

What Happens After Death?

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Introduction

A drunken driver loses control of his car and careens headfirst into a van, killing a family. A mother dies of breast cancer, leaving confused children and a grieving husband. An infant boy succumbs to a fatal birth defect. A gentle, elderly lady dies quietly in her sleep. A desperate, depressed teenager commits suicide.

Maybe death would be different if it were predictable or consistent. But death can be so capricious. It hardly seems fair.

To us life is precious. But death is everywhere! We don't want to die. We don't want to see our loved ones die.

Self-preservation is a powerful instinct. We design special diets and exercise programs to keep us young and fit. Through medical science we seek to isolate the gene that causes aging, hoping somehow to eliminate death. A few have even arranged for their bodies to be preserved cryogenically in the hope that they can be brought back to life when the cure for what killed them is finally discovered.

Yet for all our efforts, hopes and wishes, *death* is the one thing in life that remains certain. Whether through old age, illness, accident or violence, whether we are rich, poor, male or female, no matter if we're good or bad, all of us—regardless of race or creed—eventually face death.

Scientists cannot tell us what happens after death. Too many aspects of life itself are intangible—too elusive to measure and record. Philosophers disagree on death and the afterlife.

Religions also disagree. Traditional Christian denominations generally teach that the souls of the dead live on in a place or condition of heaven or hell. Many non-Christians believe in the transmigration or reincarnation of souls at death. Still others believe the dead will never live again—that this life is all there is.

What *really* happens at death? Why do we even have to die? Can we actually know whether there is life beyond the grave? Where can we go for meaningful, believable answers?

Only the Creator of life can reveal its purpose and the state of the dead. By looking into the Word of God for answers to our questions, we can learn a great deal about both life and death.

Let's now take a look at what God, our Creator, says about life and death in His inspired Word, the Bible. You may be both surprised and challenged as you discover the truth about what happens after death!

The Wondrous Gift of Life

To understand death, we need to first consider: *What is life?* The world's greatest thinkers, including the Greek philosophers Plato, Aristotle and Socrates, have struggled with this question. Scientists and theologians have dedicated lifetimes to trying to find the keys that unlock the mystery of human existence.

But only the One who created life in the first place can supply the answers we so desperately need. We must look at *the very beginning of life* to understand it.

Religion, philosophy and science acknowledge that physical life had a beginning. Some believe that life evolved over millennia. But the Bible reveals a God who boldly claims that He is the Creator of all life and that He created human life for a tremendous purpose. Through His Word, God gives us His answers to life's most important questions.

Why human beings differ from animals

Much of humanity is familiar with the account in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. *Genesis* simply means “beginning” or “origin.” In Genesis God reveals the origin of the forms of life we find on planet earth.

Notice what God says about human life in Genesis 1:26: “Let Us make man *in Our image, according to Our likeness*; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (emphasis added throughout). God intended that other forms of life be subject to man as part of an extraordinary *higher purpose* for man.

Only mankind was created *in God's very image*—a designation that applies to no other part of His creation. Human beings are unique among God's physical creation in their godlike abilities to make decisions, plan and create. Far beyond providing us with animal-like instinct, God created within us intellect, self-awareness, the capacity to learn, reason, communicate and produce.

Human brains are physically quite similar to some animal brains, yet people have vastly higher abilities. The Bible reveals that the difference between the human mind and the animal brain is the spiritual essence God included in the makeup of human beings: “For what man knows the things of a man except [by] *the spirit of the man* which is in

him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11; see also Job 32:8; Zechariah 12:1).

Something is still missing in human beings

Paul refers to the “*spirit of the man*” as that which makes people intellectually superior to animals. It separates us from other physical creatures, allowing us to know “the things of a man,” to think and understand on a much higher plane.

We were created to possess certain intellectual capacities similar to those of the Creator Himself (Genesis 1:26), enabling us to develop skills in mathematics and science, invent written languages, build great civilizations, learn from the past and plan for the future.

When God breathed the “breath of life” into the first man Adam (Genesis 2:7), He gave him more than physical existence. God



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imparted to Adam that spiritual and intellectual essence that gives mankind the remarkable capacities of the human mind.

But the apostle Paul reveals that something important is still lacking: “So also no one comprehends what is truly God's *except [by] the Spirit of God*” (1 Corinthians 2:11, New Revised Standard Version). Here Paul is speaking of another Spirit, the Spirit of God.

He continues, “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but *the Spirit that is from God*, so that we may *understand* the gifts bestowed on us by God” (verse 12, NRSV). Spiritual understanding that surpasses our normal human intellect comes only through the extra help, influence and power of God's Holy Spirit.

“Those who are unspiritual,” Paul adds, “do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (verse 14, NRSV). We will see that this *spiritual link with God* is vital in coming to know and experience the purpose of life.

Human life created for a higher purpose

Compared with plant and animal life, human beings are created by God with a spiritual dimension for a much higher purpose. Several scriptures reveal that the reason for human life is *preparation for an infinitely higher level of existence*, which includes *immortal spirit life*.

God created us with the intent that we accept His gift of salvation through Jesus Christ and live forever: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish *but have everlasting life*” (John 3:16).



God created human life on a level far different from that of plants and animals to fulfill a far greater purpose.

Jesus stated in prayer to God the Father regarding Himself, “You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give *eternal life* to as many as You have given Him” (John 17:2). God promises to give “*eternal life* to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality” (Romans 2:6-7). We have the “hope of *eternal life* which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began” (Titus 1:2). Again, this is part of the very reason for human life—that we may ultimately receive *eternal life*.

Summary

God is the Creator and sustainer of life. He created human life on a level different from that of plants and animals to fulfill a far greater purpose. Our lives consist of relationships, goals and experiences that at times are enjoyable, at times difficult. But the ultimate purpose of our lives greatly exceeds merely meeting the needs and fulfilling the pleasures of our daily circumstances.

(To learn more about the incredible purpose of human life, the ultimate reason for why you exist, be sure to request your free copy of *What Is Your Destiny?* from our Web site, at www.GNmagazine.org/booklets, or from the address nearest you at the end of this booklet.)

Now that we have briefly considered the meaning of life, we will examine the part death plays in fulfilling the purpose of human life. Why do we die? What happens when we die? What is the hope that lies beyond death?

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The Mystery of Death

Death is a fearful, often traumatic event. Sometimes it is preceded by suffering, the result of the infirmities of age, disease or injury. Often death is shocking and unexpected. Family and friends suffer the pain of loss. The Scriptures refer to death as “the last enemy” to be conquered (1 Corinthians 15:26) and point out mankind’s innate fear of death (Hebrews 2:15). Death remains one of life’s greatest mysteries.

