



What Happens When I Die?

by Rev. Stephen Hower

Can anyone know for certain what happens at the moment of death? What do you believe about death and the afterlife? Why do you believe *what* you believe? Is one opinion just as good as another?

I've conducted hundreds of funerals for families of every background and belief. Prior to the funeral, I typically gather the immediate family together for comfort, to share their memories, and to plan the memorial. Almost always there are differences of opinion about what should or should not be said, sung, or allowed during the service. The disagreements never really surprise me. Our families are just a reflection of the diversity of beliefs we have in America on the subject of death. Some hold Christian beliefs rooted in the Scripture and many do not. Still others believe it's useless to speculate about things no one can know for sure.

I have also stood by the bedside of terminally ill patients, sometimes at the moment of death. It is not unusual for patients and their families in those situations to ask lots of questions about the inevitable.

"What's going to happen, you know ... when *I* die? What's that going to be like? What can I expect to feel, see, or hear? Will I see angels? Will Jesus suddenly appear and personally take me to heaven? What will heaven be like? *How can I be sure I will go to heaven?* Will I be greeted by members of my family that have already died? Will I know others in heaven? Will others know me?" These are some of the questions I hear.

The Other Side

There is no end to the confusion people have about the "hereafter." One question leads to several more. Where do we turn for our answers? Are there trustworthy books, teachers, or sacred writings that address our questions, or are we left to merely speculate about these things?

Yes, of course there are answers. There are all sorts of answers to our questions. In fact, entire books, many of them bestsellers, have been written to give very specific answers to these all-important questions. I'm never surprised to see several of these books in the room of a dying patient. Many terminally ill friends and their families have shared copies of their favorite resources to help educate me on what they have come to believe happens when a person dies. I have personally read a half dozen of these best-selling books, each one leaving me more confused than the last. The answers to the *hereafter* question are as varied as the greeting card selection in your local drug store. Depending on what you're looking for, there is a perfect answer—just for you.

As of 2021 more than 20 million copies of *The Shack* have been sold. It is a clever novel about a man's search for the truth after the abduction and death of his daughter. In the story, the main character Mackenzie Philips, called "Mac" by his family and friends, meets God at a remote shack where his daughter was killed by a pedophile. Over the course of a weekend, Mac has extensive conversations with the three Persons of the Trinity to discover the truth about life, death, and life after death. The conversation helps Mac overcome "The Great Sadness," the phrase he uses to describe the devastation of his tragic loss. The book has apparently helped a lot of readers form conclusions and come to terms with the purpose of life, death, and life after death.

If a novel like *The Shack* is not to your liking, perhaps you should read *90 Minutes In Heaven*, the self-professed true story of Don Piper, a Baptist pastor whose Ford Escort was struck head on by a tractor trailer while returning from a pastor's conference in East Texas. Paramedics who responded to the accident pronounced Piper dead at the scene, that is, until another pastor returning from the same conference came upon the accident an hour later and "prayed Don back to life." Piper's published recollection of what he experienced during the 90 minutes from impact to recovery has sold more than four million copies.

If those books fail to answer your questions, no worries! There are hundreds of other titles, some of them *New York Times* bestsellers, that relate even more near-death experiences. If you look long enough you should be able to find one that agrees with your preferred view on the subject.

If you are not the book-reading type, no problem. Movies like *Ghost*, starring Patrick Swayze and Demi Moore, have been watched by millions. The film revolves around a young banker, Sam Wheat, who is ambushed and killed by a jealous rival. It relates the events of Wheat's death and the effects of death using creative imagery and special effects. It shows what happens from the moment he dies until justice is achieved and the main character is freed to move peacefully on into the afterlife. Or maybe *The Sixth Sense* is more to your liking in understanding the world of those who've died. Starring Bruce Willis, *The Sixth Sense* was filmed in 1999 at a cost of \$40 million but generated more than \$300 million in box office sales. Only *Star Wars: Episode 1 - The Phantom Menace* was seen by more people that year. Or maybe you prefer Brad Pitt in the movie, *Meet Joe Black*, a 1998 remake of the 1934 movie, *Death Takes A Holiday*. As you can see, death is a popular subject.

