

What are the differences between Hades, Sheol, Tartarus, and Hell?

These four terms describe different aspects of the afterlife and the realm of the dead, though they're often conflated under the English word "hell."

Sheol is the Old Testament term for the general abode of all the dead—both righteous and unrighteous. Sheol literally means a place where all the dead, both righteous and unrighteous, go at the end of their lives. Depending on the context, Sheol may signify the abode of both the righteous dead and the ungodly dead.

Hades is the New Testament Greek equivalent to Sheol. Hades was used eleven times in the New Testament, and its meaning is very similar to Sheol—it was viewed as a place where all the dead went, both righteous and unrighteous. However, the New Testament increasingly distinguishes Hades as specifically the place of torment for the unrighteous. Hades is viewed as the place that receives the ungodly for the **intervening period between death and resurrection**.

In [Revelation 20:13](#), Hades is essentially a holding place for the unrighteous dead until judgment, after which they will be cast into the lake of fire.

Tartarus is uniquely specific. The Greek word Tartarus is mentioned once, in [2 Peter 2:4](#), as a **prison for fallen angels**. The ancient Greeks regarded Tartarus as that abiding place where rebellious gods and other wicked ones were punished. Sometimes rabbis called this portion Tartarus, but that does not seem accurate.

Hell (Gehenna) represents the final place of eternal punishment. There is a fundamental difference between Hades and Gehenna.

- Hades is the place that receives the ungodly for the intervening period between death and resurrection, while
- **Gehenna** may be equated with the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels and the **lake of fire** into which death and hell are cast, becoming the final place of punishment by eternal fire following the resurrection and judgment of the lost.
- The word **Gehenna** also relates to burn pits outside major population centers where refuse, including dead bodies, was burned by the pagans, so it relates to the lake of fire in this way

Relate Abraham's bosom to these terms

Abraham's bosom occupies a unique position within the Sheol/Hades framework—it represents the righteous compartment of the intermediate state rather than a separate location entirely.

Those in Hades (torment section) can glimpse Abraham's bosom, the paradise of the saved, though there is no biblical indication that the reverse is true (or not true). This multi-chamber arrangement appears in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, where the rabbis divided Sheol or Hades into a righteous section called "paradise," and a wicked section called Tartarus. Abraham's bosom functioned as the righteous division—a place of comfort and fellowship rather than torment.

Some believe that until the Ascension, Abraham's bosom was also located in Sheol, that is, the place of the physically dead. This suggests that before Christ's resurrection, righteous Old Testament believers and those who died in faith occupied this compartment within Hades, awaiting their ultimate redemption. The image is of Lazarus reclining at a table leaning on Abraham's breast—as John leaned on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper—at the heavenly banquet.

The terminology shifted after Christ's work. The souls of the righteous, at death, go directly into the presence of God—the part of Sheol called "heaven," "paradise," or "Abraham's bosom". When Christ died, He descended into Hades and "led captivity captive"—liberating the righteous dead from their intermediate state and transferring them to heaven proper.

Abraham's bosom thus represents a transitional reality: the blessed compartment of Hades for Old Testament saints awaiting Christ, and subsequently a poetic expression for the heavenly presence of God where the righteous dwell eternally.

Purgatory

In common parlance, there is another term often mentioned...Purgatory. What is that all about?

The concept of purgatory—a **state of purification after death for those who die in a state of grace but with unconfessed venial sins**—lacks any direct biblical support, which is why it remains a point of significant theological disagreement between Catholic and Protestant traditions.

Catholic theology appeals to several passages as supporting evidence. [2 Maccabees 12:39–45](#) describes prayers and sacrifices offered for the dead, suggesting an intermediate state where the deceased benefit from intercession. [Matthew 12:32](#) mentions that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come," implying some sins *can* be forgiven in the age to come. [1 Corinthians 3:11–15](#) uses metaphors of fire testing works, which Catholic interpreters understand as

purification. [Revelation 21:27](#) states that “nothing unclean will ever enter” heaven, suggesting a need for cleansing.

Protestant theologians counter that these passages don’t explicitly teach purgatory. They argue that Christ’s sacrifice fully atones for all sins—past, present, and future—for those who believe ([Heb 10:10–14](#)). The thief on the cross was promised immediate paradise without any intermediate purification ([Luke 23:43](#)). Paul’s confidence that “to be absent from the body” is “to be at home with the Lord” ([2 Cor 5:8](#)) suggests no intermediate state of purification. [Hebrews 9:27](#) states that “people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”—not a purification process.

The doctrine of purgatory developed through church tradition rather than explicit scriptural teaching, which explains why it remains distinctly Catholic rather than universally Christian.

Some of the references, such as the books of the Maccabees, are not considered to be inspired works, and therefore not in the protestant Bibles. Some of these works are considered historical, but not inspired, and so no Biblical weight should be assigned. The Book of Enoch is another book that is considered non-inspired and not included