

## **What Happens When I Die?**

“What happens when I die?” ranks #2 from 800+ responses you helped gather from your friends and families for our present series, “If You Could Ask God One Question.” Thank you for helping us and the results confirm that many are thinking about the significant life-and-death issue. Besides, this is the season to talk about it because we’ve all heard the quote, *“In this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.”*

Joking aside, this question concerning death and life after death is heightened in our extremely stressful and taxing pandemic season, when we are under yet another stay-at-home measure!

Some who have lost loved ones whom they could not visit before their passing - due to restrictive measures and social isolation -might wonder if they would see them again sometime in the future.

Others who are facing health challenges are anxious about uncertainty, fear, separation and loneliness; death seems to be knocking at their door every minute.

For many death is a nagging question and the greatest enemy, the relentless Grim Reaper that shows no respect for ethnic heritage, family of

origins, profession, socio-economic status, gender, or age.

For some who are suffering much pain, they want to know what’s beyond death; and if there’s certainty of a better future, death might not be here soon enough.

For people of faith some still wonder if they “go to heaven” immediately after they die; if not, where will they be, when will that “heaven” bit come, and what will they do there?

*[Response moment: Do you have anxiety or feel uncertain about death and life beyond?]*

These are great questions to ask and good reason to find out more from God’s word. But there are no easy but competing answers to the question “What Happens When I Die?”

Some don’t have an answer and pledge agnostic, for example, the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius, was asked a similar question and answered, “If we don’t know life, how can we know death.”

In one of Larry King’s interviews a few years back, *What happens after we die?: Spiritual Leaders Explore the Ultimate Mystery* Ellen Johnson, the then president of American Atheist, says that “death” is a nonsense word and

atheists don't worry about this question. This life is all there is; be good and get the most out of it, for this is as good as it gets.<sup>1</sup>

But this view seems a bit shallow and doesn't satisfy too many folks who are seeking for a deeper meaning of life than "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die."<sup>2</sup>

Even the famous atheist French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, admits that "there comes a time when we ask ... 'Is that all there is?'"<sup>3</sup>

If that is all there is, rearranging the chairs on the deck and playing fantastic music in the grand ball room of the Titanic wouldn't change the outcome<sup>4</sup> – even being the king of the world only lasted for a moment! Besides, aren't all the passengers on board are in a historic adventure and are looking forward to arriving at their destiny on the other side of the new world?

From the Chinese funeral practice of burning paper money and gift items to ensure that the dead has lots of good things in the afterlife, to the elaborate designs of Egyptian pyramids, to the reincarnation of New Age teaching,

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EFrgpeWh6tQ>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Is. 22:13; 1 Cor. 15:32.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics*, p. 250.

<sup>4</sup> This reference to the Titanic is drawn from the opinion piece by Dinesh D'Souza, "Life after death: What does the evidence show?" (<https://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2009/1209/p09s02-coop.html>)

"[s]omething deep in our souls is not satisfied with this whole world of time and mortality."<sup>5</sup> There is a universal yearning – hope - for a better future, a purpose for being and doing good, and a hope for a broken life made whole.

As C.S. Lewis says, "If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world."

- Those who hold an animistic or tribal religious view believe that the human soul after death remains on the earth or joins their ancestors' spirits wandering in the dark underworld for eternity.
- Furthermore, there is a big difference between a Muslim who believes a Palestinian boy killed by Israeli soldiers goes straight to heaven and the Hindu who believes that, because of karma, one must return in a different body to pursue the next stage of one's destiny.
- Or an Orthodox Jew who believes that all the righteous will be raised bodily to new life in the future resurrection and the Buddhist who hopes after death to be absorbed by the great impersonal and formless mother nature,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

dissolving one's own identity like a drop in the ocean.<sup>6</sup>

As we can see, there are different understandings of what the nature of one's destiny is and how one can get there. I invite you to sign up and join our discussion group on Wednesday night (<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/ask-god-one-question>).

Due to the limitation of time we'll explore - in broad terms - what the Bible has to say "What Happens After I Die?"