Let me be candid on the subject of near-death experiences. I do not deny that people have had near-death experiences. Too many people have described those events to dismiss them completely. Nor am I willing to declare all personal experiences to be merely "imagined" or "inaccurate." At the same time, I am unwilling to accept personal experiences as the absolute truth about the afterlife without the verification of Holy Scripture.

Experience-based "experts" do not agree with each other, and much of what they describe is in direct conflict with the clear teaching of Scripture.

The Bible tells believers, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). A person's experience may or may not be accurate. It may be generated by the effect of heavy medications, a vivid imagination, or an encounter with a deceiving spirit (a fallen angel) whose goal in life is to lead people away from saving faith in Jesus and the truth of God's Word. For these reasons, this booklet will discuss the question of "What happens when I die?" solely from a biblical perspective.

How Can I Be Sure The Bible Is Accurate?

What makes the Bible more trustworthy than other books, personal experiences, movies, and the reasonable opinions of highly educated people? That's a fair question and it deserves an honest answer. There are at least seven reasons why I put sole confidence in God's Word as the standard by which all other opinions can be weighed:

- 1. The Bible is a book of verifiable facts.** Though the events, places, and people cited in the Bible represent ancient history, their existence can be confirmed to a significant degree. It is not a theological book only; nor is it merely a book of wise sayings, like many other so-called "holy" books. You can investigate the Bible, and when you examine its history, archaeology, and geography, you will find the facts of the Scriptures are verifiable.
- 2. The Bible is a book of prophecy and fulfillment.** Someone has said there are no fewer than 8,000 prophecies made in the Bible. Some of them were fulfilled almost immediately. Some of them took years or even centuries to be fulfilled. Some have not yet been fulfilled. Not one of God's prophecies has ever been proven inaccurate. If the promises of God have been proven truthful, then the teaching contained in God's Word can also be trusted.
- 3. The Bible is an historic book that has recorded events corroborated by other historic texts outside its pages.** The events of Scripture have been verified by the writings and records of other ancient civilizations like Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome.

4. **Archaeological finds frequently verify the reliability of the biblical record.** For many decades, archaeologists have used Scripture to locate specific sites and learn more about cultural practices and people not documented or rarely documented elsewhere. Biblical records once doubted have been verified by evidence unearthed in ongoing excavations and discoveries.
5. **There is a case to be made for textual agreement.** You won't find something in one book of the Bible disputed or contradicted by another book of the Bible written by an author in some other century. Written by more than 40 different authors over a period spanning more than a thousand years, Scripture tells an amazingly unified story of God's love and His plan to redeem the whole earth from the destruction of sin, death, and the devil.
6. **The Bible has survived the test of time.** There is no other book that has borne the test of time like Scripture. It has endured without the need to change the message, the facts, or the truth of its pages in order to accommodate new discoveries.
7. **For all these reasons—and the Bible's own claim to be divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit—believers accept the Scripture as God's Word.** For believers the Bible is not merely the isolated opinion or firsthand experience of a person who may be well intentioned, but self-deluded. It is, quite simply, God's eternal and inerrant message for mankind. "No prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21).

What Happens To Us Physically When We Die?

The congregation I once served is nearly 170 years old and still maintains an active cemetery on its premises. I have stood by many a grave pronouncing a blessing upon the physical remains of a Christian loved one by saying, "May God the Father, who has created this body; may Jesus, God's only Son, our Lord, who has redeemed this body together with the soul; may the Holy Spirit, who through the means of grace has sanctified this body to be God's holy temple; May God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit keep these remains until the resurrection of all flesh." Other Scriptures, prayers, and words are also shared before the family and friends of the deceased leave the grave, and the body is lowered into a concrete vault which is sealed and buried in the earth.

The Bible teaches that the soul at the time of death separates from a person's body. The body returns to the earth and disintegrates over time. The soul returns to God in heaven or is sent to hell. In heaven or hell the soul now waits for the Lord's return when the body will be resurrected, renewed, and rejoined to the soul. In Ecclesiastes 12:7, Solomon declared, "The dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." This is in total agreement with the first discussion of death by God in the Garden of Eden when He said, "By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19).

