

What is Sheol?

SCOTT HOEZEE

As Christians, one of the easiest mistakes we can make is to take how we currently view some biblical or theological topic and project it back into history. Surely believers in God have always believed such and such on this or that topic, right? Well, not really. Take, for instance, ideas and images related to the afterlife or to what we often refer to as heaven. The truth is that even in the Bible there is a spectrum of ideas on what happens after we die. Some of the more surprising beliefs of past followers of God can be found in the Old Testament. Today on *Groundwork*, we begin a brief series on heaven; and we will start with views from the Bible's first testament. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From ReFrame Media and Words of Hope, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are going to do kind of a short series, three parts, on what is colloquially, usually referred to as heaven or the afterlife. What is our future with God after we die? And so, we are going to devote three programs to that topic. Today, we are going to really focus on the Old Testament and their ideas on life and death. The second program will go to the New Testament, and we will talk a lot about the intermediate state, as it is called; and in the final program we will look at what we refer to ultimately as heaven as our final destination beyond the grave and after judgment day and so forth.

DAVE BAST

Right; and it is a hot topic, I guess, among many Christian circles. There have been a number of popular books written about heaven; and one particularly popular sort of subgenre is the "I died and went to heaven" kind of book. People who come back from quote-unquote "death" or a near-death experience and report on what they saw and heard and did there. You know, I think people have always wondered what's next...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Really; and it is human to do that, and Christians are kind of confident of our hope in Christ—our hope of salvation—our hope of life. We want to talk about that from a biblical perspective. We want to dig into the Bible; and some of what we say might be surprising if you have kind of embraced these popular views.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you know, you are right, Dave. This is kind of a hot topic and one of interest; and for a lot of people...and as pastors you and I know this...a lot of people don't confront this so much about what will happen to me, but it is after a loved one dies, and then the question is: Where is Grandma? Where is my son? Where is my spouse?

DAVE BAST

And are they watching me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, lots of questions.

DAVE BAST

And will I know them when I get there? So much of it is provoked by love, you know, and these wonderful relationships that we have; and then when they are broken by death...when we experience that loss, as you say, that is tough and we want to have some information.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we will start out... Let's just state what I think most Christians believe most of the time, and that is that when we die our souls don't die. That may be a mercy of God, too. We don't believe we are naturally immortal. The Bible doesn't teach that, but by God's grace souls don't die; bodies die, but the soul goes to be with the Lord if you are a believer, or it goes to a place of torment if you are not a believer or a wicked person, and that is it. We go to one of two places: Heaven or hell. Now, we can briefly mention the Catholics have a belief in purgatory, but even purgatory is temporary. Even Catholics believe that beyond purgatory even it is either heaven or hell; and that is it; and we go there...our souls do anyway...as soon as we die; and someday the soul will be reunited with a new resurrection body at the resurrection of the last day; but in the meanwhile, you go to one of two places; and as we said in the beginning of the show, it is easy to think: Oh, well; yes, everybody always thought that. Abraham, Moses, David; you know, Peter, James, John; but that is actually not true.

DAVE BAST

Yes; one of the things we are going to do is start with the Old Testament and dig into some of the very puzzling and at times even disturbing passages of the Old Testament, where people did not necessarily have a clear understanding or idea about what happened when you died. In fact, in many cases throughout the Old Testament, believers sort of shrank from death because they thought that after you died you didn't have much going for you, and they used an idea that was very common and widespread in the time before Christ...the time of the Old Testament: The idea that when you died you went to a place called *sheol*, and more up-to-date versions of translations of the Old Testament use that term, *sheol*, repeatedly in various places.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; s-h-e-o-l is the English version of that Hebrew word for *sheol*; and *sheol* seems to be...now, we will be talking that there is kind of varying views on this depending on what passage you look at. *Sheol* seems to be in a lot of passages the common destination for everybody—the good, the bad, the ugly—it doesn't matter; the righteous, the wicked—everybody goes to *sheol*. It is not hell exactly, but it is a far cry from paradise.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not heaven either. It seems to be kind of a holding tank. Kind of a holding place, kind of under the earth; kind of pictured as being underneath the earth—the realm of the dead. A lot of passages seem to indicate that everybody goes there. In fact, the earliest reference to *sheol* is in Genesis 37.

