

# What happens after death?

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## *Heaven, hell and the afterlife*

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*John 14:1-3, Revelation 21:1-4, Matthew 25:46, Luke 16:19-31, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, 2  
KEY SCRIPTURES Corinthians 5:1-8*

## Introduction

The truth is that every human being is mortal. Death is a guaranteed destination of life. It is a question that transcends culture, age and background. The young think it is something that is well into the future. The older one gets the more the question of the afterlife begins to be more of a question. How many young people die unexpectedly? Young sportsmen have fallen whilst at their peak from an undiagnosed complaint. Mid-life death has carried off those who hoped for a long retirement. True Christianity does not shrink back from the question of the afterlife. The Scriptures have the answers. The Bible speaks with great clarity and consistently speaks about what lies beyond death. The answers Scripture gives are on one hand sobering but on the other it is gloriously hopeful.

## Death is Not the End

The first and most foundational truth many wish to avoid is that there is an existence after death. Their faith, yes, their faith, is that there is nothing after death. However, the Bible makes clear that physical death is not the end of existence. Jesus Himself states it clearly:

***John 11:25-26, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die."***

Here is the simple truth: all human beings will die. But the deeper truth is that man is not merely a physical being. God created men and women. The creation of the first man is recorded:

***Genesis 2:7 "...then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being."***

Man became a living being. The word for that in the Hebrew is 'soul'. The physical body contained a soul. That is the invisible reality within all mankind. It does not cease to exist

when the last breath is given. It goes on to live after death. Death is an interesting word. It indicates a separation. In actual death there is a separation of the soul from the body, not the extinction of the person. The writer of Ecclesiastes confirms this:

***Ecclesiastes 12:7 "Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it".***

It could not be clearer. The body goes into the grave. The spirit returns to God. This is the truth about every soul that ever walked the earth

### **What Happens Immediately After Death**

The Bible teaches the good news, that when death comes; the soul/spirit of the believer goes immediately into the presence of God. The apostle Paul expressed this with joyful confidence when he wrote

***2 Corinthians 5:8 "We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord".***

Let us be clear. The Bible has no purgatory, no 'soul sleep', no ante-waiting room. To depart this life is to continue in existence. For the believer it is to be with Jesus the Christ. Paul underlines this in his letter to the Philippians, writing from prison and facing possible execution:

***Philippians 1:21 "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain".***

There is no loss in death for the believer, rather it is gain — it is to be in the immediate, presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Think about the thief on the cross. Death was guaranteed within hours. All he did was recognise Jesus as his King. In return he was given the promise of eternal life with Jesus. He heard that directly from the King on the cross.

***Luke 23:43 "Verily I say unto thee, today shalt thou be with me in paradise".***

Notice there is no period of waiting in purgatory. No delays. That very day he would be in Paradise with Jesus.

### **Heaven — The Promise of God's Dwelling Place**

It is to be understood that heaven is not some mystical state of bliss. The Scriptures are clear: it is a real place that our Saviour Jesus said He would prepare for believers. Jesus said:

***John 14:2-3 "In My Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, so that where I am you may also be." (TLV)***

The book of Revelation gives us the most graphic description of what awaits the redeemed. John writes of a new heaven and a new earth, a holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down from God. He records these beautiful encouraging words:

***Revelation 21:4 "And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away".***

Heaven is a place where everything that was a great burden to human beings: sickness, grief, disease, loss, loneliness, even the event of physical death itself. For the believer all these have passed away forever. It is not just that there is an escape from suffering. But it is more, a glorious restoration of everything God originally intended for humanity, in the original creation of Paradise, but even more so. The greatest glory of being in heaven, however, is not its wondrous beauty or even its freedom from pain. It is the very presence of God Himself.

***Revelation 22:4 "They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads".***

At last, what all believers have longed for has come!

## **Hell — The Solemn Warning of Scripture**

The subject of hell is an awesome and terrible thing that has to be spoken of. Whilst there is joy in looking forward to heaven; the Bible is honest - we therefore must speak of hell. We cannot speak of one without the other. It was Jesus Himself — He who wept at the tomb of Lazarus, who welcomed children into His arms, who forgave the adulteress, was gentle with the Samaritan women, living in sin. His concern was that He wished hell on no one. He

spoke of Hell more than anyone else in Scripture. His concern was a great act of mercy and grace. He was clear:

***Matthew 25:46 "And these shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into everlasting life".***

We need to think long and hard about this: "everlasting punishment" for some and "everlasting life" for others. Everlasting describes both destinations. If heaven is eternal, so is hell. We cannot accept one without the other. Jesus told a parable that is both sobering and heart rendering. **Luke 16** tells of a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. They both died. Lazarus was taken by angels to Abraham's bosom, but the rich man found himself in the torment of hell. He cried out to Abraham:

***Luke 16:24 "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame".***

This parable teaches vital truths about hell. It is a place of conscious existence. We are told that the rich man thinks, feels, remembers and speaks. It is a place of torment and there is a complete separation from God's blessing. There is no escape from hell. That gulf of separation is permanent it cannot be crossed. It is to be remembered that hell is not God's spiteful revenge on sinners. It is the righteous consequence for those who by their own free will choice, lived a life of rejection. That is a rejection of God and His Son Jesus, who He had sent into the world. It is the rejection of God's mercy and grace.

***2 Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some count slowness, but is long-suffering toward us, not purposing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance".***

The death of Jesus on the cross opened a door to salvation, from the consequences of sin – death.

***Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."***

The salvation God offers is a free gift. The door of grace and mercy stands open whilst people live. To reject the gift and close the door in God's face, has the consequence of the

eternal Hell. The Gospel has to be the great call to people by all who teach and preach. The Scripture speaks eloquently:

***Deuteronomy 30:19 "I call Heaven and earth to record today against you. I have set before you: life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life, so that both you and your seed may live..".***

This was spoken to the Jewish people by Moses about their choices to obey or reject God. It is the same in the matter of heaven and hell – choose life.

### **The Resurrection — The Great Hope**

The Bible teaches a bodily resurrection. This is the believer's hope has within it, that the soul is going to be with God at death and will be reunited with the resurrected body This doctrine sets Christianity apart from every other worldview. The return of the Christ, will see the bodies of the dead being raised and the soul and the new spiritual body united, they are transformed and glorified through Jesus. The soul is not just some disembodied ethereal thing it will be clothed:

***1 Corinthians 15:44 "..it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body."***

***2 Corinthians 5:1-4 "For we know that if our earthly house [our body] of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For indeed in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our dwelling-place out of Heaven; if indeed in being clothed, we shall not be found naked. For we who are in this tabernacle groan, being burdened; inasmuch as we do not wish to be unclothed, but to be clothed, so that the mortal might be swallowed up by the life."***

Paul further writes with great pastoral tenderness to believers grieving their dead:

***1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 "For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord".***

The resurrection body will be real and physical, but transformed and imperishable. Our hope is not to drift around on clouds as disembodied spirits forever. Our hope is the resurrection of the body - a redeemed humanity dwelling in a renewed creation, in the full and glorious presence of God, for eternity.

***Hebrews 3:6 "But Christ was faithful as a Son over his own house; whose house we are, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end."***

## **The Final Judgment**

We must start our understanding that God's throne is established, not founded on love but on righteousness and judgement:

***Psalm 89:14 "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of thy throne; steadfast love and faithfulness go before thee."***

These Scripture teach that every human being will stand before God in judgment. The Scriptures make clear God looks to see if a person has lived righteously and depending on that, justice must be done. From an earthly perspective, if someone breaks the law, say they murder another, it is expected that they will be subject to justice. But this judgement is made in the context of steadfast love. This is how the Hebrew word *'Hesed'*, used, is translated. However, it means that the judgement is carried out with mercy and in faithfulness and truth, as meant by the Hebrew word *'emeth'*. Everyone will be treated fairly. We therefore, can now turn to what the Scripture teaches. There are two places of judgement. The first is the *Bema* or judgment seat of the Christ. There are two key Pauline portions of Scriptures to note here.

***2Co 5:10 "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body."***

***1Co 3:11-15 "For no other foundation can anyone lay, other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work shall be made manifest; for the Day shall reveal it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall test each one's work, as to what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built remains, he shall receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, but so as through fire."***

For the believer, this is the *Bema*, the Judgment Seat of the Christ. This is not a judgment of condemnation, for Paul also makes clear:

***Romans 8:1 "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus".***

The believer's judgement is an assessment of faithful service and a time of eternal reward. This is not a choice that God makes as a form of favouritism. Rather it is a judgement made as to the person having made the right choice. As said above it is a judgement about righteousness. For a believer, they do not stand before this set in their own righteousness, but in the righteousness of Jesus Himself.

***2 Corinthians 5:21 "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." (See also Romans 3:21ff and Romans 10:10)***

The second place of judgement is for those who have not accepted Jesus the Christ. It is the Great White Throne of judgment that awaits them. This is described by John in Revelation:

***Revelation 20:11-15 "Then I saw a great white throne and He who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled. And no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and they opened the books. And another Book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged by the things having been written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to their works. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the Lake of Fire. This is the second death, the Lake of Fire. And if anyone was not found having been written in the Book of Life, he was cast into the Lake of Fire."***

This is a deeply sad portion of Scripture, because it is a place of finality of judgement. It is where the books are opened and every life is assessed against God's perfect standard. Those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life, that those who have rejected God's gift of the Lord Jesus and His righteousness, face the second death - the lake of fire. This is not a comfortable doctrine. But it is a biblical one, and as a teacher who loves people, I cannot hide it or dismiss it. I can only hope that people will choose wisely whilst they have

their opportunity to do so in life.

## **The Urgency of the Gospel**

Everything the Bible says about heaven, hell and the afterlife gives weight and urgency to the message of the gospel. Paul makes the most succinct and clear appeal:

***Romans 10:13 "For "whosoever shall call upon the name of the LORD shall be saved.""***

The Scriptures outlined here are clear. Heaven and hell are real. It is therefore profitable to accept what God offers in love – the gift of Jesus who imparts righteousness. Pursue this above all things. Avoiding hell is worth any sacrifice. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life: no one comes to the Father except through Him (***John 14:6***). To share that message with those we love is not a burden. It is a great act of love we can offer.

The invitation of Scripture remains open today:

***Revelation 22:17 "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely".***

## **Conclusion**

Let us be clear. What the Bible teaches on the afterlife and heaven and hell, is not designed to frighten but to give light in the darkness. It pulls back the curtain on death and what lies beyond. It invites us to live in the light of eternity. For the believer, death has lost its sting. The grave has lost its victory.

Quoting from the Jewish Scriptures Paul confirms this:

***1 Corinthians 15:55-57 "" O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? Now the sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."***

Christ has conquered both, and those who are in Him share in that conquest. Heaven is real. Hell is real. The resurrection is real. And the God who made us, redeemed us and promises to receive us, is more real than anything this present life contains.

***Romans 8:38-39 "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor***

***principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (KJV)***