Some think of death as a punishment God visited upon man because of sin. True, death is a consequence of sin, but it is also a gracious act of God to keep those He loves from living forever in a world irrevocably transformed by the troubling effects of sin. Life is hard even in the best of times, and most of life is not lived in the best of times. To keep mankind from experiencing the ongoing pain of living forever in a sinful world, God barred Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, thus eliminating their access to the Tree of Life. Then God removed the Tree of Life from the earth to limit the longevity of mankind, as the Bible describes: "The length of our days is seventy, or eighty if we have the strength. ..." (Psalm 90:10a). This life-giving tree will be found again in heaven where the Bible says it provides 12 kinds of fruit that provide eternal life to those who reside there. In the new heaven and new earth that God has prepared for those who accept the free gift of eternal life, God has created a place devoid of sin and all its heartaches (see Genesis 3:24, and Revelation 22:2). Because Solomon knew death was merely the doorway to this gracious opportunity for a new life in heaven, he once expressed this opinion: "... the day of our death is better than the day of our birth" (Ecclesiastes 7:1b).

The Body And Soul Will Be Rejoined

God still has plans for our body in the afterlife. The soul's separation from the body is only temporary—no matter how long our body must wait for the Second Coming of Jesus. When He returns with all the angels, our graves will be opened and our bodies will be restored and reformed. After our mortal body puts on immortality, our new bodies will be rejoined with our soul for all eternity. The Bible says, "I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a

flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). This is the same picture Paul paints for those in mourning when he writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, “The Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call 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.”

No matter if our believing loved ones were buried at sea, lost in the tragic collapse of the World Trade Center, or cremated and the ashes spread over the ocean or some distant mountain, at the coming of Jesus, their bodies will be restored and changed to be like Jesus’ resurrected body—fit for existence in heaven for eternal life.

What Happens To Us Spiritually When We Die?

I have always loved the way Jesus described earthly death to Martha when her brother Lazarus died in John 11:21-27. This passage has been a source of confusion for many because, at first, it seems contradictory:

“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. He who believes in Me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?’

‘Yes, Lord,’ she told him, ‘I believe that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world.’”

Bible students everywhere are raising their hands. “Teacher, teacher, which is it? Do we live even if we die? Or, do we never die?” Those two outcomes are not the same. You can’t have it both ways! We either die but live, or we never die! It seems contradictory.

Jesus’ words are not in disagreement with each other. Jesus was discussing death from two different perspectives. The first is the perspective of those who remain behind after the death of their loved one. To the survivors Jesus in effect said, “Please don’t mourn too greatly the obvious physical death of your loved one. Even though they have died, they shall live to enjoy heaven’s eternity.” The second reference is the experience of death from the perspective of those who die; Jesus is pointing out that for those who die, there is no such thing as a period of “non-existence.” In a seamless transition, our life passes immediately from this life into life eternal.

The Moment Of Our Death

In almost all accounts of near-death experiences, there is a critical moment when a person’s soul leaves his or her body, rising over that person’s physical remains. The soul of the dead continues to exist in a conscious but bodiless dimension in the afterlife. Consider, for example, the lessons we can draw from the moment Jesus died. He told the thief who was crucified next to Him on His right, “... Today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43b). Obviously, the physical remains of Jesus and the body of the thief remained on earth. Nevertheless, the words of Jesus were fulfilled when at the moment of death the believing thief and Jesus were immediately with God in heaven.

Greater insight can be found in a simple reading of Peter’s description in 1 Peter 3:18-20a: “Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. ...”

This passage is one of several passages that confirm Christ’s descent into hell, an historic point of faith mentioned in the Apostles Creed. At the moment of Jesus’ death by crucifixion on Good Friday, His body died. He cried out with a voice, “It is finished” (John 19:30b), and He died.