Religions offer a variety of answers, some seemingly credible and some beyond belief. Their explanations often contradict one another, adding to the confusion and uncertainty about what happens after death. A very common idea is that people are born with immortal souls. Many believe that after death the soul is conscious and proceeds to a literal place or condition of bliss or torment. Others teach that at death the soul is absorbed into a “greater consciousness.” Some expect to be reincarnated, coming back to earth as another person or as an animal.

Can we pinpoint just what death is? Do we have immortal souls? Are we conscious after we die? Are we destined to go somewhere to experience some form of reward or punishment? What is really going to happen when we die?

To understand, let’s continue with the biblical account of the first human beings.

God personally instructed Adam and Eve,



Often death is shocking and unexpected. Family and friends suffer the pain of loss.

but they chose to disobey Him. They let Satan influence them into choosing their own will rather than obeying God’s instructions. God informed them that, because they had disobeyed Him, their lives would grow difficult and, as He had warned, they would die. “In the sweat of your face,” God said to

Adam, “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).

Our lives are physical; we age and eventually die. Like Adam and Eve, we eventually return to dust. Solomon made a simple but profound observation when he wrote that there is “a time to be born, and a time to die” (Ecclesiastes 3:2). Look around the world at the example of nature. All living processes eventually break down and cease, then the physical remains begin to decay.

Solomon, after observing the cycles of life, noted that we human beings yearn for an eternal existence (verse 11). Knowing that death is inevitable, we search for a deeper meaning of life.

What is a soul?

Much misunderstanding about death is directly related to confusion concerning the “soul.” What is a soul? Does it exist? If it exists, is it separate from the physical body? Does it live on after death?

The Hebrew word most often translated into English as “soul” or “creature” in the Bible is *nephesh*. *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* succinctly defines this word as “a breathing creature.” When used in the Bible, *nephesh* does not mean a spirit entity or the spirit within a person. Rather, it usually means a physical, living, breathing creature. Occasionally it conveys a related meaning such as breath, life or person.

Surprising to many, this term *nephesh* is used to refer to human beings *and* animals. In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a “soul” (*nephesh*) more than 130 times. But the same Hebrew term is also applied to sea creatures, birds and land animals, including cattle and “creeping” creatures such as reptiles and insects. All are “souls.”

For example, notice the account of the creation of sea life: “And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good” (Genesis 1:21, King James Version). The Hebrew word translated “creature” in this verse is *nephesh*. In the biblical account, these particular “souls,” creatures of the sea, were made before the first human beings were formed and given life.

Nephesh and man

Let’s further see how this word is used to refer to mankind in the Scriptures. The first place we find *nephesh* in reference to mankind is in the second chapter of Genesis: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; *and man became a living soul*” (verse 7, KJV).

The word translated “soul” in this verse is again the Hebrew word *nephesh*. Other translations of the Bible state that man became a living “being” or “person.” This verse does not say that Adam *had* an immortal soul; rather it

says that God breathed into Adam the “breath of life,” and Adam *became* a living soul. At the end of his days, when the breath of life *left* Adam, he died and returned to dust.



The soul (*nephesh*) is *not immortal*, because *it dies*. This is clear in the Bible. For example, through the prophet Ezekiel God proclaimed, “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; *the soul who sins shall die*” (Ezekiel 18:4, see also verse 20). Again, the Hebrew word translated “soul” here is *nephesh*. Indeed, the same word is even used of corpses—dead bodies (see Leviticus 22:4; Num-

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a “soul” more than 130 times. But the same Hebrew term is also applied to sea creatures, birds and land animals, including cattle and “creeping” creatures such as reptiles and insects. All are “souls.”

bers 5:2; 6:11; 9:6-10). So Scripture plainly states that *the soul can die*. It is *mortal*—it is in no way *immortal*—*because it is subject to death and decay*.

What happens to the dead?

Superstitions and assumptions, all kinds of beliefs, abound about the state of the dead. Many enjoy being frightened by books and movies about ghosts and other weird twists on the afterlife. Movies and television programs portray apparitions and angels sent back to earth to accomplish some final good deeds or rescue people from difficult situations. Cartoons entertain our children with ideas about animals going to heaven and the antics of friendly ghosts.

On the other hand, of course, many religious groups teach that at death a person goes immediately to his reward or punishment.

But the reality of what happens after death is quite different from all of these ideas. There are no disembodied spirits of dead people wandering about frightening or taking revenge on people—or even helping them.

Furthermore, the Bible does not speak of the dead going to live on forever in a place or condition of “heaven” or “hell.” Solomon observed that mankind and animals are destined for, in death, a common fate. “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other . . . All go to one place: all are from

the dust, and all return to dust” (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

The book of Daniel refers to the state of the dead in an inspiring prophecy: “And many of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth* shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Daniel 12:2).

This passage conveys some crucial information. For one, it offers the promise of *life after death*—not by people living on apart from their bodies after death but through a *resurrection from death* that will take place in the future. Some will receive immortality then, and some will not. So clearly we are not immortal souls at present. Moreover, the passage compares death to sleep—and explains the resurrection as waking up *from* that sleep.

Sleep connotes unconsciousness, and the Bible draws the same analogy in other places. How could people who have died be asleep in their graves, profoundly unconscious—as revealed in the Bible—yet be residing blissfully in heaven and looking down at us on earth (or, presumably, suffering in hell and looking up)?

Do Some Bible Verses Teach We Have an Immortal Soul?

Some believe that various scriptures support belief in an immortal soul. Let’s consider some of these passages and understand what they really say.

Matthew 10:28: Destroying soul and body in hell?

“And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

Is Jesus teaching in this verse that the soul lives on after death and is immortal? Not at all. If you look at this scripture closely, you see that Jesus is actually saying that *the soul can be destroyed*. Jesus is here warning about the judgment of God. He says not to fear those who can destroy only the physical human body (*soma* in the Greek), but fear Him (God) who is also able to destroy the soul (*psuche*)—here denoting the person’s physical being with its consciousness.

Simply stated, Christ was showing that when one man kills another the resulting death is only temporary; God can raise anyone to conscious life again either soon after death (see Matthew

9:23-25; 27:52; John 11:43-44; Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-11) or in the age to come after Christ returns to the earth. The person who has died is not ultimately gone forever. We must have a proper fear of God, who alone can remove one’s physical life and all possibility of any later resurrection to life. When God destroys one in “hell,” that person’s destruction is permanent.

What is the “hell” spoken of in this verse? The Greek word used here is *gehenna*, which comes from the combination of two Hebrew words, *gai* and *hinnom*, meaning “Valley of Hinnom.” The term originally referred to a valley on the south side of Jerusalem in which pagan deities were worshipped.

Because of its reputation as an abominable place, it later became a garbage dump where refuse was burned. *Gehenna* became synonymous with “a place of burning”—a site used to dispose of useless things.

