

Sermon Handout
Biblical Images of the Afterlife
Rev. Mark Reynolds

- I. ***Sheol***: A Hebrew word that meant “the abode of the dead.”
 - A. **Early Interpretation**: The lowest place under the earth, in contrast to the “highest heaven.” A dark and shadowy place where both the righteous and unrighteous went after death. It was not a place of reward or punishment, but a symbol pointing to the end of life.

“Everything . . . is vanity, since the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil . . . The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. Go, eat your bread with enjoyment and drink your wine with a merry heart . . . Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”
(Ecclesiastes 9:1-10)
 - B. **Later Interpretation**: After the Babylonian Exile, *Sheol* increasingly referred to where the wicked went upon death, but in the Old Testament it was not a place of torment. In contrast, we get images of the righteous being reunited with their ancestors in a kind of paradise, but the location of this paradise and what it looked like was still being worked out.
- II. ***Hades***: The Greek translation of *Sheol*, but now the underworld is separated into two sections: a section where the righteous are rewarded, and a section where the unrighteous are punished. See, for example, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.
- III. ***Gehenna***: The Greek word translated as hell. A valley on the southwest side of Jerusalem where some ancient kings in Israel sacrificed children to false gods. Condemned by the prophet Jeremiah. By the time of Jesus, it was a garbage dump where everything unclean and unholy would be taken to be burned. This place, where the worms never die and the fire is never quenched, becomes a powerful symbol of the place of God’s judgement. But at this point, the punishment is not necessarily eternal. The idea of eternal punishment comes later in Christian history.
- IV. **A New Heaven and a New Earth** (Revelation). This image of the afterlife is couched in a story about Christ returning in final victory, and everyone coming before his throne, including the dead who will be resurrected, for the final judgement. After the judgement, the righteous will live with God in a new heaven and new earth, while the wicked will be cast out of God’s presence into hell. People debate whether the punishment of the wicked is temporary or eternal.

- V. **Symbols and Metaphors:** Remember, all these biblical images are symbolic because they attempt to describe something that remains a profound mystery at the intersection of the natural and supernatural.
- VI. **What We Trust with Our Lives:**
- A. Death is our final act of surrender to God that is grounded in our practice of faith.
 - B. Those who confess their sin, trust in Jesus, and seek to follow him daily have no reason to fear death. We can have the assurance of salvation and die in peace.
 - C. Because God loves all His children and desires that every person be saved (2 Timothy 2:3-4), we can trust God with our loved ones who precede us in death.

Prayer for Those Who Have Died
by Rev. Mark Reynolds

Gracious and Loving God,
Every human being is a precious child created in your image,
and we believe that you love all of us unconditionally.
We trust the scriptures when they teach us that you are slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love. **(Exodus 34:6)**
We trust the scriptures when they teach us that you are good,
that your mercy and loving kindness last forever,
and that your faithfulness endures from generation to generation. **(Psalm 100:5)**
We trust the scriptures when they teach us that Jesus died
to save the whole world **(Jn 3:16)**
and that you desire the salvation of all people **(1 Timothy 2:3-4)**.
Being convinced of your love and goodness,
we entrust all who have died to your tender mercies and care,
knowing that if we still love them, you love them even more,
and will make a way for them to be with you in your kingdom.
We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.