“Father,” Jesus said, “into Your hands I commend My spirit. ...” (Luke 23:46a). The Scriptures teach that after His physical death Jesus traveled to proclaim His victory to “the spirits” who had been kept “in prison,” going back to “the days of Noah.” Obviously, Jesus did not go to a prison in Rome, Ephesus, or Philippi. He went to visit people who died at the time of the flood, the spirits kept in the spiritual prison of hell. Peter could have said that Jesus went to preach to the spirits in prison who were being kept there from the time of creation (1 Peter 3:19-22). Observe that Peter refers only to those who died at the time of the flood because he wants to make a reference to Baptism, namely, that eight people were saved in the ark by passing through the water (see 2 Peter 2:5). Also, note how “Baptism saves us ... not by the washing of the body with water, but by acting on the promise of God connected to baptismal water” (see 1 Peter 3:21). (Please review Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 2:38, Romans 6:3-5, Colossians 2:11-13, Titus 3:5, in this regard.) Jesus descended into hell immediately upon His death and prior to His resurrection to proclaim His victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. He did not go to hell to suffer. His work was finished on the cross. Those who rejected salvation during the days of Noah were already in hell. These are the “spirits” to whom Jesus appeared and proclaimed His victory.

The concept of an immediate and conscious existence in the afterlife is confirmed by other Scriptures as well. When the rich man and Lazarus died, the rich man was immediately in hell and Lazarus was immediately in heaven. By examining the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, who was in heaven, it is apparent the rich man was conscious of his surroundings in the afterlife and aware of Lazarus’ presence in heaven as well (see Luke 16:19-31). John’s later description of heaven as recorded in Revelation also describes the conscious state of the martyrs in heaven awaiting their vindication on Judgment Day (see Revelation 6:9-11).

Jesus Is The First Of Many

Just as Jesus commended His spirit to His Father in heaven at the moment of His death, so too our bodies are laid to rest in the grave. But our spirit lives on and is immediately transferred to heaven or hell on the basis of faith or lack of faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection. When Paul described what happened to Jesus at the time of the Lord’s death and resurrection, he added, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a Man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the first fruits; then, when He comes, those who belong to Him” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

In Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus, the Lord described what happened to their souls after their death but before the physical resurrection of their bodies (see Luke 16:19-31). We also learn from this story that it is impossible for our souls to move back and forth between heaven and hell. The rich man asked “Father Abraham” to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with a drop of water. From heaven, Abraham replied, “... between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (Luke 16:26b). He also refused the rich man’s request to send Lazarus to earth to warn his brothers so they would believe and not end up in hell. Abraham told him, “... They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them” (Luke 16:29b) and then, “... If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead” (Luke 16:31b). We can surmise that as it is impossible to go from heaven to hell, it is likewise impossible to go from heaven or hell back to earth.

We Do Not Acquire Miraculous Powers at Death

When people die they do not become angels nor assume the divine attributes of God. Angels are unique and specific creations of God; they are heavenly beings created at the beginning of the world to serve man (see Hebrews 1:14). Neither should Christians expect to share God’s miraculous powers in the afterlife. Those who die do not become omnipresent (able to exist in more than one place at a time) or omniscient (all-knowing). When David said he was eager to awake with the likeness of God, he was describing life without sin, not appearance or authority (see Psalm 17:15). In the afterlife, a person exists in only one place at a time. The souls of those who die are not able to move about as a ghost on earth while living in heaven at the same time. That is a quality possessed only by God.

The Bible teaches that Jesus will return to earth for a final judgment of both the living and the dead. At that time He will bring with Him all the souls of those who have died, and on that day (and not before), the bodies of the dead will be raised from the earth, transformed for immortality, and reunited with their spirits for eternity.

This is how Paul described that day in a letter to Christians in Thessalonica: "... God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him. According to the Lord's own Word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till 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 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" (1 Thessalonians 4:14b-17).

This important factual information has practical implications to help us discern what is true and false in popular movies and books on the subject of death and life after death. For all the reasons stated previously, the Bible can be trusted for true insights into God and the world He has made here and hereafter. When we hear, see, or read other intriguing theories about life after death, we must examine those statements against what we know to be true from the Scripture, accepting or rejecting them in light of the Bible's insight (see 1 Corinthians 14:37 and 1 John 4:6).

