

Death

R. David Pogge
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Why do so many Christians believe Greek mythology about death?

Part 1

Today we are going to talk about what happens when you die. In particular, we are going to compare Greek mythology to the Biblical truth about what happens at death. It is remarkable that many Christians, perhaps even the majority, believe Greek mythology instead of the Bible.

Here's the outline of today's broadcast. In this first segment we are going to review the Greek myth about death, and then look at the historical events that cause the Roman Catholic Church to replace the Biblical truth about death with Greek mythology in the dark ages.

In the second segment, we will present the Biblical description of what happens at death. We will use scriptures to show that the Bible presents a description of what happens after death that is entirely different from the Greek mythology generally taught in Christian churches today.

Finally, in the third segment, we will address the practical implications of what one believes about death. Does it really matter if one believes Greek mythology or the Bible? Yes, it certainly does, and we will explain why.

So let's begin by examining Greek and Roman mythology. The two are always discussed together because Roman mythology is nothing more than Greek mythology with the names changed. The Romans gave Zeus, the Greek king of the gods, the Roman name, Jupiter. The Greek god of the dead, Hades, was renamed Pluto by the Romans. All the Roman gods are just Greek gods with Roman names. The Romans myths are just plagiarized versions of Greek myths.

Just as the pagan Roman Empire found it expedient to unify the empire by adopting Greek mythology and simply changing the names of the gods, papal Rome made it easy for pagans to join the church by letting them continue their pagan practice of worshipping statues. They just replaced the statues of Roman gods with statues of Christian saints. The second commandment prohibits the worship of statues, so the Church eliminated the Second Commandment; but that wasn't enough. They also had to get rid of the Biblical teaching about death being like sleep in order for the dead saints to be awake to hear, and answer prayers. Greek mythology enabled them to do that.

Edith Hamilton's classic book, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes, describes tells what the Romans believed about death. As JoAn reads Hamilton's description of the Underworld, please mentally substitute Heaven for the Elysian Fields, Purgatory for Erebus, and Hell for Tartarus. Compare the notion of Charon taking dead souls to the adamant gate, where Cerberus is the gatekeeper, with the notion that the angel of death takes souls to the pearly gates, where Saint Peter is the gatekeeper. The belief that Pluto tortures sinners in Tartarus is the origin of the myth that Satan tortures sinners in Hell.

THE UNDERWORLD

The kingdom of the dead was ruled by one of the twelve great Olympians, Hades or Pluto, and his Queen, Persephone. It is often called by his name, Hades. It lies, the Iliad says, beneath the secret places of the earth. In the Odyssey, the way to it

leads over the edge of the world across Ocean. In later poets there are various entrances to it from the earth through caverns and beside deep lakes.

Tartarus and Erebus are sometimes two divisions of the underworld, Tartarus the deeper of the two, the prison of the Sons of Earth; Erebus where the dead pass as soon as they die. Often, however, there is no distinction between the two, and either is used, especially Tartarus, as a name for the entire region.

In Homer the underworld is vague, a shadowy place inhabited by shadows. Nothing is real there. The ghosts' existence, if it can be called that, is like a miserable dream. The later poets define the world of the dead more and more clearly as the place where the wicked are punished and the good rewarded. In the Roman poet Virgil this idea is presented in great detail as in no Greek poet. All the torments of the one class and the joys of the other are described at length. Virgil too is the only poet who gives clearly the geography of the underworld. The path down it leads to where Acheron, the river of woe, pours into Cocytus, the river of lamentation. An aged boatman named Charon ferries the souls of the dead across the water to the farther bank, where stands the adamantine gate to Tartarus (the name Virgil prefers). Charon will receive into his boat only the souls of those upon whose lips the passage of money was placed when they died and who were duly buried.

On guard before the gate sits Cerberus, the three-headed, dragon-tailed dog, who permits all spirits to enter, but none to return. On his arrival each one is brought before three judges, Rhadamanthus, Minos, and Aeacus, who pass sentence and send the wicked to everlasting torment and the good to a place of blessedness called the Elysian Fields.

