

What Happens to the Dead?

After death, will you live again? Where exactly will you spend eternity?

Millions of people today—and more billions throughout history—have never had even the slightest chance for salvation. In fact, most have never even heard the *name* of Jesus Christ—the only name under heaven by which man may be saved (Acts 4:12). What happens to such people when they die? Are they, as many believe, “lost”?

Orthodox Christendom would have us believe that death is little more than the death of the body, while the still-conscious “immortal soul” goes on to an eternity of bliss in heaven, or to an eternity of torment in an ever-burning hell.

What does the Bible really teach about *death* and the state of the dead? What is the fate of the billions who have never known salvation through Jesus Christ?

Is the Soul Immortal? Interestingly, Orthodox Christendom as a whole does not even pretend to get its beliefs from the Bible alone. Many, in fact, are of pagan origin. The “immortal soul” concept, for example, does not come from the Bible. If you believe the Bible is the Word of God and the only reliable source of knowledge about God, then the question is, “What does the Bible teach about life after death?”

Most religious leaders today continue to teach the immortality of the soul, despite the fact that the Bible teaches the exact opposite—that the human soul is mortal. It can and does DIE (Ezek. 18:20). God alone has immortality (I Tim. 6:15, 16).

The immortal soul idea can be traced back to ancient Babylonian mythology, which in various forms spread through the then-civilized world, eventually centering in Egypt in the third and second millennia BC. Greek mythology came mostly from Egypt, and its gods were simply the old Egyptian gods under different names. In the so-called “Golden Age” of Greek civilization, belief in various deities was overlaid gradually with a body of philosophy promoted by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. A major part of Platonic philosophy was based on the supposed *dualistic* nature of man—the idea of an immortal soul trapped inside a material body. Thus, the “inner person” is actually an “immortal soul” that originated in the heavens and came down to be trapped inside a material, physical body. The material body was deemed temporary and essentially evil. Accordingly, the hope of the “spiritual man” was that his conscious immortal soul could return to heaven at the death of the material body.

Most post-apostolic “church fathers” were brought up believing ideas such as the immortality of the soul prior to becoming “Christian.” Through their highly influential writings, they eventually infused such ideas into the doctrines of the Roman Church. The Protestant Reformation—while it did help to correct some doctrinal errors—continued to promote the immortal soul heresy, which today underlies Protestant as well as Catholic doctrine.

What the Bible says about the *soul* requires some study. The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *nephesh*, defined as “a *breathing* creature, i.e., animal or (abstract) *vitality*...” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Hebrew Lexicon, item 5315). The various uses of *nephesh* simply refer to the *physical life* of air-breathing creatures—including human beings. Rather than being *separate from* the physical body, the soul is inextricably fused with the body.

When God created Adam, He made *him*—not just his body—“of the dust of the ground.” Note that Adam did not *receive* a soul, but “*became* a living soul” (*nephesh*). The soul is what a person *is*—not something he “has.” It’s the *complete being*, both physical and nonphysical.

Can a soul die? In Ezekiel 18:4 we read, “The soul [*nephesh*] that sins, it [not just the body] shall die.” For emphasis, the statement is repeated in verse 20. Some point to what Jesus said in Matthew 10:28—“Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul”—

but they fail to read the rest of the passage. “But rather fear him [God] which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Greek, *gehenna*]” (*KJV*). Notice, Christ did NOT say this *gehenna* fire burns the soul for eternity, but that it DESTROYS the soul—burns it up, causing it to cease to exist. Christ made it clear that the soul is NOT immortal and has no life or consciousness apart from the body.

Confusing Soul with Spirit: Some misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on the soul may result from the fact that the Bible also teaches that man has a human spirit. The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach*, which in some places is also translated “breath.”

Job 32:8 says there is a “spirit in man.” Several passages in Proverbs refer to this human spirit (Prov. 15:13; 16:32; 20:27; 25:28). This inner spirit, which we all have, is not a separate or additional “being”—nor an “immortal soul” trapped inside of us. It is a non-physical dimension that God gives to each of us at conception and is what, in reality, makes us human (Isa. 42:5; Zech. 12:1).

It is the human spirit added to our brain that gives us a *conscious mind* with self-identity—through which we are able to learn complex subjects such as language, mathematics and design (I Cor. 2:11). The human spirit is the sum total of everything about us that is non-physical—our thoughts, imaginations, plans, hopes, dreams, feelings, emotions, attitudes—and makes us each who and what we are. The human spirit also provides God with what is comparable to a “recording” of all that we are—which at death returns to God (Eccl. 12:7). God can then use this “recording” to resurrect us back to physical (or spiritual) life with everything that was unique about us intact.

It is important to understand that even with the addition of the human spirit, it is the whole physical and spiritual package that makes up the person—the soul. The whole person *is* a soul—not *has* a soul. Neither the soul nor the human spirit retain any consciousness after death (Psalm 146:4).