Because of the stories and teaching of the Bible, we know the dead do not wander the earth, haunting buildings or watching over loved ones as ever-present but unseen ghosts. Because of what we learn from the Bible, we also know it is impossible to talk to those who have died or to communicate with them through a person who claims the power to "channel" the voice of the dead, or who conducts séances to invite the dead to a meeting of the living. There is only one reference in the entire Bible where such a thing ever happened. It was during the reign of the Old Testament King Saul. When first appointed king, Saul was humble and obedient to God as the Lord spoke through the prophet Samuel. By the end of his reign, Saul had become prideful and disobedient, building monuments for himself throughout the country to remind the people of his victories. Because of unfaithfulness, the Lord ultimately rejected Saul and told the prophet Samuel to go to Bethlehem to choose Israel's next king. Through divine direction, the prophet anointed the young shepherd boy David to replace Saul. David did not immediately become king. He would wait more than 20 years until the Lord provided the opportunity for him to assume the throne. Samuel told Saul that God had rejected him and chosen another to reign in his place.

After Samuel's death, Saul worried about his own pending demise. Without the prophet's help, the king was forced to engage the Philistines in a major battle. In an attempt to know the battle's outcome, Saul sought the help of a witch to communicate with the spirit of the dead prophet Samuel. Unable to recognize Saul because of the disguise he wore, the witch agreed to the king's request and attempted to conjure the spirit of Samuel. When Samuel actually appeared during the séance, the witch screamed in surprise and fear (see 1 Samuel 28:12-15). Obviously, despite her claims, the witch was not accustomed to speaking with dead people or she would not have been so surprised at Samuel's appearance. It was God's decision that allowed Saul to see Samuel after his death, not the result of a witch's black magic.

There is one other instance in the Bible of the dead making an appearance on earth among the living. It happened prior to Jesus' last trip to Jerusalem, before He was arrested and crucified at the hands of the chief priests and Pontius Pilate. To prepare for what Jesus knew awaited Him, the Bible tells us He retreated to a distant mountain to pray (see Luke 9:29-35). During this intense prayer Jesus was joined by the spirits of Moses and Elijah who spoke with Him about His exodus to be fulfilled in Jerusalem (see Luke 9:31). (This passage in Luke, by the way, is the only time the word "exodus" is used in the New Testament.) By special permission, Moses and Elijah were sent to earth by God for the purpose of providing encouragement to Jesus before His death. The significance of the Hebrew term "exodus" implies a release from bondage similar to the exodus of the children of Israel from the slavery of Egypt. Through His death on the cross, Jesus would return to the glory that is rightfully His in heaven.

What About Those Who See Ghosts?

What about people who claim to have seen the ghosts of the dead on earth? If that is not possible, what did they see? What possible explanation does the Bible provide to explain those encounters? It is my opinion some who practice the occult have actually heard and seen unearthly forms they believe are ghosts in the midst of their séances and rituals. But, based on the Scriptures we have examined, I must conclude in those instances they are *not* talking to the spirits of the dead, but rather to Satan's emissaries posing as the dead to confuse people who are emotionally vulnerable on earth. The Bible warns that fallen angels behave in this fashion when it says that "... Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (2 Corinthians 11:14b-15). And also, consider this passage:

"... Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1b).

For the sake of comfort, there is another possible explanation that would parallel the story of Jesus, Peter, James, and John seeing and talking with Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. I have been told stories of people—including a fellow pastor—who saw a loved one walking away with a stranger at the moment he/she died. It is possible that God sometimes permits a surviving loved one to see the spirit of the deceased leaving their body.

On another occasion, a trusted woman told a similar story when her son died in combat in the Battle of Iwo Jima. She said in the middle of the night on February 21, 1945, he appeared in dress uniform at the foot of her bed in Marysville, Ohio, and said, "Goodbye, Mom." Several weeks later they got word he had died on a hospital ship that same day.

It is possible God might occasionally permit the spirit of a dead individual to make *one last stop* on the way from earth to heaven to comfort someone and prepare that person for the shock of receiving an otherwise unexpected word that a loved one had died. But let me make this point absolutely clear: these instances were not made possible by the power of those who practice the occult. The Bible says, "... God cannot be tempted by evil and He Himself tempts no one to do evil" (James 1:13b). It also says, "... What can righteousness and wickedness have in common, or what fellowship does light have with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14b). Believers should never consult those who practice the occult in the hope of communicating with loved ones who've died. The dead are not able to communicate with us, or we with them, but the Lord is Lord of the living and the dead. Through prayer the believer can ask the Lord to share their thoughts with those who have died. In turn, through prayer, the living may be comforted by the Lord's assurance that all is well with their loved ones.

