

## What Happens When You Die?

Many Christians speak of going to heaven when they die. It certainly sounds better than the proverbial “hell”! Is this our destiny, heaven or hell? Is this what the Bible teaches about life after death?

Death of humanity began back in the Garden of Eden when Eve ate of the forbidden “tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. She was deceived by the serpent into eating it and then gave it to Adam who also ate the fruit. As a result, Adam was cursed. Adam, and all who would descend from him, were now under the curse of death. “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you shall return.” (Genesis 3:19) They were then driven out of the Garden which excluded both Adam and Eve and their descendents from ever having the opportunity to eat of the “tree of life”.

Adam and Eve died and every human since then has died. Where are they all now? There are countless scriptures that speak of people dying and going to the grave. They were often buried in tombs by their family. But what does the Bible say in reference to the grave where all people go? Men of God spoke in this way about the grave: “As the cloud vanishes and is gone, so he who goes down to the grave does not return.” (Job 7:9) “If the only home I hope for is the grave, if I spread out my bed in darkness, if I say to corruption, ‘You are my father,’ and to the worm, ‘My mother’ or ‘My sister,’ where then is my hope? Who can see any hope for me? Will it go down to the gates of the grave? Will we descend together into the dust?” (Job 17:13) Job, who was spoken of by God as one who was “blameless and upright and who fears God and shuns evil” did not have a very positive outlook on death in these statements.

### Death Described

David made reference to the grave many times in the Psalms. In his despair, he often cried out to God to save him from the grave. “Turn, O LORD, and deliver me; save me because of your unfailing love. No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?” (Psa. 6:4-5) In Psalms 49, David compares the death of men “like the beasts that perish...like sheep they are laid in the grave”. He says, “I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. Do you show your wonders to the dead? Do those who are dead rise up and praise you? Is your love declared in the grave, your faithfulness in destruction?” (Psa. 88:5, 10-11) David asks rhetorically, “What man can live and not see death, or save himself from the power of the grave?” (Psa. 89:48) Neither Job nor David speak of a going to heaven or hell at death.

How did King Solomon, the wisest man ever to live, describe the grave? In his writing he said, “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten...there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.” (Eccl. 9:5, 10)

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, “For the grave cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living—they praise you, as I am doing today, fathers tell their children about your faithfulness.” (Isa. 38:18)

God also prophesied through the prophet Nahum that he would prepare a grave for Nineveh because of their evil ways. (Nahum 1:14)

None of these scriptures speak of death other than going to the grave and the dead “know nothing”. There is nothing that speaks of dying and then “going to heaven” or “hell” as so many proclaim. So is that it? Do we die, go to the grave and are condemned to its power to hold us forever?

### **The Hope of a Christian**

Absolutely not! Scripture speaks of a “hope” for us after we enter the grave. The prophet Samuel spoke of God’s power in this way. “The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up.” (1 Sam. 2:6) King David understood this hope and prophesied regarding it. “But God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself.” (Psa.49:15) “...you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. 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.” (Psa. 16:10-11). David here prophesied not only of his resurrection from the grave, but also of the promised Messiah, the Holy One, whose body would not even see decay.

Ezekiel also, through a vision from God, realized the dead would rise again which he foretold in detail in Ezekiel 37. “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the LORD God to these bones, ‘Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.’” This is a proclamation of hope for the dead!

So is David no longer in the grave, but in the presence of God as he foretold? Peter quotes David and explains this very verse. After quoting David’s words from Psalms 16, Peter explains, “Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Therefore, being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that of the fruit of his body, according to the flesh, He would raise up the Christ to sit on his throne, he, foreseeing this, spoke concerning the resurrection of the Christ, that His soul was not left in the grave, nor did His flesh see corruption. This Jesus, God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses...For David did not ascend into the heavens...” (Acts 2:25-34) Clearly Peter understood that David was still dead in the grave, but that Jesus Christ was resurrected from the dead, and his body never saw decay!

Jesus’ resurrection was prophesied, and has occurred, and the apostles all spoke boldly regarding His resurrection. Peter and the other apostles said, “The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree.” (Acts 5:30) In Stephen’s last address he said accusingly, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers...and (he) said, “Look! I see the heavens open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” (Acts 7:52, 56) What a fantastic vision for Stephen at the time of his death to see evidence that Jesus was resurrected from the dead! Paul also concluded, “For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption; but He whom God raised up saw no corruption.” (Acts 13:36-37) It is interesting to note that in this verse as well as many others, death is likened to being asleep. (John 11:11, Acts 7:60, 1 Cor. 11:30, 1 Cor.15:6, 18, 20, 1 Thess. 4:13-15).

So it’s obvious that Jesus has been resurrected from the dead, but where does that leave the rest of us? We find the Bible speaks of an order in which God’s plan will be carried out. It is revealed that Jesus is the firstborn from the dead: “His Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren”, “he is the firstborn over all creation”, “the firstborn from the dead”,

“when He again brings the firstborn into the world”. (Rom. 8:29, Col 1:15, 18, Heb. 1:6) Paul explains in more detail in 1 Cor. 15:20-23, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits 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 firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” That is the promise from God who raises the dead, that Jesus was the first to be resurrected and all others await a resurrection in their turn.