I am going straight to this first point:

***The soul is separated from the decaying body; one's consciousness and individuality remain intact.***

In Eccle. 12:6-7 King Solomon gives hints of the afterlife when he likens the physical body as a fragile earthen jar that is broken at death while the spirit/soul returns to the Creator. Here is a clear reference to the separation of the dead body and the soul/spirit. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* translation brings out the essence of the passage:

"Life, lovely while it lasts, is soon over.

Life as we know it, precious and beautiful, ends.

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<sup>6</sup> N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, Location 234, Kindle Edition. See also the aforementioned Larry King's show and <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/spiritual-growth/core-christian-beliefs/what-happens-when-you-die.html>.

***The body is put back in the same ground it came from. The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it.***<sup>7</sup>

Also, do you remember the dialogue between Jesus and the two criminals on the cross?<sup>8</sup>

The criminal on the left mocked Jesus but rebuked by the other on the right who then asked Jesus to remember him when His kingdom comes. "23:43 Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, today ***you*** will be with me in paradise."

And shortly after Luke tells us: <sup>23:46</sup> Jesus called out with a loud voice, "Father, into your hands ***I commit my spirit.***" When he had said this, ***he breathed his last.***"

We see from Scriptures and Jesus' experience in particular that the soul survives the death of the body. While the body dies biologically and begins to decay, the soul exists and continues in a disembodied but conscious state.

Recent surveys suggest that many people believe in life after death because of numerous reports and scientific research of near death experiences which also support the conscious state of disembodied souls after death.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gen. 2:7; 3:19.

<sup>8</sup> Lk. 23:39-43.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, <https://www.nyas.org/news-articles/academy-news/is-there-life-after-death/>; <https://nyulangone.org/doctors/1467610337/sam-parnia>.

[Response moment: *Have you heard of near death experience or heard from someone who claims to have NDE?*]

While these NDE's appear genuine, but they could also be a source of misunderstanding and some people may begin to base their views of the afterlife and heaven on these near-death experiences rather than on what the Bible teaches about the afterlife.<sup>10</sup> However, "Taken as a whole, this body of evidence shows that as people approach death, many sense they are coming not to the end of existence but to the beginning of another journey."<sup>11</sup>

Let's summarize what we have covered so far:

- there's a universal yearning – hope – for something beyond this earthly existence;
- we know that physical death is not the end point;
- there's a separation between the body and the soul after death;
- and the individual exists as a disembodied soul.

So a logical question follows: "Where would the disembodied soul go?"

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<sup>10</sup> People claim to have gone to heaven, seen and conversed with loved ones and friends, family members who have passed before. In fact, some even claim to have conversed with Jesus in heaven. But regretfully they were sent back to earth. As warn by renowned Christian apologist, William Lane Craig, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/practical-issues/what-happens-when-we-die/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://others.org.au/features/ten-reasons-to-believe-in-life-after-death/>

Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man is instructive (Lk. 16:19-26). Here Jesus describes that the once poor earthly Lazarus after death is by Abraham's side, where he will await the final resurrection, and the rich man suffering in Hades.

The Greek word *Hades* is the intermediate state before the final resurrection and is the equivalent to the Hebrew word *Sheol*.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Hades = Sheol = Realm of the Departed Souls***

In OT Sheol generally has negative, punitive connotations and refers to the realm of the departed dead, the underworld of departed spirits. Now *Hades* is not *Hell*, which is a different word, "Gehenna" which is the ultimate abode of the wicked after the final judgment.<sup>13</sup>

This rich man is not in Gehenna; he's in Hades – kind of like the penultimate "holding station" but still a pretty unpleasant place – where the dead awaits his resurrection to final judgment. Only then will people be ushered in to their *final* state, which is new heaven and new earth or hell.

### ***Hades → Final Judgment → Gehenna***

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Gen. 37:35; Ps. 49:15; 55:15; 86:13; Isaiah 5:14; Hosea 13:14.

<sup>13</sup> "Gehenna" comes from the Hebrew place name "valley of the son of Hinnom," located south of Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian exile (cf. Josh. 15:8; 18:16); the place was infamous for child sacrifice and other pagan rites (cf. 2 Ki. 16:3; 23:10; Jer. 19:6-7). In the time of Jesus, Gehenna was the city dump where all the garbage was burned and used as a depiction of the final judgment on the wicked. See Gary A. Lee, "Gehenna," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 2:423.