Three other rivers, beside Acheron and Cocytus, separate the underworld from the world above; Phlegethon, the river of fire; Styx, the river of the unbreakable oath by which the gods swear; and Lethe, the river of forgetfulness.

Somewhere in this vast region is Pluto's palace, but beyond saying that it is many-gated and crowded with innumerable guests, no writer describes it. Around it are wide wastes, wan and cold, and meadows of asphodel, presumably strange, pallid, ghostly flowers. We do not know anything more about it. The poets did not care to linger in that gloom-hidden abode.

The belief that the soul goes immediately to Heaven or Hell at death comes from directly Greek mythology. As we will see in part 2, the Bible tells an entirely different story about what happens after death.

There are two reasons why papal Rome adopted pagan Rome's myth about death.

First, it was easier to convert pagan Romans if they didn't have to give up their beliefs about death. That is still true today. Perhaps there is no doctrine more difficult to correct than the state of the dead. People who have been told all their lives that their dearly departed friends and relatives are enjoying a blissful existence right now in Heaven (regardless of how they lived their lives on Earth) don't want to hear the truth. Many Protestant churches today cling to Roman mythology for the same reason. They don't want to risk losing members by destroying their cherished belief that their loved ones are now in "a better place."

The second reason why the Roman Catholic Church adopted the Greco-Roman death myth is that it allowed the church to sell indulgences. If you tell vulnerable, grieving people that Saint Peter will allow your loved one to leave Tartarus and enjoy eternal bliss in the Elysian Fields, in return for a significant donation to the church, what grieving person can refuse? Not only that! You can even buy indulgences for sins you have not yet committed so that you can go straight to Heaven without spending a single, uncomfortable minute in Purgatory! The Greco-Roman death myth was a cash cow for the Roman Catholic Church.

Some modern Protestant churches have retained the Greek myth about death because they think that the threat of eternal torment will encourage church members to behave. Therefore, eternal hellfire is preached often from their pulpits.

Other Protestants believe that a loving god would never punish people this way, and fear that the doctrine of eternal hellfire drives people away from the church. They find it advantageous to preach that God loves everyone, so everyone will go straight to heaven when they die.

But since consciousness in death has its roots in Greek mythology, and not the Bible, there should be no argument. Neither eternal damnation nor universal salvation should be taught from Protestant pulpits. The Biblical truth about death should be preached instead of Greek mythology, despite the perceived practical advantages of preaching the Greek myth.

We will set the tone for our discussion of what the Bible says about death with this short excerpt of “The Trumpet Shall Sound” from Handel’s Messiah..

[music – Messiah, “The Trumpet Shall Sound”]

Part 2

Before the break we saw that the notion that dead people go straight to Heaven or Hell when they die is simply a recycled Greek myth. The Catholic Church took advantage of this myth to sell indulgences, and bully their members into obedience. They made the Greek myth appear to be a Christian doctrine by changing the names of the Elysian Fields, Tartarus, and Hades to Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell. They replaced Cerberus with Saint Peter, and Pluto with Satan. Because they wanted church members to pray to statues of saints, they eliminated the commandment prohibiting idol worship, and taught that the saints were not asleep in the grave, but were alive in Heaven, listening to prayers and helping the penitent.

None of this is Biblical. The Bible presents an entirely different view of the state of the dead. Here is a brief summary, which we will follow up with scriptural support.

According to the Bible, people enter a state of unconsciousness when they die, with a very few, very notable exceptions (such as Enoch, Elijah, and Moses). Jesus is currently judging everyone, including those who are still living, and those who are dead. When all the cases have been decided, Jesus will return to Earth. The righteous dead will be resurrected and given glorious new bodies. The righteous living will also get new bodies, and all the righteous will ascend together to Heaven with Jesus. The unrighteous living will be killed by the brightness of Jesus’ coming, and the unrighteous dead will remain dead for a while.

The righteous will spend 1,000 years in Heaven, reviewing the records of the lives of anyone they care about, to discover why those people were either saved or lost. At the end of the thousand years, New Jerusalem will come down from Heaven, with the saints inside. At this time, all the unrighteous dead will be resurrected. True to their unrighteous characters, they will attack New Jerusalem, and God will kill them all. They will cease to exist.