Through conversion our human spirit is conjoined by God’s Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16). It is through the workings of God’s Spirit with our human spirit in our minds that enables us to be able to understand the things of God (I Cor. 2:11). Those who have God’s Holy Spirit added to their human spirit in this life become, at death, the “dead in Christ.”

What is Death? The Bible is clear in its teaching on death and the state of the dead. The difference between being alive and being dead, according to Scripture, is not a matter of place or location—but a matter of being conscious or not conscious. Death is the total cessation of life, including consciousness. The only hope for the dead is through a resurrection back to conscious life. In fact, the Bible describes the death of humans as being identical to the death of animals (Eccl. 3:19, 20). Death is the same for all—whether righteous or unrighteous, faithful or unfaithful (Eccl. 9:2). In death, a person’s thoughts perish—he or she *knows nothing*, has no consciousness, no awareness (Eccl. 9:5; Psa. 146:4). They are neither looking down from “heaven” nor roasting in a “hell” somewhere in the bowels of the earth. They are simply *dead*.

Do People go to Heaven? Many are surprised to learn that the Bible does not teach that anyone goes to heaven. On the contrary, Jesus Christ—the very author of our Christian faith, whose words ought to carry far more weight than those of any would-be religious leader—stated emphatically, “No man has ascended up to heaven” (John 3:13). The apostle Peter adds, “David is not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:34)—he is simply dead.

Hebrews 9:27 tells us that it is appointed to *all to die once*. This first death (and lying dead for decades or centuries afterward) is neither a reward nor a punishment. It is simply what happens to everyone. In David’s case—because he died “in the faith”—he will (in a future resurrection) receive the reward of the faithful. Like all the true saints who have died, he is simply waiting in his grave for the resurrection.

Another false teaching (also based on the “immortal soul” idea) insists that people go at

death to a place called “Purgatory” where they suffer over long periods of time in order have their sins purged—after which they can go on to heaven. Obviously, there are no references to such a myth in Scripture. In fact, the idea denies the very sacrifice of Christ for the forgiveness of sin. When a person is truly converted—has repented of sin and accepted Christ as savior—his or her sins are totally and completely forgiven *at that time*. One does not have to undergo any punishment for such sins—now or after death.

The resurrection—A Christian’s True Hope: Job asked the question in chapter 14, verse 14, “If a man die, shall he live again?” He gives the answer: “All the days of my appointed time [in the grave] I will wait, until my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall have the desire for the work of Your hands.” This change does *not* occur right at death. Job knew he would have to *wait in the grave* for an unknown period of time before God would raise him up to a CHANGED state—from being dead to being alive.

Again, we must look to the words of Jesus Christ, not to those of human church leaders. The most quoted verse of the Bible—John 3:16—may also be one of its least understood. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not...”—what? Not go to hell, but go to heaven?

Is that what Christ said?

This passage is not about living forever in a horrible place or living forever in a good place. Location isn’t the issue. Christ said those who believe in Him “should not *perish*”—which means to cease to exist—“but have everlasting life.”

In the book of Acts and throughout the epistles, Paul and the other apostles describe the Christian hope as being the *resurrection from the dead*. In reassuring Christians of this hope, Paul makes it clear in I Corinthians 15 that Jesus’ resurrection is absolute proof of a future resurrection of the saints. He encourages the Thessalonians with similar words (I Thess. 4:13-18). Referring to the resurrection of the true Christian, Christ repeatedly said, “I will raise him up **at the last day**” (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24).

When does God make His final decision whether a person lives forever or perishes? Does God make that decision at the time of a person’s death? For those few who have been called to conversion and God’s grace, now is their time of judgment. But for the majority, the time for their judgment has not yet come. Remember, the first death is neither reward nor punishment—for in Adam we all die (I Cor. 15:22). The vast majority of the dead are simply waiting for the resurrection, when they will have their opportunity for “judgment.”

Is Today the Only Day of Salvation? According to mainstream Christianity, if a person doesn’t “get saved” now, in this life, he or she is lost forever. As sincere as this teaching may be, it is simply incorrect. The Bible DOES NOT teach the idea that this life is the only time in which people may have salvation!

Satan, the “god of this world” (II Cor. 4:4), currently holds most religious and civil leaders under his sway—having deceived such leaders at every turn (Rev. 12:9). The result is a world of culture and tradition in which whole populations are entrenched in false ways of life. Most people are so steeped in the ways of this world that they cannot possibly understand the truth of God—nor would they be willing to follow God’s way of life even if they did understand. This is why, as Paul says in Romans 11:32, God has “concluded them all in unbelief”—but only for a time—“that He might have mercy on them all” in a future time of judgment.

Add to that the fact that the natural human mind simply lacks the capacity or even the desire to understand spiritual truth (I Cor. 2:11, 14). Only if God by His spirit “calls” a person—that is, *opens the mind* of an individual and imparts understanding of His truth—does that person come to repentance and conversion in this life (II Cor. 7:9-11; John 6:44; Rom. 2:4; Phil. 2:13).