Only God can utterly destroy human existence and eliminate any hope of a resurrection. The Scriptures teach that God will in the future burn up the incorrigibly wicked in an all-consuming fire, turning them to ashes (Malachi

Solomon noted that the dead have no awareness, nor are they in some other state of consciousness: “For the living know that they will die; *but the dead know nothing* . . . for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). The person who has died is unconscious and unaware of the passing of time.

Life is transitory

The patriarch Job contemplated the transitory nature of physical life. Man, he said, “comes forth like a flower and fades away; he flees like a shadow and does not continue” (Job 14:2). Directing his remarks to God, Job commented on the physical limitations common to all men and women, stating, “Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with You; You have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass” (verse 5).

Job noted the stark reality of death: “So man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their

4:3)—annihilating them forever.

1 Thessalonians 5:23: Spirit, soul and body?

Many are confused by an expression the apostle Paul uses in one of his letters to the Thessalonians: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

What does Paul mean by the phrase “spirit, soul, and body”?

By “spirit” (*pneuma*), Paul means the non-material component that is joined to the physical human brain to form the human mind. This spirit is not conscious of itself. Rather, it gives the brain the ability to reason, create and analyze our existence (see also Job 32:8; 1 Corinthians 2:11). By “soul” (*psuche*), Paul means the person’s physical being with its consciousness. By “body” (*soma*), Paul means a physical body of flesh. In short, Paul wished for the whole person, including the mind, vitality of conscious life and physical body, to be sanctified and blameless.

Revelation 6:9-10: Souls of slain crying out?

“When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they

held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” (Revelation 6:9-10).

To understand this scripture, we must remember the context. John was witnessing a vision while he was “in the Spirit” (Revelation 4:2). Under inspiration he was seeing future events depicted in symbolism. The fifth seal is *figurative* of the Great Tribulation, a time of world turmoil preceding Christ’s return. In this vision, John sees under the altar the martyred believers who *sacrificed their lives* for their faith in God. These souls figuratively cry out, “Avenge our blood!” This can be compared to Abel’s blood metaphorically crying out to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Though neither dead souls nor blood can actually speak, these phrases figuratively demonstrate that a God of justice will not forget the evil deeds of mankind perpetrated against His righteous followers.

This verse does not describe living souls that have gone to heaven. The Bible confirms that “*no one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven [Jesus Christ]” (John 3:13). Even righteous King David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22), was described by Peter as being “dead and buried” (Acts 2:29), not alive in heaven or some other state or location (verse 34).

sleep” (verse 12). Job understood that death was the absolute cessation of life.

Notice that in Genesis 2:17 God told Adam and Eve that disobeying Him by taking from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would lead to *death*. Then, in Genesis 3:4, we read that the serpent (Satan) told Eve that if she ate from that tree, she would “not surely die.” Simply put, God said that man is mortal and subject to death. Satan contradicted God and said that man would *not* die—that man is immortal.

Isn't it amazing that, as evidenced by the pervasive belief in the immortality of the soul, more people accept Satan's teaching than God's? Yet maybe

The History of the Immortal-Soul Teaching

Despite widespread use of the phrase *immortal soul*, this terminology is found nowhere in the Bible. Where did the idea of an immortal soul originate?

The concept of the soul's supposed immortality was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. “The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is . . . speculation . . . nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture

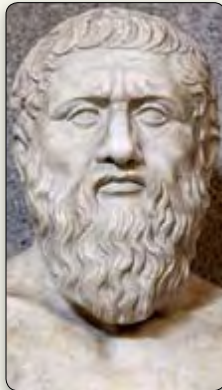
Plato, the Greek philosopher, taught that the body and the immortal soul separate at death.

. . . The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended” (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941, Vol. 6, “Immortality of the Soul,” pp. 564, 566).

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the “immortal soul” separate at death. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* comments on ancient Israel's view of the soul: “We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament” (1960, Vol. 2, “Death,” p. 812).

Early Christianity was influenced and corrupted by Greek philosophies as it spread through the Greek and Roman world. By A.D. 200 the doctrine of the immortality of the soul became a controversy among Christian believers.

The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology notes that Origen, an early and influential Catholic theologian, was influenced by Greek



thinkers: “Speculation about the soul in the subapostolic church was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. This is seen in Origen's acceptance

of Plato's doctrine of the preexistence of the soul as pure mind (*nous*) originally, which, by reason of its fall from God, cooled down to soul (*psyche*) when it lost its participation in the divine fire by looking earthward” (1992, “Soul,” p. 1037).

Secular history reveals that the concept of the immortality of the soul is an ancient belief embraced by many pagan religions. But it's not a biblical teaching and is not found in either the Old or New Testaments.

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that's not so startling after all. The Bible does say that Satan “deceives the whole world” (Revelation 12:9), and he has certainly deceived many about what happens after death.

The Hebrew Scriptures, commonly called the Old Testament, teach that, at death, the soul dies and consciousness ends. The soul does not live on in some other condition. It does not transmigrate into another form. It is not reincarnated into another creature. In dying, it ceases to live.

What does the New Testament say?

The apostle James understood the *temporary* nature of life. He compared life with a mist: “You do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a *vapor* that appears for a little time and then *vanishes away*” (James 4:14). Another epistle also discusses this subject, stating that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

The New Testament uses a word similar in meaning to *nephesh* to characterize the life or vitality of our *physical* existence, the Greek word *psyche* or *psuche*. (We will use the latter spelling here, as the Greek *y*, the letter upsilon, was pronounced as a *u*, and the spelling *psyche*, now used in English, typically conveys a different sense from the word's original meaning.)

According to *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, this word meant “breath” when the New Testament was written. It could be used in the same sense as the Hebrew word *nephesh*. Recall that *nephesh* occurs in reference to the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7, where the word is translated “soul” or “being.” This verse is paraphrased in the New Testament as “The first man Adam became a living being” (1 Corinthians 15:45), and the Greek word substituted for *nephesh* here is *psuche*.

Both of these words often translated “soul” convey the concept that man is a *living, breathing* creature subject to death. Notice Christ's use of the word *psuche*: “For whoever desires to save his life [*psuche*] will lose it, but whoever loses his life [*psuche*] for My sake will find it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul [*psuche*]? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul [*psuche*]?” (Matthew 16:25-26).

Notice that Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, uses *psuche* four times in this passage. It is translated into English as both “life” and “soul.” Christ was simply saying that following Him and His message is more important than life itself. What good is it if you gain the whole world and then lose your existence? Jesus knew that the soul, one's physical being with its consciousness, was temporary and mortal. It could be lost or sacrificed for something of less value.

What did Peter teach?