Then God will recreate the Earth, restoring it to a condition similar to the Garden of Eden, as a home for the righteous forever.

Clearly, this doctrine is incompatible with the worship of saints. What good would it do to pray to saint who is unconscious in the grave? Even if Saint Christopher did hear your prayer for a safe journey,

what could he do about it? In order to believe that Saint Christopher can keep you safe, you have to believe Saint Christopher has some sort of limited power on Earth, just like one of the lesser gods of Roman mythology, and he has to be conscious in heaven, capable of hearing your prayer.

The Biblical doctrine about the state of the dead bears absolutely no resemblance at all to the Greek mythology commonly preached in many Christian churches. Let's open the Bible and see this straight from God's word, starting with the Gospel of John, chapter 11.

Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. (This Mary, whose brother Lazarus now lay sick, was the same one who poured perfume on the Lord and wiped his feet with her hair.) So the sisters sent word to Jesus, "Lord, the one you love is sick."

When he heard this, Jesus said, "This sickness will not end in death. No, it is for God's glory so that God's Son may be glorified through it." Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. So when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he stayed where he was two more days, and then he said to his disciples, "Let us go back to Judea."

...

"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up."

His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep.

So then he told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead, and for your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."

...

On his arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet him, but Mary stayed at home.

"Lord," Martha said to Jesus, "if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask."

Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

Martha answered, "I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day."

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

"Yes, Lord," she replied, "I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, who is to come into the world."

...

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. “Take away the stone,” he said.

“But, Lord,” said Martha, the sister of the dead man, “by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.”

Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?”

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.”

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” [John 11]

Let’s look at some key points. Jesus told his disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.” He did not say, “Our friend Lazarus has gone to Heaven; but I am going to bring him back.” He did not say, “Our friend Lazarus has gone to Hell; but I am going to rescue him from torment.” If Lazarus had gone to Heaven, and was enjoying unimaginable bliss, it would have been cruel of Jesus to bring him back to Earth. If Lazarus had gone to Hell, it would have been cruel for Jesus to let His friend be tortured there for four days before rescuing him. Jesus isn’t cruel. He knew that Lazarus was unconscious in the grave, and would remain so until his resurrection. Since he wasn’t enjoying the pleasures of Heaven, or suffering the torment of Hell, it didn’t matter how long Jesus waited before resurrecting him.

John tells us that His disciples replied, “ ‘Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.’ Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead.’ ” Jesus didn’t lie. It would have been a lie to say that Lazarus was asleep if he had actually been awake in Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory. Jesus equated death with sleep. His disciples misunderstood, thinking He meant natural sleep when He meant the sleep of death. So, He told them plainly what He meant.

Martha said, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” She didn’t say, “I know Lazarus is in a better place.” She was a well-informed Jewish girl. She knew what the Old Testament says about death. She knew what Jesus had told her about death. She knew her brother would remain dead, in the grave, until the resurrection.

When she said, “I know he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day,” Jesus did not correct her by saying, “No, he is already resurrected.” Instead, Jesus said to her, “The one who believes in me **will** live.” He used the future tense. Lazarus was dead at the moment, but was going to live again at the resurrection.

Furthermore, note what Jesus said about the condition for being resurrected in the future. “The one who believes in me will live.” He did not say, “The one who buys salvation from the Church will live.” If Catholic Church in the dark ages had allowed the common people to read the Bible in their own language, they would have known their dead loved ones were sleeping peacefully in their graves, awaiting the resurrection, and would not have bought indulgences to get their loved ones out of Purgatory. They would not have bought candles to burn in front of statues of saints to gain their favor and assistance if they had known the saints were sleeping peacefully, unaware of the prayers asked of them.

What passages in the Old Testament gave Martha the idea that her brother was sleeping and would “rise again in the resurrection at the last day?” She probably had heard passages like these from the book of Job.

“Why did I not perish at birth,

and die as I came from the womb?

Why were there knees to receive me

and breasts that I might be nursed?