DAVE BAST

Right; where Jacob is speaking. He thinks that he has lost his son Joseph; and if you know the story you know that Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery, but they took his beautiful coat, tore it and put some animal blood on it because they were covering their tracks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

What happened to Joseph? Oh, look what we found, Dad; and Jacob draws the natural conclusion: Oh, Joseph has died. He has been killed; and he is heartbroken and he cries out and says...as they try to comfort him, he refused to be comforted and said: No; I shall go down to sheol to my son, mourning; and thus his father bewailed him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here you pick up the idea that Jacob believes Joseph is now in sheol. Joseph he thinks has been killed; and he will join him there...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When he dies; and so that is a very...that is the earliest reference I think we have...

DAVE BAST

Or you think later David, who did lose his infant son, and they are trying to comfort him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he says: No, forget it. He won't come back to me, but I will go to him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is what happened. When you died you just went off to this place, which wasn't all that nice.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. It comes up a lot in the book of Job; not surprisingly with Job thinking ultimate thoughts and questioning God, and he has lost his children. So, it comes up a lot also in the book of Job, and this passage from Job 7, starting at the 6th verse is typical also of how sheol is referred to in Job, where Job says: My days are swifter than a weaver's shuttle and come to their end without hope. ⁷Remember that my life is a breath. My eye will never again see good. ⁸The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone. ⁹As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to sheol do not come up. ¹⁰They return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them anymore.

DAVE BAST

So, it is a really rather grim view of things. This idea that life simply passes away and then you go off to this underworld—this sort of shadowy semi-existence. It is not really nonexistence, but it is not real existence either; and that is a common view in the Old Testament. It lends real poignancy. So, there is a verse at the end of Psalm 39, where the psalmist actually prays to God to look away from him, as if to say: Leave me alone because I've only got a little while here before I go forth and am no more—before I depart and am no more, he says. So, you may have read those passages, you know, and puzzled over them: What is going on here? Why don't they have this hope of salvation and eternal life? But it wasn't clear in the Old Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No; particularly early on; and so, was sheol a good place; a hopeful place? Could there ever be any hope for something better beyond sheol? Well, the psalmists wrestled a lot with that. You see that in their prayers; and so, we are going to go next to the book of Psalms to see where sheol pops up then, and what we can kind of figure out that the people who wrote the psalms believed, and we will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in the first program, Dave, of a three-part series on heaven—the afterlife—what happens to us after we die. We have already established that early in the Old Testament there is a belief in the underworld; this realm of the dead where everybody seems to go: The good and the bad, the righteous and the wicked; and it is called *sheol*, and we saw some references to that in Genesis already; lots in the book of Job. Sometimes it is referred to as the pit, particularly in the Psalms. The point is we want to figure out what really were the attitudes of the Israelites toward this place?

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the Psalms can help us with that.

DAVE BAST

Yes, they can; and it is interesting to me, too, that this was a widespread belief in the world of their day. It wasn't just in the Bible, but the ancient Greeks, who were living roughly at the same time when the Bible was written...especially the later wisdom literature like Job and the Psalms...they had this exact same view. They called it Hades in Greek, but if you look at the famous Greek epics like the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* of Homer, that is exactly what happened, too, to these warriors in the wars; whether they were good, bad, or indifferent; when they were killed or when they died, they went down to Hades, and it was exactly like sheol. It was this shadow world...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we see it, as you said, Scott, in the Psalms especially. So, here is an example from Psalm 6, where the Psalmist cries:

⁴Turn, O Lord, save my life; deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love. ⁵For in death there is no remembrance of you; in sheol who can give you praise?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And here is another one from Psalm 89: ⁴⁷Remember how short my time is; for what vanity you have created all mortals? ⁴⁸Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of sheol?

DAVE BAST

And one more from Isaiah. This is Isaiah 38:18: For sheol cannot thank you; death cannot praise you. Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, in these passages—these three we just read, Dave—here you are picking up the attitude that people are kind of terrified of going to sheol, and they want to put it off as long as possible. It is going to happen someday, but they want to put it off as long as possible. They want to live as long as they can. They want God to deliver them; and then, interestingly enough, the reason being often...and this is sort of motivation to God to save my life for the time being because once I go to sheol I cannot even talk to you, God...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I cannot sing to you, I cannot praise you...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, it looks like this sheol...that there was a fear or a thought among the earliest Israelites that it was a God-forsaken place. You could not get at God from sheol either; and so: God, don't send me there yet because I've got more songs to sing to you; so keep me alive...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is also very interesting.

DAVE BAST

Kind of a bargaining chip with God they used to...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, but it shows a negative, fearful view of the afterlife.