What did Jesus' early disciples teach about death? The book of Acts

records the apostle Peter's powerful sermon in which he mentioned ancient Israel's King David and his lack of consciousness while awaiting his resurrection. "Men and brethren," exhorted Peter, "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 . . . For *David did not ascend into the heavens . . .*" (Acts 2:29, 34).

If people truly are alive in heaven with God the Father and Jesus Christ as so many believe, surely King David would be among them. But Peter said David is dead and



The apostle Paul, like other biblical writers, likens death to sleep. He uses the word *sleep* to describe death as a state of unconsciousness.

buried and *not* in heaven. In contrast to Christ, who was resurrected so that "His soul was not left in *Hades*" (verse 31)—this being the Greek word for *the grave*, as we will later see—David *remains* in the grave.

His hope, and ours, is to live again through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ and the *resurrection* available through Him.

Paul's teachings about death

The apostle Paul also comments on the state of the dead. In one of his letters to the church in Corinth he compared the condition of the dead with sleep: "For this reason many are weak and sick among you, *and many sleep*" (1 Corinthians 11:30). Notice how Paul, like the Old Testament book of Daniel, likens death to sleep. Paul comments that many in the Corinthian church were weak and sickly. Many had died. Paul uses the word *sleep* to describe death as *a state of unconsciousness*.

But that is not the end of the matter. In describing the future resurrection of Christ's followers, Paul writes in the same letter, "Behold, I tell you a mystery: *We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed*" (1 Corinthians 15:51). This change is yet future—and Christians who sleep unconsciously in death will do so until that time.

In addition, Paul specifically points out that we are now mortal—destructible—and that to receive everlasting life we must somehow become

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immortal—*indestructible*. "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, *and this mortal must put on immortality*. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'" (1 Corinthians 15:53-54).

Paul conveyed a similar message to the church at Thessalonica: "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*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). Paul here again describes the dead as being in an unconscious state comparable to sleep.

On the basis of so much scriptural testimony, Martin Luther, leader of the Protestant Reformation, wrote at one point: "It is probable, in my opinion, that, with very few exceptions indeed, the dead sleep in utter insensibility till the day of judgment . . . On what authority can it be said that the souls of the dead may not sleep . . . in the same way that the living pass in profound slumber the interval between their downlying at night and their uprising in the morning?" (Letter to Nicholas Amsdorf, Jan. 13, 1522, quoted in Jules Michelet, *The Life*

What About Reported Life-After-Death Experiences?

Occasionally the news media report the story of someone who supposedly came back to life after he or she had died and returned to consciousness to relate the incident. Sometimes these happenings seem truly remarkable and appear to contradict the many biblical passages describing death. How can that be?

The basic premise of these accounts is that the people describing their experiences actually died. True, many of them were declared "clinically dead." However, as with life itself there is much that medical science has not grasped about the nature of death. Doctors and scientists do not agree on exactly what constitutes "death." Some people, for example, may be brain-dead or comatose while the rest of their body goes on functioning for years. Others whose hearts or lungs have stopped have been successfully resuscitated with no permanent ill effects.

In the Bible death is described as a state of total unconsciousness devoid of awareness,

knowledge or perception (see Psalm 6:5; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10). If we accept the Bible's description of death, we realize that those who returned to consciousness or were medically revived and later related their experiences were not really dead in the true sense. Some vital organs, such as the heart, may have temporarily ceased functioning, but not all brain activity had stopped.

Researchers have found that the human nervous system and brain operate largely through electrical impulses. The brain requires blood and oxygen to properly function, and when breathing or blood circulation is impaired the brain begins to malfunction. If these functions are interrupted long enough, the brain eventually ceases all activity.

Some researchers conclude that the unusual sensations, including lights and sounds, reported by those revived after being *clinically* dead can be attributed to malfunctions of the nervous system and brain brought about by the shock to the body as a result of *nearly* dying.

God's Plan of Redemption

God gave us physical, temporary life. Since we are physical, we all eventually face death. This is no accident of evolution but came about as a result of circumstances knowable only from the Bible—involving decisions made by our first parents in the Garden of Eden.

In the beginning of God's plan for mankind, God made available to Adam and Eve His gift of eternal life represented by the tree of life (Genesis 2:9, 16). This tree represented choosing to believe in and obey God's revealed will, embracing His way of life.

The garden contained another tree as well, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (verse 9). This tree represented something altogether different—man choosing his own way of life rather than following God's revelation—deciding for himself what is good and evil.

Influenced by Satan, Adam and Eve made a fundamental choice that has affected humanity ever since. They chose to take of the wrong tree, eating the forbidden fruit.

rejected by Adam and Eve, is available to each of us today as a result of God's personal calling.

Adam and Eve introduced sin to mankind, and all human beings springing from them are "appointed" to die because all have sinned



Man is able to be rescued from death because of the priceless shed blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Refusing to believe and obey God, they came under the dominion of Satan and the penalty for sin—suffering and death (Genesis 2:17).

Had Adam and Eve taken of the tree of life, they would have received eternal life (Genesis 3:22). This is why, after they had made the wrong choice and had taken of the wrong tree, God had to cut them off from the tree of life "lest they live forever." God could not allow them to live forever in their sinful, rebellious state.

Because of their disobedience, God told them of their sure fate: "You [shall] return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

It is important to realize that God's original plan to give mankind eternal life, which was

(Romans 5:12; Hebrews 9:27). Yet God's purpose for mankind stands; His purpose to give mankind eternal life will succeed! Throughout the rest of the Bible we see the unfolding of God's plan of redemption—the *purchase of mankind for a price*. Man, we see, is able to be rescued from death because of the priceless shed blood of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The little-understood truth is that God's initial purpose for mankind is that he not die. The temporary existence that ends in death, bringing suffering and loss, is not God's original purpose for mankind. It is part of the curse for sin brought on humanity by the wrong choice made by our first parents, and all have chosen to follow that sinful way ever since (Romans 3:23).

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of Luther, translated by William Hazlitt, 1862, p. 133). Yet the Reformation did not embrace the biblical truth that the dead sleep in total unawareness.

Is the spirit in man the immortal soul?

Earlier we noted a special spiritual aspect of the human mind that gives us our intellectual abilities, separating us from animals in function and purpose (see 1 Corinthians 2:11).

What we've seen so far is that the Bible shows a dead person is in no way immortal; his life has perished. So what happens to the spiritual essence that separates man from animal? Does it continue as a conscious, immortal soul independent of the physical body? Certainly not!

The Bible shows that the spirit in man, which originally came from the Creator God, returns to Him. "Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the *spirit* will return to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7). This *spirit* that returns to God is neither the source of human life, nor is it human consciousness. Life and consciousness both perish when one dies. God does not tell us *why* this spirit returns to Him, just that *it does*. This may be the way God preserves the characteristics of each person until the resurrection.