Now, what about the disembodied souls of believers?  
Where would they be?

The souls/spirits of the believers go to be with Christ - “you will be ***with me*** in paradise” (Lk. 23:43); “Abraham’s side” (Lk. 16:22) - where they will await their bodily resurrection.

The picture of the believer’s soul after death being with Christ in a place of intimacy, rest, contentment, and peace is also echoed in Paul’s teaching: <sup>Phil. 1:21</sup> For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul expresses his dilemma to the Philippians: He wants to stay alive for a fruitful ministry. But, to be absent from the body and present with the Lord is far better, and that’s his heart’s desire.

Now let me repeat: for Christ-followers after death, when they are in this intermediate state of disembodied existence, they are brought into a closer, more intimate fellowship with Christ, and they wait in that state the future ***bodily*** resurrection when Jesus returns at the end of history and the beginning of the new heaven and earth.

This takes us to another crucial point about what happens after death:

***God is concerned about our spiritual death; the overarching Jesus story is about restoration of life.***

According to Scriptures both physical and spiritual death are the consequence and penalty of sin common to fallen humanity. Death leads to ...

- the loss of blessed existence in the presence of God;
- humanity’s natural alienation from God and hostility toward God;
- disharmony between individuals and with creation itself;
- and the failure to live out God’s purpose as image-bearers (cf. Jeremy’s message last week – “Damaged by Evil”).<sup>14</sup>

In view of what the bible teaches about sin and its consequences, we can understand the severity of Jesus’ warning to the disciples:

<sup>Matt. 10:28</sup> Don’t be afraid of those who want to kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both ***soul and body in hell*** [“Gehenna”].

Killing the body - the end of our physical/biological life-span - doesn’t mean the immortality of the soul. In fact, in his dialogue with the religious leaders, Jesus says:

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12ff.; 6:23. “Where man turns his back upon God ... he cuts himself off from the root of his life and becomes subject to death ... He lives as a sinner in death ... the power dominating his life ... ‘Spiritual’ death and ‘physical’ death, inextricably bound up together, constitute the reality of life in sin ...” (Dictionary of New Testament Theology, I:436.)

Jn. 5:28 Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, <sup>29</sup> and they will rise again. **Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.**<sup>15</sup>

Jesus' point is clear: Everyone will be raised from the dead and give an account before God; those who refuse to believe in Him and His message will face a judgment worst than physical death at the final judgment - they will receive appropriate retribution and experience what the Apostle John calls "the second death," i.e., being permanently banished from the presence of God.<sup>16</sup>

While there are different perspectives on whether it is literally fire and burning sulphur in hell or not, we know that God is good and love, but being apart from Him – being in a state without love - will mean being in a place of suffering and pain.

***The opposite of everlasting life is not earthly life but "second death," the permanent banishment from God.***

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<sup>15</sup> Along the same vein, the author of Hebrews writes: <sup>Heb. 9:27</sup> And just as each person is destined to die once and **after that comes judgment,**<sup>28</sup> so also Christ was offered once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are **eagerly waiting for him.**

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jn. 5:24; 2 Thess. 1:8-9; Rev. 2:11; 20:6, 14, 12-15; 21:8.

Any talk about God being the Judge and Hell is not very popular in contemporary culture, but I think we can't shy away from truth. NT scholar Kline Snodgrass writes,

"No one wants to think about God judging us .... We want a God who loves but makes no demands. God is indeed love, but love itself demands because it cares ... The God of the Bible cares about us, and the God of the Bible has demands for the people he created in his own image ... We will be judged on how we reflected God's character, the very purpose for which we were created."<sup>17</sup>

***The overarching story of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is not a story of death and eternal damnation but a story of God's love in the restoration and transformation of life so all creation can fulfill His eternal purposes.***

This brings us to the last but not least point I want to make regarding the question about what happens after we die:

***Jesus has conquered death; HIS-story can be our story.***

Hope lies at the centre of the Jesus story; death is a beaten enemy. The hope and assurance of Jesus' promise of eternal life is the anchor we need in this changing and confusing time.

