

Sheol, Hades, and Hell: Distinct Yet Related Realms

Sheol (Hebrew) and Hades (Greek) both refer to the general realm of the dead. In the Old Testament, all people descend to Sheol, yet Scripture gives hints of distinction within it—while the wicked remain under judgement, God preserves and ultimately raises the righteous to be with Him (e.g., Ps. 16:10; Dan. 12:2). In its basic sense, Hades—like Sheol—simply describes the place of the dead, whereas *hell* (Gehenna) refers more specifically to the place of final punishment.

This distinction becomes clearer in Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31). There, we see two realities within the realm of the dead: the unrighteous in torment, and the righteous at rest with Abraham—the “righteous place of Sheol.” Though separated, both exist within the broader domain of Hades. By Revelation 20:13, Hades functions as a temporary holding place for the dead until final judgment.

Fallen Angels and Their Confinement

Scripture also describes a distinct realm for rebellious spiritual beings. God cast sinning angels into chains of gloomy darkness to be held for judgement (2 Peter 2:4). This place is called *Tartarus*—a term used to describe a deep place of confinement. It is distinct from Sheol/Hades and is reserved for fallen angels awaiting their final judgment.

Jesus' Death and Resurrection: The Decisive Victory

Christ's death and resurrection mark a decisive turning point. As Peter declares, Jesus “was not abandoned to Hades” (Acts 2:27–31). Instead, through His resurrection, He conquered death and now holds “the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18).

The New Testament gives us glimpses into what this victory means. In 1 Peter 3:18–20, Christ is described as going and proclaiming victory to the “spirits in prison,” and in 1 Peter 4:6, the gospel is said to have been preached even to the dead. While the exact details are debated, the emphasis is clear: Jesus' work reaches into the realm of the dead and the unseen world.

Paul adds in Colossians 2:15 that through the cross, Christ “disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them.” His victory is not only over death, but over the powers of darkness themselves.

Ephesians 4:8–9 then gives a powerful picture of the result of this victory:

“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives... (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions of the earth?)”

In this light, Christ's descent into the realm of the dead is followed by His victorious ascent—bringing with Him the righteous of the Old Testament who had been awaiting redemption. Those who were in the place of rest within Sheol are now brought into the fullness of God's presence. What was once a place of waiting for the faithful has now been surpassed by direct access to God through Christ.

Because of this, everything has changed. The New Testament now describes believers as being “with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23), not waiting in Sheol. Death's power has been broken, its sting removed (1 Cor. 15:55).

And this victory is not His alone—it is ours in Him. Those who belong to Christ share in His triumph over sin, death, and the powers of darkness. What once held humanity captive has been overcome, and Jesus now leads His people—from every generation—out of death and into eternal life.

Amen!