The truth is that man has no spiritual soul with conscious awareness independent of the physical body. This has been proven time and time again when individuals have gone into comas for weeks, months and sometimes years at a time, only to emerge from that comatose state with no memory or recollection of the passage of time.

If one had a soul that existed independently of the human body, wouldn't that soul have some memory of remaining aware during the months or years the body was unconscious? That would be powerful and logical proof of the existence of an independent soul within the human body—yet no one has ever reported any such thing, in spite of thousands of such occurrences.

Summary

In this chapter we have considered the mystery of death. The good news is that it doesn't have to be a mystery. The scriptures we have reviewed make clear that a human being *is a mortal* soul and does not *possess* an *immortal* soul. Upon death, life ceases. It does not continue in some other form; a dead person does not transmigrate to be reincarnated as another being.

Since the time of Adam and Eve, *all* people have died a physical death—even Jesus Christ. *But death is not the end*. As Paul wrote, "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ *all shall be made alive*" (1 Corinthians 15:22). Even though our life is temporary, God has not left us without hope and a greater purpose for living.

Another vital step we have mentioned here and will take up more fully in the next chapter, the resurrection, brings us from death back to life.

The Promise of Life After Death

In the first chapter we dealt with God's gift of physical life. In the second chapter we discussed death itself. We have learned that we are mortal; life is temporary. Now we will focus on *what happens after death*. Even though our bodies are temporary, subject to decay and death, God has planned for us much more than just this limited, physical existence.

Thousands of years ago the patriarch Job asked the same question we ask ourselves: "If a man dies, shall he live again?" (Job 14:14). He went on to answer the question in stating to God: "All the days of my appointed time will I wait, *till my change come*. Thou shalt call, *and I will answer thee*" (verses 14-15, KJV). After death a person is unconscious, waiting for God to call him from the grave and restore him to life.

What does the Bible say about the remarkable phenomenon of restoration to life? When will it take place? What else happens at this time? Will the resurrected still be flesh and blood, or will they be brought back to a different kind of life?

The answers to these questions go to the core of the meaning of our existence. As we study the Bible to find the answers, we can be encouraged, motivated and inspired by God's plan for life after death.

The promise of the resurrection

Paul, as we saw briefly in the last chapter, spoke of a great change that will take place when he referred to both *the resurrection of the dead* and the state of *those who remain alive* at the time of the resurrection at the return of Christ. A marvelous transformation must occur before we can receive the gift of eternal life. The dead in Christ will be resurrected to an "incorruptible" existence, and those in Christ who are still alive will be instantly changed from a mortal, physical existence to an incorruptible state.

Notice again Paul's description of this astounding event: "Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep [die], 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*" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

As explained in the previous chapter, those who have died are *uncon-*

scious, as if they are sleeping a dreamless sleep, awaiting their time to be called out of the grave and resurrected to a new life. The period from the last moment of consciousness until they are awakened in the resurrection will seem as if no time had passed at all, just as if they were waking from sleep or from a coma.

Paul shows clearly that this resurrection will occur when Jesus Christ returns to the earth: "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [died], 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. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who



Paul shows clearly that this resurrection will occur when Jesus Christ returns to earth: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven . . . and the dead in Christ will rise first."

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 the 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" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

Two groups resurrected at Christ's return

In both passages Paul distinguishes between two groups of Christ's followers—those who have died and those who are still alive when Jesus returns—both of whom will be in this resurrection. Although "it is appointed for men to die once" (Hebrews 9:27), some will remain alive when Jesus returns. So what will happen to these faithful followers who are still alive then?

At that time, these people's physical lives will be over, because they will be miraculously and instantaneously changed to incorruptible spirit, inheriting the gift of eternal life.

Ancient Pagan Belief in Heaven

The idea that “souls” go to heaven at death originated in pagan religion, not the Bible. A brief look at ancient history reveals that the people of Babylon, Egypt and other kingdoms imagined such an afterlife.

According to *This Believing World*, by Lewis Browne, the Egyptian god Osiris was thought to have been killed, resurrected and taken to heaven: “Osiris came to life again! He was miraculously resurrected from death and taken up to heaven; and there in heaven, so the myth

The Egyptian god Osiris was thought to have been killed, resurrected and taken to heaven.

declared, he lived on eternally” (1946, p. 83).

Browne explains: “The Egyptians reasoned that if it was the fate of the god Osiris to be resurrected after death, then a way could be found to make it the fate of man, too . . . The bliss of immortality that had formerly been reserved only for kings was then promised to all men . . . The heavenly existence of the dead was carried on in the realm of Osiris, and it was described in considerable detail by the Egyptian theologians. It was believed that on death the soul of a man set out at once to reach a Judgment Hall on high . . . and stood before the celestial throne of Osiris, the Judge. There it gave account of itself to Osiris and his forty-two associate gods” (p. 84).

If able to satisfy the gods, “the soul was straightway gathered into the fold of Osiris. But if it could not, if it was found wanting when weighed in the heavenly balances, then it was cast into a hell, to be rent to shreds of the ‘Devouress.’ For only the righteous souls, only the guiltless, were thought to be deserving of life everlasting” (pp. 86-87).

This idea of men being able to follow their savior-god into heaven was a central focus of the ancient mystery religions. Browne continues: “Mankind everywhere, in Mexico and Iceland, in Zululand and China, makes more or less

the same wild guesses in its convulsive effort to solve the riddle of existence . . .

“In very early times that idea flourished not alone among the Babylonians and Egyptians, but also among the barbaric tribes in and around Greece . . . These mysteries [came] down from Thrace or across the sea from Egypt and Asia Minor . . . They declared that for every man, no matter how poor or vicious, there was a place in heaven.



All one had to do was to be ‘initiated’ into the secrets of the cult . . . then salvation was assured him, and no excess of vice and moral turpitude [i.e., depravity] could close the gates of paradise in his face. He was saved forevermore” (pp. 96-99).

Man has always wanted to live without ever dying. This world and all it offers has never satisfied humanity. For centuries mankind has searched for security and happiness in the hope of going to heaven at death. Regrettably, too many have embraced beliefs that cannot be proven true.

God alone knows the answers to the mysteries of life and death, and He reveals them in His Word, the Holy Bible. Contrary to what so many think, God does not promise eternity in heaven as the reward of the saved. Instead, Jesus says those who overcome will reign with Him in the coming Kingdom of God, which will be established on earth at His return (Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 11:15). Ultimately, they will inherit the entire universe and spirit realm as coheirs with Christ (compare Romans 8:17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 2:5-11; Revelation 21:7).