What Happens in Eternity After We Die?

In geometric terms life is neither a line nor a segment. Lines are depicted as a segment with arrows on both ends, signifying no beginning and no end: <—> Our life did not pre-exist in heaven as taught by some. We had a beginning when God formed us in our mother's womb, according to Psalm 139:13 and Ecclesiastes 11:5. Neither is life a segment. Segments are finite. They have a beginning and an end:|—| The Bible makes it clear that death is not the end of our existence. Where you stand with God in life determines where you stand with God in your afterlife: —> Like a ray, the direction you are on now will determine your eternal future.

Our eternity begins the moment we are conceived. Life begins with conception. In the book of Judges, Samson's mother was not permitted to eat anything unclean during her pregnancy because her child was dedicated to the Lord from the time of his conception (see Judges 13). When Elizabeth greeted Mary before the birth of their sons, she asked, "Why has the mother of my Lord come to visit me?" (Luke 1:43b). We are conceived. We are born. We die. We continue life after death in heaven or hell. When David was informed of the death of his infant son, he said, "... I will go to him but he will not return to me" (2 Samuel 12:23b).

At the moment of our death, our soul enters heaven or hell. At the Second Coming of Jesus, our bodies will be raised from the grave, joined to our souls, and we will stand with the whole world before the judgment throne of God. Those who believed in Jesus as the long-promised Messiah will then enter—soul and body—into heaven. Those who reject the grace of God in Jesus will then be consigned—soul and body—into hell. There are no exceptions. The Bible plainly states there are no valid excuses for unbelief because God has made Himself known through man's inner voice and through the evidence of the things He created (see Romans 1:18-23; Romans 2:1-16, and Acts 14:16-17).

Neither will there be a second chance to acquire eternal salvation after death. The Bible is perfectly clear. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Life, as we know it, is not a trial run with future opportunities for reconsideration to follow. Reincarnation is not taught in the Bible. It is an invention of man's imagination. Nor does the afterlife provide an opportunity to reassess and realign oneself with the Lord after death. It is now or never. "The Lord declares, 'In the time of My favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. ...'" (Isaiah 49:8a). I tell you, *now* is the time of God's favor; *now* is the day of salvation. Salvation by grace through faith in Jesus is offered to everyone. God does not play favorites. God "desires all to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4).

It is tragic so many neglect God's gift of salvation to their ultimate condemnation. The most haunting question of the Bible is found in the book of Hebrews; "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard Him" (Hebrews 2:3). There is only one right path, one means of salvation. As the sacred text declares, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Heaven Is ...

The Bible has a curious way of describing heaven. Lengthy books have been written on the subject, but for the most part they are speculation, often based on symbolic descriptions of gold-paved streets and gates made of pearl. It has always fascinated me how the Bible describes heaven mostly in negative terms. Heaven is almost always described in the Bible as a place completely free of all that makes life on earth so difficult.

"I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (Revelation 21:3-4).

In similar words John was also told that "... He who sits on the throne will spread His tent over them. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their Shepherd; He will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 7:15b-17).

It makes sense. The world God made was good. In fact "... it was very good" (Genesis 1:31b). Sin corrupted God's plan and brought heartache and pain into our lives and His paradise. The Bible says the first Adam brought sin into the world. The second Adam, Jesus, will remove sin and its consequences from God's creation. Paul used that language when he wrote, "I consider our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the One who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:18-21).

To be in heaven is to return to the original plan of God. *Heaven is God's return ticket to Eden.* To gain heaven is to live in paradise and enjoy all that God originally planned before sin ruined everything. And God will again walk in the garden, and we will experience complete fellowship with our Heavenly Father as Adam and Eve knew it. David looked forward to that moment. He described it when he wrote, "You have made known to me the path of life; You will fill me with joy in Your presence, with eternal pleasures at Your right hand" (Psalm 16:11).

Hell Is ...