### **When Will We See Victory Over Death?**

When does our turn come? The previous verse stated, “when he comes”. We find more evidence of this resurrection through the words of Jesus when he was responding to those who did not believe in a resurrection. He answered them, “Those who are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead are raised, when he called the Lord ‘the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ For He is not the God of the dead but of the living, for all live to Him.” (Luke 20:34-38) Hebrews 11:40 also substantiates that the faithful, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as well as many others, are still awaiting the resurrection from the dead, so we can see that Moses was speaking prophetically. Jesus also spoke to Martha about the resurrection in this way, “Martha said to Him, ‘I know that he (Lazarus) 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, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?’” (John 11:24-26) It is therefore, though belief in Jesus Christ that we are resurrected to eternal life, and never experience eternal death, the second death. (Rev. 20:6)

Paul comforts the Thessalonians, and all who would read his words in generations to come, by saying, “But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who sleep in Jesus.” But how will God do this if they are in the grave? Paul further explains, “For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.” (1 Thess. 4:13-18)

Paul explains this great victory over death extensively in 1 Corinthians 15. In verse 50-52 he declares, “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.” These verses proclaim a resurrection of the dead in Christ and a transformation of those alive who are “in Christ”.

The dead will rise again! We have seen in scripture that at the return of Jesus to this earth, the dead in Christ, (all the faithful mentioned in Hebrews 11, and all the faithful who have died since

the death of Jesus Christ), including those faithful who are alive at the time of his coming, will either be resurrected or immediately changed into an immortal body to live eternally.

But where does this leave all the dead who have never known God or Jesus Christ, or who perhaps did not choose to repent and live their lives in faith to God? Are they condemned to eternal torture in a hell fire as so many believe? Revelation 20:4-5 speaks of the saints in the first resurrection who will be given thrones and judgment to reign with Christ for a thousand years, and says, "but the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished." After the thousand years is over the following occurs. "Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books. The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and the grave delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works." (Rev. 20:11-13)

What do we learn from this passage? Three things are apparent: all the dead will be resurrected, all will be judged by God, the book of life is open. What is a judgment is a judicial decision. Why would we assume all are judged to eternal hell fire? Scripture does not reveal how long this judgment period will last, but the book of life is open which means all these people now have an opportunity to be written into that book and therefore have eternal life. Our God is a loving, just and merciful Judge. He desires that all will be saved. There is great hope for the majority of mankind who has never known God or the name of Jesus Christ! There is hope for all mankind who have been deceived by the great Deceiver of this world, Satan!

After this time of judgment is finished, and how do we know what time period it will last, the scripture then says, "death and the grave were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death. And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:14-15)

Jesus spoke of this punishment when talking about those who would not inherit the Kingdom and he said, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Matt. 25:41) Jesus further states in verse 46, "And these shall go away into everlasting (Greek "aionios") punishment, but the righteous into life eternal (Greek "aionios"). Some theologians believe that since the righteous will live eternally, the wicked must suffer eternally. However, this theory cannot be reconciled with statements in Revelation that claim the wicked will be thrown in the lake of fire and perish, thus the "second death". (Rev.2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8)

Clearly, Matt. 25 and other references to "everlasting fire" are referring to the one time event of the wicked, forever punished through eternal death. This can be further understood through the event of Genesis 19:24 where "the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah". These two cities were completely destroyed. In the book of Jude, this event is referenced as "Sodom and Gomorrah...suffering the punishment of eternal ("aionios") fire. Obviously these fires are not still burning, but totally destroyed those condemned to it. Such is the same for the wicked, who will be destroyed in the lake of fire, the outcome being an eternal effect.

Jesus also warned, "Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into hell, yea, I say unto you, fear him." (Luke 12:5) Easton's Bible Dictionary explains the meaning of the word "hell", or Greek "geenna". "This valley afterwards became the common receptacle for all the

refuse of the city. Here the dead bodies of animals and of criminals, and all kinds of filth, were cast and consumed by fire kept always burning. It thus in process of time became the image of the place of everlasting destruction. In this sense it is used by our Lord in Matt. 5:22, Matt. 5:29, Matt. 5:30; Matt. 10:28; Matt. 18:9; Matt. 23:15, Matt. 23:33; Mark 9:43, Mark 9:45, Mark 9:47; Luke 12:5. In these passages, and also in Jam. 3:6, the word is uniformly rendered "hell," the Revised Version placing "Gehenna" in the margin." So, Jesus, explained in Luke 12:5 that men can kill us, but only God has power to cast us into the lake of fire, the second death. Also, the book of Revelation reveals, "But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." (Rev. 21:8) So there is a "lake of fire" in which those who do not inherit eternal life and the kingdom of God will be cast.

Now, back to the original question, will you go to heaven or hell when you die? Well, certainly not immediately! Jesus the Messiah, was the firstborn from the dead and now resides in heaven with God our Father. The faithful will be resurrected at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, which is referred to as the first resurrection (Rev. 20:5) or the better resurrection (Heb. 11:35). After the King, Jesus Christ, and the resurrected saints reign on earth for a thousand years, (Rev. 20:4) all the rest of the dead will be resurrected. They will be judged and have an opportunity to have eternal life and those not found written in the Book of Life will experience a second death by being thrown in the lake of fire instead of inheriting eternal life. We will all die, just like Adam, and await a resurrection. How wonderful it would be to be counted worthy to be in the "better" resurrection and reign with Jesus for a thousand years!