Paul describes this wonderful change a little earlier in the same chapter. “So also is the resurrection of the dead,” he wrote. “The body is sown in corruption, *it is raised in incorruption*. It is sown in dishonor, *it is raised in glory*. It is sown in weakness, *it is raised in power*. It is sown a natural body [flesh and blood], *it is raised a spiritual body* [no longer physical, but composed of spirit]. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42-44).

Paul then explains that while “the first man Adam became a living being,” a physical creature of the dust of the earth, “the last Adam [Jesus Christ] became a life-giving spirit” (verse 45)—that is, He was resurrected as a spirit being with a body composed of spirit. And so it will be with us, as Paul explains.

The apostle continues: “And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man [Christ]. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption” (verses 49-50).

At the end of our physical lives—the conclusion of this temporary and mortal existence—comes death. After that comes a resurrection in which we must be changed because, as Paul wrote, mortal “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” Those who are “in Christ”—who have been called, repented, been baptized and been led by God—will be transformed in that resurrection to eternal, spiritual life, glorified as spirit beings like the resurrected Jesus Christ (Romans 8:16-17).

What happens after the resurrection?

The words quoted earlier from 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17 describe Jesus’ triumphant return to earth. Heralded by the shout of an archangel and the sounding of a trumpet, God will resurrect the dead in Christ to eternal life; the living who are Christ’s will be changed from mortal to immortal and will ascend to meet and greet Him.

Scriptures show that those in this resurrection will not stay in “heaven” (in this case the earth’s atmosphere—“the air,” as it states) with Christ, but will descend with Him as He takes control of and begins to reign over the nations (see Daniel 2:44; 7:13-18; Zechariah 14:1-4; Acts 15:15-17; Revelation 11:15; 19:15).

The resurrected saints (this term meaning those sanctified or set apart, applying to all of Christ’s followers) will reign with Christ on earth in His Kingdom. As Revelation 5:10 states, Jesus will make them “a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (New International Version). (To learn more about these incredible events, be sure to download or request your free copy of our booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

Who will be resurrected?

Now let's look at another important detail regarding the resurrection: Some will be resurrected to receive eternal life, but others will be resurrected to a coming judgment. Jesus makes this distinction Himself: "Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds *to a resurrection of life*, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment" (John 5:28-29, New American Standard Bible).

God gave us this temporary, mortal life to prepare us for eternal life. The hope and promise of that resurrection is intriguing and inspiring. But knowing



Repentance is also our resolve to forsake our former way of life to begin a new life in Christ. Baptism portrays that resolve.

there is also a "resurrection of judgment" gives us reason to pause. Why might one person be resurrected to life and another be resurrected to judgment?

The resurrection of life is through Jesus Christ

When he was challenged by religious leaders, Peter made the point that the only way to salvation is through Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). Paul points out that our resurrection can take place because God first resurrected Jesus. Unless He was resurrected before us, we have no hope (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

Jesus promised: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, *though he may die, he shall live*" (John 11:25)—shall live *again*, that is. One of the best-known verses in the Bible, John 3:16, promises that "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

The simple truth is that we can receive the gift of eternal life only through Jesus Christ. "For there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). How do we demonstrate our belief in Him? What obligations does that carry?

Jesus said that those who are His disciples must be willing to place

everything else in life secondary to seeking the Kingdom of God (Luke 14:25-33; Matthew 6:33; 13:44-46). People have devised many ways to live, with many false values and distractions (Matthew 6:19-20; 7:13-14), but the reality is that there is only one right way and only one Savior.

In concluding the first recorded sermon after Jesus' death, Peter called on believers in Christ to repent, undergo baptism and receive from God His Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38). Repentance is a sincere and heartfelt realization of our own sinfulness and inadequacy.

But it is also our resolve to forsake our former way of life to begin a new life in Christ. Baptism portrays that resolve (Romans 6:1-6). (To better understand these topics, send for or download online your free copy of our booklet *The Road to Eternal Life*.)

Many scriptures reveal what we must do to demonstrate our belief in Jesus Christ.

For example, Colossians 3-4 is a long passage that describes the complete commitment we must make. We must allow God to *change our very nature*, and we must learn to imitate Jesus in everything we do. If we are truly yielded to God, Christ will live His life in us through the power of God's Holy Spirit (Galatians 2:20).

We also learn that our personal reward will be based on how we live. Indeed, God gives "eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who

Words of Encouragement

The apostle Paul noted that God revealed details about what happens after death to encourage and comfort us, to give us hope in times of personal loss, that we not "sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

God's promise of eternal life is certain; we can safely trust in it as long as we are faithful to Him. Writing to a fellow minister, Paul spoke of his confidence in the "hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began" (Titus 1:2).

When a family member or friend dies, there is no denying the sense of loneliness and emptiness and the feeling of unfinished business—that we should have said or done more. Gaining

a more complete understanding of death and life can help us face our own mortality. We find courage, comfort and hope by viewing life in a larger context. We realize that, just as our present existence is temporary, so is death. A time is coming when we will reunite with those who have died and renew our relationships.

Although adjusting to the loss and loneliness caused by death takes time, we need to remember that even this most extreme experience does not separate us or our loved ones from God's plan or His love: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, . . . nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

does evil . . . but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good” (Romans 2:6-10).

More than one resurrection

Another major aspect of the resurrection revealed by Scripture is that the dead come back to life *in a particular order*, in sequence, according to a plan.

Not all will be resurrected at the same time, though Christ’s followers of this age will be: “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man

Are There Saved Human Beings in Heaven?

In Revelation 19:1, relaying what he experienced in a spiritual vision, the apostle John states, “After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power belong to the Lord our God!’”

Must the great multitude praising God here be throngs of saved human beings now living in heaven? Have any human beings ever ascended to heaven?

The popular teaching is that when Christians die they immediately go to heaven, where they take up residence in their permanent abode. But can we find such a teaching in the Bible?

To understand the truth on any biblical teaching, we must consider *all* the passages on a subject. When we do, the truth then usually becomes clear. We must also look at plain biblical statements and passages first, and from them come to understand the meaning of those that are less clear.

Notice one such clear statement in John 3:13: “*No one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] who is in heaven.”

John wrote these words decades after Jesus died and ascended to heaven—and well after many of Christ’s followers had died—but he still affirmed that *no one other than Jesus* had gone to heaven.

Whose voices, then, could John have been

hearing when he recorded in the book of Revelation what he heard and saw? He refers to voices many times in the book. Let’s notice one example in particular:

“Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:11-12). So there are at least hundreds of millions of angels, and the voices in Revelation 19 could well be theirs.

Moreover, we should remember that John in the book of Revelation was receiving a vision of the future—with Revelation 19 concerning events at the time of Christ’s return and the resurrection of His followers. Even if verse 1 were referring to saved human beings appearing briefly before God in heaven and praising Him at that time (just after their resurrection), this would not mean that they are doing so today.