Christ indicated to His disciples that such a calling has NOT been extended to most people in this life. They asked Him why He spoke to the masses in parables. He answered, “Because

it has been **given to you** to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.... For this reason **I speak to them in parables**, because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, ‘In hearing you shall hear, and in no way understand; and in seeing you shall see and in no way perceive; for the heart of this people has grown fat, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and should hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them’ ” (Matt. 13:11-15).

Up to now, only a tiny minority of all humankind has had the calling of God—and far fewer have actually come to conversion and received God’s Holy Spirit. These few—this “little flock,” as Christ refers to His true Church—constitute the “house of God.” Peter tells us that *now*, in this life, is the time that judgment must begin at the house of God (I Pet. 4:17). Thus, when a converted person dies “in the faith” (or “in Christ”) their judgment by God has already taken place. God has made the final decision that he or she is going to be in His Kingdom—and has written that person’s name in the “Book of Life.”

There will be some few who may have committed the “unpardonable sin”—that is, with full knowledge and understanding of the truth and the way to salvation, they have rejected God’s grace and forgiveness, and have chosen not to repent and turn from the way of sin to God’s way. For such—and only God knows who they are—their final judgment is complete. They await the resurrection of the wicked and their fate is the second death in the lake of fire. This lake of fire (Greek, *gehenna*) is a consuming fire that totally destroys the incorrigible wicked. Jesus warned us to fear Him who can “**destroy both soul and body**” in this fire (Matt. 10:28). Malachi 4:1-3 shows that the wicked will become ashes under the feet of the faithful.

A Second Resurrection: As we’ve seen, the dead in Christ remain in their graves *until* He raises them up “at the last day,” (Job 14:14; John 5:25; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; I Thess. 4:13-16; I Cor. 15:50-54; Matt. 24:30, 31; Rev. 20:4-6). At that time Christ will raise them to eternal life in a supernatural, spirit state—to be just like Christ Himself (I John 3:1, 2; Phil. 3:21; II Pet. 1:4; Daniel 12:3).

But what about the rest of the dead? Judgment for them has not yet occurred. When do they get their chance for salvation? In Revelation 20, verse five, John writes that the resurrection of the “dead in Christ” (which occurs at Christ’s second coming) is only the “first resurrection.” He adds that, “the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished.”

Thus, there is a *second* resurrection. In that same chapter, verse 12, we read, “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God.” Here we see pictured the “second resurrection”—the resurrection of all who have ever lived and died NOT in the faith—those not having been called and brought to conversion in their first life, now coming before Christ’s “white throne” of judgment.

As with most biblical subjects, the whole story is not told all in one place. In Ezekiel 37 we have another view of the second resurrection—dealing specifically with the dead of Israel as they are brought back to physical life in the future. They are among the “rest of the dead”—the dead not in Christ—who appear before God’s throne in Revelation 20:12. Remember, “the rest of the dead” means all of those not in the first resurrection—which would include the overwhelming majority of Israelites who had died throughout the ages.

Notice in Ezekiel 37 that after Israel is brought back to life, God gives them His Holy Spirit! In order to receive God’s spirit, however, they must first *repent*, as Peter brings out in Acts 2:38. These newly resurrected Israelites will, apparently, be called before the “white throne” of Christ like the rest of humanity—to account for the deeds of their past. Most if not all will come to see what sinners they were, and in repentance accept Jesus Christ as their savior with forgiveness of their sins. They will be granted God’s Spirit and happily live out their new

physical life. (Isa. 65:20 seems to indicate that they may have up to 100 years to grow in grace and knowledge and to build spiritual character before ultimately going on into the Kingdom of God.)

Clearly then, we see “unconverted” Israel resurrected in the future. But what about “unconverted” Gentiles? Chapters 9-11 of Romans shows us that God will deal with Gentiles as He deals with Israel. Revelation 20:12 pictures ALL of the “rest of the dead” before the white throne, not just Israel. ALL bow before God and confess their sins. ALL are judged based on their works, and ALL are found guilty of sin (Rom. 3:23).

But will the guilty stand condemned? II Peter 3:9 tells us that God is not willing that any should perish (be destroyed and miss out on eternal life). After being shown their sins before the throne of God, ALL will have their *first* and *only* chance for salvation through repentance, conversion and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Remember, those of the second resurrection NEVER had (in their first life) their minds opened to the truth of God by the Holy Spirit of God—and never had the opportunity (with a full understanding) to repent of their sins and receive God’s grace.

Christ died once for ALL (I Tim. 2:6; Heb. 10:10; I Cor. 15: 22-24). Our Lord and Savior did not go through the torture, humiliation, scourging and beating He suffered, followed by His agonizing death on the cross, only to have His grace offered to just part of the human family!

By the time this “White Throne Judgment” takes place, Satan will have been put into the lake of fire and will no longer be able to pervert the truth and deceive humanity. Without Satan’s distorting influence—and with their minds now opened by the Holy Spirit—people will for the first time be able to think spiritually.

Thank God for His incredible, merciful plan! Be encouraged by the truth of the Bible concerning death and the state of the dead—rejoice in the sure knowledge that all who have ever lived will one day have their full chance for eternal life!