For now I would be lying down in peace;

I would be asleep and at rest

with kings and rulers of the earth,

who built for themselves places now lying in ruins,

with princes who had gold,

who filled their houses with silver.

Or why was I not hidden away in the ground like a stillborn child,

like an infant who never saw the light of day?

There the wicked cease from turmoil,

and there the weary are at rest.

Captives also enjoy their ease;

they no longer hear the slave driver’s shout.

The small and the great are there,

and the slaves are freed from their owners. [Job 3:11-18]

Job knew that everyone, from slaves to kings, even the wicked, were at rest in the grave. They didn’t need to buy indulgences from the church to relieve them of their suffering.

Job wished his words were recorded on a scroll. Fortunately for us, they were.

“Oh, that my words were recorded,

that they were written on a scroll,

**that they were inscribed with an iron tool on lead,
or engraved in rock forever!**

**I know that my redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand on the earth.**

**And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;**

**I myself will see him
with my own eyes—I, and not another.**

How my heart yearns within me! [Job 19:23-27]

After his skin was destroyed, Job expected to see his redeemer with his own eyes. Clearly Job was expecting some sort of physical resurrection. He did not believe the dead would suffer in Purgatory until somebody bribed the pope to get them out. Solomon, too, understood what happens at death. He said this:

All share a common destiny—the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not.

**As it is with the good,
so with the sinful;**

**as it is with those who take oaths,
so with those who are afraid to take them.**

This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of people, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead. Anyone who is among the living has hope—even a live dog is better off than a dead lion!

**For the living know that they will die,
but the dead know nothing;**

**they have no further reward,
and even their name is forgotten.**

**Their love, their hate
and their jealousy have long since vanished;**

never again will they have a part

in anything that happens under the sun.

... Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. [Ecclesiastes 9:2-6, 10]

So, the righteous and the unrighteous share the same fate—they both enter a state of unconsciousness. The nearly righteous don't become probationary angels sent back to Earth to earn their wings by showing Jimmy Stuart, "It's a wonderful life!"

Martha knew what the Old Testament said about death. She knew her brother Lazarus was sleeping in the grave, unconscious, waiting along with everyone else for the resurrection at the last day. To prove that He has the power to resurrect the dead, Jesus raised Lazarus. But He did not raise everyone at that time. We know that because, on Pentecost, Peter told the crowd,

"Fellow Israelites, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ... For David did not ascend to heaven ... [Acts 2:29, 34]

The disciples knew from Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones¹ that resurrection is connected to the kingdom being restored to Israel. So, when Jesus appeared to them after His resurrection,

Then they gathered around him and asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. "Men of Galilee," they said, "why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven." [Acts 1:6-11]

Given this promise from the two angels, they expected Jesus to return from heaven at any moment to come back and restore the kingdom. But Jesus did not return immediately, and some believers died without seeing His return. This concerned some of them, so the believers at Thessalonica asked Paul about it. He wrote this response to them, found in 1 Thessalonians, chapter 4.

Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. For we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call

¹ Ezekiel 37:1-14

of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words. [1 Thessalonians 4:13-18]

Paul did not say, “The Greeks were right. Your brothers are in the Elysian Fields right now, so that should comfort you.”

Paul refers to death as sleep twice in this passage, and doesn’t feel the need to qualify the term. He knows that his readers will know that “sleep” means “death” without having to explain what he means. Furthermore, it is clear that resurrection will be a group activity in the future. He doesn’t say that every Christian who has died has already risen and is with God in heaven now. All the dead believers will be resurrected at the same time as the living believers are translated to heaven.

Paul clearly told the Thessalonians what happens to believers when they die; but what happens to non-believers? John tells us in Revelation 20, verses 4 and 5.

And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony about Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.)

There will be two resurrections. Believers will be resurrected first when Jesus returns. Non-believers will be resurrected 1,000 years later. The book of Revelation goes on to explain that Satan and the non-believers will then be destroyed in the Lake of Fire. Satan doesn’t torment the wicked people forever in Hell the same way Pluto torments the wicked in Tartarus, as stated in the Roman myth.