Indeed, those who have died are still dead and in the grave—unconscious and unable to praise God (Psalm 6:5; 30:9; Isaiah 38:18). Scripture, as we have seen, shows that no human being except Jesus Christ has ever entered heaven, and that remains so today. The voices referred to in Revelation 19, then, cannot be those of saved human beings now in heaven.

came death, by Man [Christ] also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But *each one in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits, *afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming*” (1 Corinthians 15:20-23).

In his letter to the church at Rome, Paul writes that we must have God’s Spirit within us if we are to be resurrected to life: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also *through his Spirit that dwells in you*” (Romans 8:11, NRSV).

The resurrection we have described so far occurs when Jesus returns. It will include only “those who are Christ’s” (1 Corinthians 15:23), also called “the dead in Christ” (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

These are people who have understood that salvation is through Jesus Christ and



What about people who have lived and died in ages past or in remote regions today without ever even hearing the name of Jesus Christ, much less learning His teachings and being able to respond with any kind of commitment to Him?

who have shown their belief in Him through the commitment of repentance, baptism and obedience to God’s Word as led by the Holy Spirit. As we have seen, they will be transformed into immortal spirit at Christ’s return, thus inheriting eternal life (1 Corinthians 15:50-53).

Others who have died

But now we have a dilemma. What happens to people who never had the opportunity to come to a proper understanding and make the needed commitment to God through Christ? Are they the ones Christ spoke of who will be resurrected to judgment?

What about infants and other young children who die long before they can understand or gain the maturity to receive the Holy Spirit and seek God’s Kingdom? What about people who have lived and died in ages past or in remote regions today without ever even hearing the name of Jesus Christ, much less learning His teachings and being able to respond

with any kind of commitment to Him? What about people who adhere to high moral values but don't hold to any particular religious beliefs or commitment?

What will happen to them and when? Will the treatment these people receive be just? Is God fair? Will He give everyone equal opportunity to receive eternal life? Or is He selective, offering eternal life to only some?

The first resurrection

Let's begin with what John describes as the *first* resurrection. He speaks of "those who are Christ's," some of whom had suffered martyrdom and all of whom had rejected false religions and deceptive teachings.

He writes of the vision he received in the book of Revelation: "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (*The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.*) This is the *first* resurrection. Blessed and holy are those who have part in the *first resurrection*" (Revelation 20:4-6, NIV).

Notice that some come to life *after* the 1,000-year reign of Christ. Those given eternal life at the beginning of that period, at Christ's return when they will reign with Him, represent the *first* resurrection. But here we plainly see that others, "the rest of the dead," do not come to life again until 1,000 years have passed. If only one resurrection is to occur, John would simply have referred to it as *the* resurrection. However, since he uses the phrase "the *first* resurrection," it is evident that *at least one more* resurrection must follow.

Summary

We have learned from the highest written authority—the Bible—that at Jesus Christ's return He will resurrect His true, faithful followers and grant them the incredible gift of eternal life. They are the *only* ones who will have a part in this resurrection.

Yet we're told in 1 Timothy 2:3-4 that "God our Savior . . . desires *all* men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." What, then, of the billions of people who have already died and *never had* the knowledge of the truth? Is it too late for them?

This brings us to a discussion of one of the most truly amazing aspects in God's plan for life and death—what God has in store for the *rest* of the dead.

Did Paul Expect to Be Conscious in Heaven Right After Dying?

The apostle Paul dedicated his life to preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In the process he was subjected to persecution, beatings and several periods of imprisonment. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was enduring a period of house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that the Roman government had authority to put prisoners to death. He knew what the future might hold for him, whether it be execution on the one hand or his release on the other.

In Philippians 1:23-24 he writes of the two possible outcomes: "For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

Many have assumed from Paul's words here that he believed that at the moment of his death his consciousness would leave his body to join Christ in heaven. But is this the case?

Before focusing on what this scripture says, let's notice what it does *not* say. It does *not* say *when* or *where* Paul would be with Christ if he departed. Neither is the terminology of departure intended to be geographic—as in leaving the earth to go to heaven. There is no reference to heaven in these verses. To conclude otherwise is to read assumptions into Paul's words. Paul is simply referring to departing from his present, physical life—leaving it behind through death.

When writing to the Philippians here, Paul was struggling with two desires. He wanted to be done with his fleshly life and be with Christ, but he also wanted to remain with God's people.

In his second letter to Timothy he speaks dogmatically of what lies ahead, knowing the end of his physical life is near and he is ready to depart: "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have

finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me *on that Day*, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8).

Paul, then, understood that he was not to receive his reward *immediately at death*. He knew that if executed, he would go to the grave, and there his remains would lie until the time of his resurrection. He understood that, since the dead have no thought processes whatsoever, in his next waking moment he would be with the returning Messiah, Jesus, joining Him along with the other saints at the time of the resurrection.

As he wrote to Timothy, he knew there was laid up for him a crown of righteousness that he would be given "*on that Day*" of Christ's appearing—at Jesus' second coming. As Paul noted, Jesus will bring Paul's reward with Him. Paul will receive it *at that time*, not before, along with all others who will be resurrected at Christ's return.

Describing this resurrection, Paul explains to the church in Corinth: "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" (1 Corinthians 15:51-52). Paul knew he would receive his reward—his "change"—at Christ's coming. He also knew that death before that time would mean "sleep," unconsciousness, until the resurrection.

The time from Paul's death until his resurrection at the same time as all of Christ's followers will seem to him but a mere moment. He will be with Christ as a glorified son of God in the next moment of his consciousness. No wonder Paul, weary of his sufferings in this life, desired to depart from it and to be with Christ!

How Eternal Life Will Ultimately Be Offered to All

Death does not discriminate. The righteous and sinners all die. Jesus used two widely known tragedies of His day to acknowledge that death can be arbitrary and to draw an important lesson from it:

“There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all the other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish’” (Luke 13:1-5).

The details are unclear. Apparently some Jews were viciously slaughtered by Roman soldiers during a religious ceremony at the temple in Jerusalem. On another occasion a tower collapsed, killing some. Both incidents are examples of the random deaths of innocent people. Jesus says these people weren’t any worse than others. They just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Similar tragic events are all around us. We’re especially disturbed when children’s lives are cut short by accidents, crime or illness. We shake our heads in bewilderment when an airplane crashes, a house burns or a terrorist attack kills dozens of innocent people who were simply going about their everyday lives. Victims of these tragedies were in the wrong place at the wrong time; God didn’t single them out for punishment. As Solomon explained, we are all subject to the uncertainties of time and chance (Ecclesiastes 9:11-12).

