

What Does the Bible Say About Our Departed Loved Ones?

Selected Biblical References (NRSV)

Where do people go when they die?

Psalm 49:14-15 (*sheol = hades = the place of the dead*)

14 Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. 15 But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

Job 7:8-10 (*once people are gone, they are truly gone*)

8 The eye that beholds me will see me no more; while your eyes are upon me, I shall be gone. 9 As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; 10 they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.

Are the dead still active in some way?

Job 14:10-13 (*death compared to a sleep which will last to the end time*)

10 But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and where are they? 11 As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, 12 so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep. 13 Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!

Job 3:11-19 (*unlike this life, death is a time of rest and peace*)

11 "Why did I not die at birth, come forth from the womb and expire? ... 13 Now I would be lying down and quiet; I would be asleep; then I would be at rest 14 with kings and counselors of the earth who rebuild ruins for themselves, 15 or with princes who have gold, who fill their houses with silver. 16 Or why was I not buried like a stillborn child, like an infant that never sees the light? 17 There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. 18 There the prisoners are at ease together; they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster. 19 The small and the great are there, and the slaves are free from their masters.

Mark 12:18, 26 (*however, the dead continue to have some sense of existence, even before the resurrection*)

18 Some Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question ... [Jesus concluded his response by saying:] 26 "And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? 27 He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong."

Are the dead aware of what is happening on earth?

Ecclesiastes 9:5-10 (*the dead have no continuing connection with their former lives*)

5 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. 6 Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun. 7 Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. 8 Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. 9 Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. 10 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.

Psalm 6:4-5 (*the dead do not even have a conscious awareness of God*)

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

Do the dead experience the passage of time?

1 Corinthians 15:51-52 (*the arrival of the resurrection is immediate*)

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

2 Peter 3:8-10 (*existence outside this world, as with God, is existence outside of time itself*)

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

Do our departed loved ones assist us on earth?

Luke 16:19-31 (in death, Lazarus was comforted; he was not put to work for the living or the dead)

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house-- 28 for I have five brothers--that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

1 Samuel 28:8-17 (King Saul tries to get help from the dead prophet Samuel, Samuel refuses)

8 So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. And he said, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you." ... 11 Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?" He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me." ... 13 The woman said to Saul, "I see a divine being coming up out of the ground." 14 He said to her, "What is his appearance?" She said, "An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe." So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance. 15 Then Samuel said to Saul, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" Saul answered, "I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do." 16 Samuel said, "Why then do you ask me, since the LORD has turned from you and become your enemy? 17 The LORD has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the LORD has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David."

Do we go to be with our loved ones when we die?

Genesis 37:33-36 (Jacob looks forward to being with his son after death)

34 Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. 35 All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him.

Genesis 25:7-8, 17 (in death, we join the people who have gone before us)

7 This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred seventy-five years. 8 Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people ... 17 This is the length of the life of Ishmael, one hundred thirty-seven years; he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.

Philippians 1:21-25 (the greatest loved one we join in death is Jesus himself)

21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

What is the Christian hope for those who have died?

John 11:23-25 (Jesus is our living hope when facing the death of those we love)

21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. 22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." 23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." 24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." 25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, 26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" 27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 (those who have died will not be forgotten by God)

13 But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. 15 For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.