Why does all this matter? And what about those Bible verses that are sometimes used to support the Roman mythology about death? We will address those issues after we pause to reflect upon the fact that our Redeemer Liveth.

[music- Messiah, “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth”]

Part 3

In our first segment we said the notion that people go straight to Heaven or Hell when they die comes from Greek mythology, and was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church in order to sell indulgences and allow pagan converts to pray to dead saints. In the second segment we saw that the Bible teaches that the dead are sleeping in their graves, awaiting their ultimate fate. The righteous will be resurrected to eternal life, and the wicked will be destroyed. We have not yet addressed the parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus, which is sometimes twisted to support the Greek myth. Let’s do that now.

Every parable can be twisted in an attempt to prove something other than the intended point. The parable about the Pearl of Great Price is intended to teach that you should recognize what is really important, and strive to attain it—not that you can get financial security by investing in jewelry. The Parable of the Ten Virgins teaches the importance of being ready for Jesus when He comes—not that you shouldn’t share your oil with others who need it. The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares teaches that God will separate the good from the bad at the Second Coming—not that Christians should not weed their vegetable gardens. (I learned that the hard way.)

If I wanted to teach a lesson discouraging greed, I might tell a story about a man who was told by a leprechaun that he could become wealthy by digging up the pot of gold buried at the end of the rainbow.

The parable only works because you know that leprechauns don't exist, and there is no pot of gold at the end of a rainbow, and that you can never reach the end of the rainbow because it moves every time you move. The parable works because it is based on a premise you know is false.

In the same way, the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus, only works because the premise is false. Jesus wanted to make the point, **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. ... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead”** [Luke 16:9, 31] He did that using the well-known, foolish Roman myth about people going to Heaven or Hell when they died. Jesus was trying to show them how foolish it would be to think that someone coming back to life to warn about the coming judgment would have any more credibility than Moses and the Prophets. And, just to prove His point, He did bring back a man named Lazarus from the dead; and the leaders did not listen to him!

When Jesus spoke this parable, He was not giving a sermon on the state of the dead, endorsing the Greek myth that there is a great chasm between Hades and the Elysian Fields. When Jesus spoke that parable to the Jews, the Jews did not believe in Greek mythology, so there was no confusion about what Jesus was saying. It is confusing to some people today because the Catholic Church replaced the Biblical truth about death with Greek mythology in order to sell indulgences and bully people into obedience. Over the years this Catholic doctrine has become ingrained in so many churches that many people erroneously believe that Jesus taught it. They miss Jesus point that one should believe on the basis of Moses and the Prophets, and erroneously think that Jesus was teaching that their dead relatives could contact them from beyond the grave.

If you believe that your dead loved ones are in another dimension, conscious of what is going on in your life, it makes it easy for Satan to impersonate your dead loved one and give you bad advice that will lead you astray. That's why the Bible warns,

“Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God. ...”**“I will set my face against anyone who turns to mediums and spiritists to prostitute themselves by following them, and I will cut them off from their people. ...”****“A man or woman who is a medium or spiritist among you must be put to death. You are to stone them; their blood will be on their own heads.”** ... **Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD; because of these same detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. [Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 20:27, Deuteronomy 18:10-12]**

Don't be deceived by a foolish Greek myth. You don't have to worry about your dead friends and relatives suffering eternal torment because they failed to accept Jesus. Yes, it is sad that they might not enjoy the eternal blessings that God offers to those who believe Him; but they aren't suffering now, and they won't suffer for eternity.

God judges the heart. It could be that some of your deceased friends and relatives had accepted Jesus without your knowledge. There is a chance they will participate in the resurrection of the righteous even if they never attended church. But why take the chance? All those who accept Jesus as their savior can be assured of salvation. Something as important as salvation should not be left to chance.

You can't pay the church to save your dead friends and relatives; but you can tell your living friends and relatives the Good News of salvation. You can share the Gospel with them, and help them to live a

happier, more fulfilling life on Earth now, and be assured of enjoying the blessings of everlasting life in the Earth made new.

God has a wonderful reward for those people who love and obey Him. You can order your life in such a way that you will receive eternal life when Jesus returns. We pray that you will.