summary

In this booklet we have considered the Bible teaching about death and have learned that:

- ❖ Death is God's punishment for sin.
- ❖ We all sin and are subject to God's punishment.
- ❖ Death is the end of life – a state of total unconsciousness in the grave.
- ❖ For most people death is the end of their existence.
- ❖ Hell is simply another word for the grave.
- ❖ Heaven is God's dwelling place and mankind has never been allowed to go there.
- ❖ A soul is just a living being, whether human or animal; souls sin and die; souls do not live on after death.
- ❖ There is the hope of resurrection from the dead for believers when Jesus returns to the earth.
- ❖ Those who are the true friends of Jesus, will enjoy eternal life in the coming Kingdom of God on earth.

God's gift of eternal life has been made possible through the work of Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again from the dead. He said to Martha after Lazarus had died: '*...He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live*' (John 11.25). Then he asked Martha an all important question – a question which needs to be answered by all who wish to avail themselves of God's amazing gift:

'Do you believe this?' (John 11.26)

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