Hell is the opposite of heaven. If to live in heaven is to enjoy the constant and gracious presence of God, then hell is eternal separation from the gracious presence of the Heavenly Father.

On the day of their death, the wicked will get exactly what they have demanded by their actions and the exercise of their will: life apart from God. He will not force Himself on anyone. If people insist on a life without God, He will grant their request. If God is love, life apart from God is hatred. If God is light, hell is darkness. If God is living water, hell is constant thirst.

It is not God's will for anyone to suffer eternal separation in hell. "... As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live" (Ezekiel 33:11a). Through the apostle Paul, the Lord declares, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Jesus told a story to illustrate God's desire to extend salvation and heaven's reward to all people on earth. It is the story of a king who first graciously invited his guests and then later invited complete strangers to a celebration of his wedding.

"The king said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. Go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests. But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. 'Friend,' he asked, 'how did you get in here without wedding clothes?' The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'" (Matthew 22:8-13).

Our only hope of attending the Lord's banquet in heaven is to accept His robe of righteousness—in other words, to be covered in His mercy. To stand in the king's presence dressed in our own best effort will never be good enough. Anyone who thinks he is qualified to attend that gathering without the forgiveness that comes by grace through faith in Jesus will be thrown out.

The Bible describes hell as a place of eternal, conscious suffering. It is referred to as a place of darkness, of tears and regrets, of fire and thirst, and of eternal punishment. Jesus stands between believers and the justice we all deserve. If we neglect the protection of the cross, we expose ourselves to the wrath of God who opposes sin and all those who practice it. There will be no sin in heaven. Neither will anyone be there who dies and is still stained by their sin without God's gracious washing of forgiveness, freely given to any and all who accept it.

As the author of the book of Hebrews described it, "How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, 'It is Mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:29-31). Everyone needs shelter from the absolute justice of God. No one has lived the perfect life necessary to escape conviction. We all need a Savior. We all need forgiveness. We all need Jesus.

Some Follow-Up Questions

After listening to teaching on the subject of life after death, some people were given the opportunity to ask questions. Here are twelve of the most frequently asked questions. Obviously, these short answers cannot contain the "whole counsel" of God on any subject, but I hope they provide some direction.

- 1. Will we remember people from earth that didn't make it to heaven and mourn? What about hurtful memories? Will we be aware of those who are not in heaven?** There is not sorrow in heaven, so your memories will not create sadness. I expect your heart to be grateful for people and experiences that contributed to your life and growth on earth. We will rejoice with those that join us in heaven but not be troubled by those who don't. (See Psalm 16:11 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.)
- 2. While sitting at the side of someone who is dying, is it possible to witness his or her soul leave the body?** You cannot see the soul, but I have witnessed dying Christians suddenly describe with a strong voice and great clarity the angels they saw at the moment of their death. I have seen people reach up towards something they saw that I could not see. I have seen them smile, and then listened as they took their final breath and knew that life had left their body.
- 3. Are ghosts just a myth? After my grandmother died, I feel like she has sent signs that she is still here. Can she communicate with us?** No. I do not deny that you saw or felt those things, but I don't believe it was your grandmother. It could be an angel (good or evil) who is giving you comfort or tempting you to believe in error that your grandmother is communicating with you. The moment we die we go to heaven or hell. We don't linger. Even the witch of Endor was shocked to see Samuel actually turn up during her fake ritual. Obviously, that instance was something God allowed as an exception, not something she believed was possible even though she convinced Saul she could do it. (See 1 Samuel 28:12 and Luke 16:22-23.)
- 4. What about purgatory? If my life has not been completely faithful, do I have to wait to enter heaven?** The concept of purgatory is not taught in the inspired Scriptures. It is contrary to the clear truth that *we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus*. (See Philippians 3:7-11.) The very idea of purgatory and the doctrines often attached to it (prayer for the dead, indulgences, meritorious works on behalf of the dead, etc.) all fail to recognize that Jesus' death was sufficient to pay the penalty for every one of our sins.
- 5. Will my dog be in heaven with me? Will there be animals in heaven?** I don't know if your specific dog will be with you in heaven. (Nowhere does the Bible say that animals have souls like people.) But I do believe there will be animals in the new heaven and on the new earth God has prepared for us. Just as there were animals in the Garden of Eden, I expect animals to be a part of God's future paradise. The Bible also describes life in paradise by saying the lamb will lie down with the lion and the lion will graze like the ox. In other words, there will be animals present but no violence or carnivorous activity in heaven. (See Isaiah 11:6; 65:25.) The 16th-century reformer, Martin Luther, once told his favorite dog not to worry, that in heaven even *he* would be given a golden tail. ☺
- 6. Should Christians be organ donors?** Yes, by all means. While the following Scriptures don't speak exactly to that subject, they will help you think through the decision. (See John 15:13 and Romans 5:7.)
- 7. Can people in heaven see us?** No. This is a good thing, too. I can't imagine how we might frustrate and aggravate them by our poor value judgments and unkindnesses. (See Luke 16:26-31). Also, see question number one above.

