

# Sermon Notes



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This Is Why It Is Called Good News – Part 5

Isaiah 38:10-12,17-20

Let's go back to our oldest literature about Man and God and see what the Hebrew scriptures have to say about life after death. What did the ancient Jews believe about life after death?

The first thing you might notice after reading the entire 39 books very carefully is that they don't say much about it. The individual's status after death was not of great concern to the writers of the Hebrew scriptures.

The second thing you might notice is that there is a very distinct change in the way life after death was viewed that occurs when the Jews were taken into captivity, whether Israel when it was taken into Assyrian captivity, or Judah when it was taken into Babylonian captivity. They learned something or adopted aspects from those cultures and incorporated them into a new understanding of life after death.

As the Hebrew scriptures were being reedited and put into the form we know them today, the Jews were under the influence of the Greeks. Suddenly, we see Greek ideas about life after death moving into their scriptures.

As we have covered in great detail in several sermon series during our 5 years of existence, the Bible was not written by one person writing one book as dictated to them by God. We can mark the different voices of different writers and editors. We can see that grouping of literature into this or that book. BTW, the Jews are and have always been very clear on this ongoing editing process.

Before the exiles, there is clearly the belief that death marked the end of life. The afterlife, as such, was called Sheol, a place where the dead, both righteous and evil, shared a common fate, a silent, dark, and isolated state.

J. Jeremias, a noted scholar, summarized it this way. After the Exile, the Jews (the people of Israel had not returned from exile and would forever be lost) came across the concept of resurrection. They began to consider that those in Sheol may not remain there forever. They began to hear and absorb ideas from Greek and Persian culture that included a belief in some form of retribution after death. Sheol, or Hades, would have a separate place for the righteous, apart from the wicked. Greeks further believed that the righteous went directly to heaven, whereas the wicked fell into Sheol/Hades, which was a place of punishment.

That's the story in a nutshell, but let's return to the very idea of death and what that meant to the patriarchs and to early Israel. Our study is complicated by the fact that the word for death in Hebrew, "mawet", means different kinds of death, biological death, symbolic death, and an actual place where those who have ceased to live on earth are kept.

We need to factor in a fundamental concept in ancient Israel, as well as in many cultures that surrounded it: the distinction between a good death and a bad death. A good death would be that of Abraham, who "breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people." (Genesis 15:15)

Eliphaz describes another good death in the Book of Job. "You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in season." (Job 5:26)

Then there are bad deaths. Jacob found no comfort in the supposed death of Joseph. "Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and mourned for his son many days. All of his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave (Sheol) to my son." So his father wept for him." (Gen. 37:34-35)

A bad death was defined by being premature, or violent, or leaving no surviving heir. A good death was won by those who lived to an old age and left children to succeed them. That is where current scholarship leaves us today.

However, I can find exceptions. Consider Isaiah 57:1-2. Here, people die young, but it is good because they are being delivered from evil. King Josiah died prematurely and violently, but was assured before his death, "I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place." (2 Kings 22:20)

Death was viewed as punishment for sin, starting all the way back to the story of Adam and Eve. While natural, and while deaths could be “good,” there is ample evidence in scripture that death was considered “unnatural,” in the sense that it was not what God intended for us from the beginning.

In Numbers 19:16, anyone who touched a dead person was unclean for seven days. That same chapter goes through instructions about how to clean yourself if you have to touch a dead body. Even entering a hut where there is a dead body requires a cleansing process that took days. In Leviticus 11, touching a dead animal’s body, unless it was ritually slaughtered, made you unclean. This is why, to this day, Jews and especially Muslims will only eat meat that has been slaughtered ritualistically (Halal).

And what about Sheol? This is an interesting study. The word Sheol is found 65 times in the Old Testament and once outside of it. Some have tried to say that there has always been segregation in Sheol, that the righteous are on a higher level. The wicked are on various lower levels (like Dante’s Inferno), but there is no evidence for that in scripture, and, since that’s where we find this word, we need to see what is actually said.

And what do we find? No one, clear view of what death meant and what Sheol was. At times, it means a subterranean world. At other times, it means the grave. There are other times it is used as a figure of speech to denote extreme misfortune, seemingly inescapable death, or the brink of death. We might say “we are going through hell” because we’ve been given that word by the King James Version, which got the idea from Augustine and Greek philosophers.

We can also find quite a few passages where Sheol seems to be the ultimate destination of the wicked. It is somewhere fearful and to be avoided, the antithesis of heaven (Job 11:8 – “It is higher than heaven, what can you do? It is deeper than Sheol, what can you know?”), Psalm 139:8, (“If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.”), and Amos 9:2, (“Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down.”).

Still, other passages indicate that even the good go to Sheol. All of Ecclesiastes teaches this, and we get a real-life example in Isaiah 38. (Isaiah 38:10-12, 17-20).

Set against this, Psalm 49:10-20. The psalmist believes that we will be ransomed, and the imbalances of this world will be put right. What might that new world look like? By now you probably can guess, but let me state it clearly...

The Hebrew scriptures give us no detailed account of the fate of the righteous. The best phrase we can find, and we see it several times, is that the righteous person is “gathered to their people.” That is a lovely idea. We just don’t have any further information to know what that means.

And yet, they trusted in their God. When we reach the New Testament, we will find that there is no single, clear picture of what happens after death. Perhaps that is because different writers are trying to work it out with the limited knowledge they have. Maybe it is because what happens after death is indescribable. Perhaps the end of physics also means our brains cannot grasp the concept of what comes next.

What we can learn from the Jews and their scriptures is the importance of trusting in God when we don’t know the answers. The Jews did not seem to need a detailed book explaining the layout of life after death for the righteous. They trusted their God. They believed that He was a God of mercy and justice and love, not as different aspects of His character but as Who He is at all times.

Psalm 103:6-13.