

# What Happens When We Die?

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## *Introduction*

In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul wrote, "But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope." Evidently there were many in Paul's day who did not fully understand the condition of those people who had already passed from this life. They were afraid that such people who had died had ceased to exist; and that they would have no part in the resurrection. Paul wanted them to be comforted, so he attempts to explain to them what happens when we die.

It is still a common question today; many still don't understand about that time after death and before the day of judgment. Some say that when a man dies, he "dies all over," that is, he no longer exists at all, no more than 1000 years before he was born.

Christians, however, believe and look forward to the day Christ comes again and our eternal life in Christ thereafter. Still the question remains about specifically what happens when we die.

## *The Bible Teaches that Man Is an Eternal Soul*

1 Thessalonians 4:14-18 (the death of the body is not the death of the soul)

1 Corinthians 15:12-28 ("...in Christ all shall be made alive.")

Matthew 10:28 "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." Man can kill the body, but he cannot kill the soul. The death of the body is not the death of the whole man - the soul continues in existence.

2 Corinthians 4:18-5:4 (Paul discusses separation of body and soul and eternal existence of soul)

Luke 20:34-38 Jesus speaks with Sadducees who denied the resurrection of the dead. They decided to bring a puzzle to Jesus that none of their former antagonists had been able to answer. They presented a case about a woman who was married to several different men; they asked, "Whose wife is she in the resurrection?"

Notice that Jesus said that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. How is that possible, seeing that they are dead? They are dead to us, but alive to Him! This is a further indication of the existence of man's soul after his physical death.

## *A Conscious Existence After Death*

There are many who believe that the soul rests or sleeps from the moment of death until the day Christ comes again and the dead are resurrected.

The word *resurrection* in NT Scripture is most often a translation of the Greek word *anastasis*/386, which means: "1) a raising up, rising (e.g. from a seat); 2) a rising from the dead; a) that of Christ; b) that of all men at the end of this present age; c) the resurrection of certain ones history who were restored to life (Heb. 11:35)." This may or may not indicate an unconscious existence between death and the resurrection. Scholars remain divided on this issue.

On the other hand, many passages in Scripture seem to indicate a conscious existence of the soul after death:

Matthew 17:1-5 (account of the transfiguration) There were three representatives of man in the flesh (Peter/James/John); they saw the Lord glorified and highly exalted, but they also saw something else that was amazing! They saw two people who had already died:

- There was one representative from the intermediate state (between death and resurrection) - Moses. Moses had died 1500 years before, his body mingled with the dust, but here he is identified, spoken of by name, separate from his body, but evidently in a conscious state; he holds a conversation with the Lord.

- And there was even one representative from the eternal state - Elijah! Remember, he did not suffer death: many centuries before, standing on the east side of the Jordan, surrounded by the multitude, he entered the chariot of God, and as the hosts of Israel stood gazing after him, he ascended to God. He was changed, glorified, and immortalized, and now shown to Peter, James, and John as a specimen of redeemed humanity. He too conversed with the Lord.

Luke 16:19-31 (story of rich man and Lazarus) There has been much debate about whether this is a parable or an actual event. It actually makes little difference since parables were based upon truth. Jesus doesn't appear to present this lesson as a theoretical or philosophical account of the hereafter, but rather as an actual and factual account of the state of the soul after death. He speaks as if this is a true description of what takes place when people die!

Notice after both die, they are each in a conscious state of existence. Lazarus is in Abraham's bosom, which was a common Jewish conception in that day concerning Paradise (being comforted). On the other hand, the rich man is in Hades.

It should be noted that Hades is not the same as the eternal hell (as rendered in the KJV). In the original language there were 3 different words rendered as hell (in the KJV) in the NT:

- *Hades* - according to Vine's Expository Dictionary of NT Words at one time referred to the dwelling place of all departed, but later (after ascension of Christ) came to refer more specifically to "the region of departed spirits of the lost; the temporary destiny of the doomed." According to Peter (quoting David) in Acts 2:27-32, Jesus was in Hades during the three days after His death. In Ephesians 4:9, Paul said that Christ "descended into the lower parts of the earth." In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said, "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it." Jesus also taught about Hades in Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15. In Revelation 1:18, Jesus said that He had the keys to Hades. In Revelation 20:13, those who abide in Hades will be given up at the day of judgment and then condemned to the eternal lake of fire (see also 6:8).
- *Gehenna* - is used throughout the NT in relation to the eternal state of the wicked and those without Christ. This is truly Hell, that lake of fire that burns forever and ever; this is the eternal punishment for the unrighteous after the day of judgment.
- *Tartarus* - used only once in 2 Peter 2:4, the place where the angels that sinned are chained and reserved until judgment.

The story of rich man and Lazarus shows that both went into a temporary, conscious state of existence until the day of judgment. Notice then two other passages that speak similarly...

In Luke 23:42, Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise." They weren't just going to the grave, but into a different state of existence. Apparently the thief was to abide in the same place then as Lazarus, a place of comfort awaiting the day of judgment.

Revelation 6:9-11 What did John see under the altar? Not bodies, but the souls of them who were martyred because of their faith. These were souls after death. Granted, the book of Revelation is mostly figurative, but there is still a representation of something that did exist, that is, souls after death - souls with a conscious existence separate from their bodies, and waiting for the resurrection at the day of judgment.

We may not understand all about it (how could we in our fleshly, human limitations?), but it seems certain that there is a further existence of our souls even after death, and apparently (based on these given passages) in a conscious state. Those in Christ will abide in a place of comfort - Paradise. Those outside of Christ will find themselves in a place of torment - Hades.

### ***The Day of Judgment***

Finally, the Bible teaches that there will be a day of judgment, a final meeting of all that have ever lived, followed by a final separation.

Hebrews 9:27 "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes the judgment."

John wrote in the book of Revelation 20:11-4 about the vision he saw - a vision of a multitude of people standing before the Lord. There will come that day when it will not be a vision, but a reality. And each of us will be there, standing, waiting, but perhaps already knowing the outcome...

Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46 "But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne, And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.' Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels.' And these shall go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."