8. I've heard about different levels in heaven and perhaps different levels of suffering in hell. Where is that taught?
The apostle Paul said he was caught up into the "third level of heaven" in 2 Corinthians 12:2b. We aren't sure exactly what he meant by that, however. We do know Jesus appeared to confirm that there are different levels of honor in heaven based on a conversation He had with James and John. (See Matthew 20:22-23.) It appears to be related to the amount of sacrifice one made for the Gospel. The Bible also teaches our good works are acknowledged and rewarded in heaven. (See Matthew 10:42, Luke 14:14, 1 Corinthians 3:14, and Revelation 14:13.) Please note this though: your salvation has nothing to do with your good deeds, though your good deeds on earth are duly noted and will be rewarded in heaven. In Luke 10:14, Jesus also taught about levels of suffering in hell: "It will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you." In Luke 12:47-48a, Jesus said, "That servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. ..."

The key truth about hell is found in Jesus' words when He says, "Depart from Me. ..." (Matthew 7:23b). Hell is to live eternally removed from the presence of God. Heaven is to live in close and abiding communion with God forever. What matters most is whether we are with the Lord or not; our exact placement in heaven or hell matters much less.

9. Will we know each other in heaven? Yes. I believe you will even immediately know people in heaven you have not met or known on earth. Peter, James, and John immediately recognized Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. (See Matthew 17:3-4 and 1 Corinthians 13:12.)

10. What if I am scared to die? Death is the ultimate enemy of life. It was not part of God's design for His creation to experience death, which is an unwanted intruder and an unwelcomed consequence of sin. Most people are apprehensive about the unknown. As Jesus said, "No one has ever gone into heaven except the One who came from heaven—the Son of Man" (John 3:13). Fear of death and dying is to be expected. It is our created nature to fight against death with every ounce of resistance we can muster. Don't worry. You won't be alone when the time of your death comes. No one is. It may be a surprise to you, but not to God who knows the number of your days even before you were born (see Psalm 139:16). When that moment comes, you will hear Jesus say, "Fear not." As David said, "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).

11. What age will I be in heaven? No one knows for sure. According to some who have had near-death experiences, the young are made older and the older are made younger. One person saw her grandmother and said she looked to be about 45, not as old as she was when she died. Adam and Eve were created mature and ready to bear children. If sin hadn't intruded they would not have aged physically, and their children would have grown to maturity and lived in their same un-aging physical bodies for eternity. Of course, all of this is only informed speculation on matters where the Bible offers no clear answers.

12. Is there life on other planets? No one can know for sure. It would not surprise me nor shake my faith to know that God established life elsewhere in His vast universe. If all the stars in the universe are suns and they all have planetary systems of their own, it is reasonable to assume there may be other life forms, too. It doesn't change the truth of God's Word about life and death on this earth—nor deny that God created all the stars and planets—for believers to accept the possibility of life in other universes.

Notes

Rev. Stephen Hower is the author of many published Bible studies, articles, and three faith-based books: *Sharpening the Sword: A Call to Strong and Courageous Leadership*; *Serenity Principles: Biblical Direction That Will Change Your Life*; *Contrary to Popular Belief: Unwrapping the Mysteries of Faith*; and with Robert Hillard, *God Had a Better Plan*. Stephen and Carol have been married for more than 40 years.



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