DAVE BAST

That when I am separated from my body, if there is a kind of life that goes on somehow, it is a life bereft of all the things that give me joy here on earth; and most especially the worship of Yahweh, the God of Israel, the Lord; although, you get another strain at times in the psalms, too, don't you, where there is a little bit of a shift, and in some passages that we read, it seems as though only the wicked end up in sheol; or even that in sheol God is there. You think of the 139th Psalm, that famous psalm: If I make my bed in sheol, even there you will find me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is one thing that we need to say, and every scholar who has ever studied this in the Old Testament has come to basically the same conclusion; I am making a blanket statement. Somebody will say: No, there was one who didn't; but I think most who have studied this say the thing about the Old Testament is, it is not neat and tidy on this subject. It is not a systematic, consistent picture. There are lots of cross currents; and indeed, here are a few examples where it almost sounds like it is the wicked who need to go to sheol. So, here is Psalm 49:

¹⁵But God will ransom my soul from the power of sheol, for he will receive me. But then, from Psalm 55:

¹⁵Let death come upon them (his enemies). Let the wicked go down to sheol, for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.

DAVE BAST

Or Psalm 141, where we read: ⁵Never let the oil of the wicked anoint my head, for my prayer is continually against their wicked deeds (He is kind of separating himself from those bad people) and he goes on: ⁶When they are given over to those who shall condemn them, then they shall learn that my words were pleasant; like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of sheol. It is for them but not me.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; or maybe...

DAVE BAST

I am on the right side.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or maybe as Psalm 49 says, it is for all of us, but God will ransom the righteous out of it and leave the wicked behind. That is a little bit of a hint, one of the few hints, but from Psalm 49 a hint that maybe there is life with God beyond sheol, but not so for the wicked.

DAVE BAST

Well, here is another one from Psalm 103...another one of those hints: Bless the Lord, O my soul...that famous call to praise...who redeems your life from the pit. So, there it is again; the pit being a synonym for sheol.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And just to complicate the picture a little more, in case we want it more complicated...maybe we don't need it more complicated...but sometimes in the psalms sheol, or the pit, is also used metaphorically for sort of what it feels like to be depressed...what it feels like to be spiritually dry. It is like: O Lord, my soul is in sheol right now. It is like, you know, I am not really dead; I am not really there; but it is sort of like saying, you know...it is sort of our equivalent of saying: I've really got the blues. They would say: No, my *soul* is in sheol, lift it out of there. So, it can also get used metaphorically; again, just to complicate the picture a little more.

DAVE BAST

So, what can we say? Let's try to start to sum up all of these disparate passages—and we have thrown a lot of scripture at you in a very brief time. There is a diversity of views, and that is maybe what you would expect because the Old Testament especially was written by a diversity of people: psalmists and prophets and wise men—sages—and some of them perhaps had a more hopeful view than others; and it is as though God is saying: You know what? I can take it all...I can take it all in; when you are feeling really low, when you feel like there is no hope, when you feel like you don't have a future. Yes, that can be true, too; as someone has said, in much of the Bible God speaks to us, but in the Psalms especially we speak back to him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And we express every different human emotion...every different human condition, including the emotion of hopelessness.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but there also seems to be a bit of a progression here. It is almost as though the closer we get to the arrival of the Christ, the closer we get to the birth of Jesus in the New Testament, things start to clarify a little

bit in terms of the meaning of death, hope beyond death, hope beyond sheol; maybe it is really not sheol in the first place; that might unsettle some people. We tend to think: Oh, well, shouldn't God just have taught one thing consistently? Abraham forward, everybody? But God's revelation in history doesn't always work like that...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It can be progressive. People do mature as God teaches them and leads them along the way; so, the closer we get to Christ, the closer we get a different picture.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and that comes through, I think, most clearly in a couple of places in the Old Testament; one of them being the 16th Psalm, which incidentally was quoted by Peter on the Day of Pentecost in his great sermon about the resurrection of Jesus. Toward the end of the 16th Psalm the psalmist writes:

⁹Therefore, my heart is glad and my soul rejoices. My body also rests secure; ¹⁰for you do not give me up to sheol or let your faithful one see the pit. ¹¹You show me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore. So, that was especially true for Jesus, whom God raised from the dead; but it is also true for everyone who believes in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that comes already in the Old Testament; so what might that tell us? Where are the arrows all pointing as we get closer to the New Testament? We will look at that as we close the program next.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we are exploring the Old Testament views of the afterlife, of what happens after death; and we have already just seen now that with all this gloom surrounding most of the Old Testament saints, who just only could think of sheol and darkness and indefinite sorts of ideas of the future, there comes this wonderful flash of bright light in the 16th Psalm, and the hope of that writer that God will not abandon his own to sheol...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And he will not allow them to just simply go away and dissolve into nothing; and how that was fulfilled in Christ.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you mentioned just a moment ago that Peter references this in his great Pentecost Day sermon in Acts Chapter 2, in reference to Jesus, but given everything that we have said in this program that people were afraid of sheol, that sheol seemed to be not a pleasant place to go, but everybody went there, the good, the bad and the in between; it might be rather surprising that all of a sudden in the Hebrew Psalter you get this 16th Psalm, which does seem to indicate hope even for our bodies: My body also will rest secure. You won't give me up to sheol. You won't let your faithful one see the pit. You have shown me the path of life. So, that might seem a little bit surprising, but we said in the previous part of this program, Dave, that you are not going to get a neat and tidy, consistent, systematic portrait of all of this in the Old Testament; but there does seem to be that idea that as the Old Testament unfolds, as the people of God mature, and above all, as we get closer and closer to the time of Christ, there seems to be some more hope infused in our afterlife; that sheol maybe isn't our destination at all after all, or if it is, it is very, very temporary and God is going to spring us from there, and maybe even our bodies have some sort of a future.

So, that is starting to sound a lot more like the New Testament; and one very famous passage that also sounds a little bit more comes from Daniel Chapter 12. Now, Daniel is kind of a strange, apocalyptic book; everybody likes the stories early in Daniel...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And then it gets kind of apocalyptic, but there is this very interesting passage in Daniel Chapter 12, which a lot of people see as one of the very few Old Testament points of reference that hint at a bodily resurrection for God's people.

DAVE BAST

^{1b}But at that time, your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. ²Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake; some to everlasting life and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (That seems to indicate the resurrection of the just and the unjust that Jesus talks about.) And then Daniel says: ³Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever. So, this beautiful image that we will shine like the stars.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so here you have a hint that our bodies, although they turn back to dust, they will be resurrected; and you also get a hint here of a dual destination for people. The righteous are going to rise to everlasting life, the wicked to everlasting contempt, and that starts to sound like our more pop version today of heaven for some and hell for others. You don't get that fully articulated usually in the Old Testament, but here is a hint of that; and Dave, there is also a famous passage in Job...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which, because it became part of the Handel's Oratorio, *The Messiah*, a lot of people know.

DAVE BAST

Yes: I know that my redeemer liveth and that he shall stand; and at the last, in my flesh shall I see God. So again, kind of a hint toward the idea of resurrection. Or another famous passage, Ezekiel 37, where the dead bones of Israel are animated by the Spirit and clothed and made to live again. So, we have got these pointers, and as you said, Scott, it comes as we get toward the end of the Old Testament and closer to Jesus; and that really, I think, shouldn't surprise us, because there were a lot of things that became more clear...and actually really only emerged into broad daylight, if we want to think of it that way, with the coming of Christ. Even what kind of Messiah he would be. A lot of people had a misapprehension. So, at the time of Jesus' ministry, there was still a divided opinion among the Jewish people. The Sadducees denied...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Absolutely.

DAVE BAST

The resurrection and life of the world to come, but the Pharisees and most of the people accepted it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, what that also tells you, Dave, is that during what we often call the intertestamental period, you know, there is about a four-hundred-year gap between what we think sort of the last book of the Old Testament was written and the birth of Jesus, and therefore what the New Testament records, and during that intertestamental period—four whole more centuries—it looks like there was more development of thought on

all of this as we got closer to Christ, to the point where a belief in the resurrection took hold for most Jewish people, but not the Sadducees. So, the fact that there was an exception to the rule in the Sadducees lets you know that the closer we get to Jesus and his bodily incarnation...so important...and we will talk about that more in the next program in this series...so important that Jesus himself had a human body. His resurrection is going to be what the New Testament will call again and again the firstfruits of what is going to happen to us.

DAVE BAST

Right; and I think maybe the bottom line for Jesus was the word that he spoke to the Sadducees who denied the life to come and the resurrection when he said he is not the God of the dead, he is the God of the living; and that is the conviction that really took hold of people even in the Old Testament because God held them in [his] hands, they would not die, but they would live.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thank you for joining our *Groundwork* conversation. I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast. We always want to know how we can help you dig deeper into scripture. So visit our website, groundworkonline.com, and suggest topics and passages to dig into next on *Groundwork*.

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