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<sup>17</sup> Kline R. Snodgrass, *Who God Says You Are*, p. 192.

Jesus says in Jn. 11:25, “I am **the resurrection and the life**. Anyone who believes in me **will live, even after dying**.”

In a world dizzy with fear and confusion, despair and discouragement, we need a hope that the power of sin is defeated and the sting of death is removed – a hope that assures us that all evil will be wiped away, every wrong right, and brokenness whole. (Cf. 1 Cor. 15:51-57.) This is the hope exactly what God has offered to all in the coming of Jesus.

I love the way Gregory E. Ganssle puts it:

“In the Christian story our future is good ... That God’s plan is for restored wholeness means that suffering and death do not get the last word.”<sup>18</sup>

*[Response moment: Do you want this hope?]*

Paul explains that our resurrection is based upon and guaranteed by Jesus’ resurrection:

<sup>1</sup>Cor. 15:20 But Christ has indeed been **raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep**.<sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.<sup>22</sup> **For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive**.<sup>19</sup>

No matter how difficult it is to change the present realities of suffering and death, our future can and will be good.

And God’s word is clear that He “wants **all** people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” (1 Tim. 2:4.)

***In the resurrection we will be made whole and become transformed people, living in harmony with one another and with the Lord Jesus Christ as we worship God in His glory, grow in the knowledge of His truth and grace, co-reigning with Jesus, and explore the wonders of the new heaven and new earth as Spirit-empowered image bearers.***

Now listen carefully, for what I am about to say in these closing comments has eternal consequence!

From the Bible’s perspective, the question of life after death raises the question of life before death! So if you are asking this question “What Happens After I Die?” God is asking you “What are you doing with the life you are leading now?”

***Our life in the present is infused with eternal significance; what and how we live now matters***

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory E. Ganssle, *Our Deepest Desires*, pp. 126, 128.

<sup>19</sup> See also Rom. 5:12ff.

Toby Jennings hits the nail on the mark:

“Death, then, serves well as a megaphone to call the living to attention concerning what they do with the life they now possess.”<sup>20</sup>

If we see and understand our story in Jesus story, then we don't need to fear death but embrace the future by Jesus resurrection power and begin to live tomorrow today.

If you want to find out more about how you can have this hope and begin to live tomorrow today without the fear of death, you can fill out and indicate that on our online Welcome Card or you can send an email to me, [Andrew@cornerstonechurch.ca](mailto:Andrew@cornerstonechurch.ca). We would love to share with you God's love and His gift of everlasting life in Jesus.

For all Christ-followers, we have Jesus resurrection power and authority as well as the indwelling of the Holy Spirit – the deposit guaranteeing our future inheritance – enabling us to partner with God in His life rescuing mission. As N.T. Wright has repeatedly reminded us, the ultimate destination is not “going to heaven when we die” but being bodily raised into the transformed, glorious likeness of Jesus Christ, starting now to bring heaven on earth: “Thus, if we want to speak of ‘going to heaven when we die.’ we should be clear that this represents the first, and far less

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<sup>20</sup> Toby Jennings, *Precious Enemy: A Biblical Portrait of Death*, Location 656, Kindle Edition.

important, stage of a two-stage process. Resurrection isn't life after death; it's life after life after death.”<sup>21</sup>

I want to give you a heads-up about our next sermon series beginning in May, “Following Jesus: Find Your Next Step,” when you can access our online your own spiritual self-assessment tools to help you to find out where you are at and how you can grow as disciples so to make the greatest impact here and now in Jesus' name.

Our personal transformation here and now is the first fruit or the sign of what is to come. God has an ultimate destiny for each of us and is committed to bringing that destiny to fruition.

Marcus Aurelius, the second century Roman king and Stoic philosopher, says, “It is not death that a man should fear, but he should fear never beginning to live.”

God's short answer to the question, “What happens after I die?” is this:

***I want you to live life to the full, now and forever!***

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, p. 168.