Are life and death arbitrary?

In the previous chapters we discovered that God has a tremendous purpose for our temporary, physical existence: It prepares us for the eternal, spiritual life He wants to give us. Those who in this age believe in Jesus

Christ and His teachings and demonstrate commitment to Him by the way they live will receive the gift of eternal life in a resurrection that will take place at His return to the earth.



Tragic events are all around us. We’re especially disturbed when children’s lives are cut short by accidents, crime or illness.

no hope or promise for them? Will they not be given an equal opportunity to receive the gift of eternal life?

Scriptures include many assurances that God is serious about His promises. Peter says that God’s will is that everyone will eventually repent: “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, *not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*” (2 Peter 3:9). This verse assures us that God will not fail. It also implies that some were thinking that God is unconcerned and inconsistent.

Not all are called now to salvation

At times Jesus’ disciples were confused and frustrated because of His teaching methods. They asked Him why He spoke to other people in parables instead of being more direct. He told them why: “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11).

Many today would be shocked to consider what Jesus was saying here. It was not His intent to present salvation clearly to every person in this age. Rather, His message was meant to be understood by only *some* at this time.

Jesus went on to quote from a prophecy in Isaiah that foretold that people would have closed minds, not able to accept His teachings or understand who He was. Then He explained, “But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (verse 16). We can see here a difference between the

disciples, who at this point had at least some faith and understanding, and the masses of people who had neither.

The people in Jesus' time frequently tried to determine exactly who He was. Was He just a rabbi? Was He the prophesied Elijah or John the Baptist? Was He a fraud, a false messiah? Was He the one true Messiah?

At one point Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He was. "Simon Peter answered and said, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus answered and said to him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven'" (Matthew 16:15-17).

God must grant understanding

Jesus taught His disciples that God must grant spiritual insight. No one can come to Jesus unless God the Father "draws him" (John 6:44).

God originally worked with the nation of Israel, establishing a relationship with the Israelites through the Old Covenant. But as a nation they continually violated that covenant and finally rejected Christ Himself. After His own people rejected Him, the promises of the New Covenant, which Jesus came to establish, were extended to people from among all nations.

Paul had this in mind when he addressed both the religious Jews (a segment of the people of Israel) and the gentiles (non-Israelites) in his letter to the church in Rome. He paraphrased Isaiah 29:10, saying, "God has given them [the Israelites] a spirit of stupor, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear, to this very day."

Paul was explaining that even the majority of the people of Israel remain spiritually blinded (Romans 11:7). In Ephesians 4:17-18 Paul shows that the gentiles equally share in this nearly universal spiritual blindness.

Paul in Romans 11:2-4 cited another Old Testament precedent. The faithful prophet Elijah thought he was the only man alive who had not been seduced into the worship of the false god Baal. But God revealed to Elijah that He had preserved others who remained faithful to Him. Paul drew an important lesson from this example: "Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (verse 5).

A remnant is just a trace, a remaining vestige. And the "election" Paul mentioned refers to a relatively small part of mankind. Clearly, God has revealed that He will call only a few to salvation in this age. Notice how Jesus explains this: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

God doesn't take this approach so He can exclude most of mankind from His promises. In fact, God has chosen this method to ultimately extend His

promises to all. "For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all" (Romans 11:32).

Paul acknowledged that this method may seem illogical at first glance, but in His wisdom God knows exactly what He is doing. Our place is not to advise God on how He should accomplish His plan. Instead, we can exclaim with Paul: "Who can measure the wealth and wisdom and knowledge of God? Who can understand his decisions or explain what he does? 'Has anyone known the thoughts of the Lord or given him advice? Has anyone loaned something to the Lord that must be repaid?' Everything comes from the Lord. All things were made because of him and will return to him. Praise the Lord forever!" (verses 33-36, Contemporary English Version).

Because God created life, He has the authority to take and restore life. And He has the power to provide the opportunity for salvation at the time of His choosing—whether in this age or in an age yet to come.

The future Kingdom of God

Consider again a scriptural passage quoted in the preceding chapter: "I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years. (The *rest of the dead* did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) This [the one at the beginning of the 1,000 years] is the *first* resurrection" (Revelation 20:4-5, NIV).

As noted previously, John is writing here principally of the same resurrection Paul referred to in 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4, calling it the "first" resurrection. Since it is called the *first* and not just "the" resurrection, at least one more resurrection must follow. John also states that the *rest* of the dead will live again after the 1,000 years.

Let's consider what will transpire during the 1,000-year period (commonly called the Millennium, Latin for "thousand years") and the responsibility those in the first resurrection will have at that time.

Daniel 7 gives a prophetic overview of mankind's history. Daniel briefly describes a series of great empires (Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome) that would dominate the Middle East from Daniel's time forward. Those powers are represented respectively by a lion, a bear, a leopard and a "dreadful and terrible" beast.

Finally, Christ will return and set up a kingdom to succeed all of these—God's everlasting Kingdom, which will never be usurped: "I was watching in the night visions, and behold, One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and

they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given *dominion* and *glory* and a *kingdom*, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an *everlasting* dominion, which shall not pass away, and His kingdom the one which shall *not be destroyed*" (Daniel 7:13-14).

The prophecy continues: "Those great beasts, which are four, are four kings [or kingdoms (see verse 23)] which arise out of the earth. But the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the

The Biblical View of Hell

The end of this chapter delves into the matter of what will happen to the incorrigibly wicked—those who ultimately refuse to repent of their sins. Many assume that their fate is eternity in an ever-burning inferno in a dark underworld called hell, but is that really what the Bible says?

To answer that question, we need to understand the Hebrew and Greek words translated "hell" in most versions of the Bible. As we will see, the biblical view of hell is not one of unending torment.

Two words translated "hell" refer to the grave

Sheol is the Hebrew word translated "hell" throughout the Old Testament. It refers to "the state and abode of the dead; hence the grave in which the body rests" (William Wilson, *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*, "Hell," p. 215). The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* explains, "Thus there are no references to eternal destiny but simply to the grave as the resting place of the bodies of all people" (Lawrence Richards, 1985, p. 336).

Reflecting its true meaning, many modern Bible versions translate this word as simply "the grave" or leave it untranslated as *Sheol*.

Among those who knew that they themselves were going to *sheol* were such men of faith as Jacob (Genesis 37:35), Job (Job 14:13), David (Psalm 88:3) and Hezekiah (Isaiah 38:10). These followers of God would not have been going to an ever-burning inferno. Clearly, then, *sheol* must mean simply the grave, not a place of eternal torment.

The counterpart of *sheol* in the Greek language is *hades*, which also refers to the grave. Despite the use of the term Hades in Greek mythology to refer to a subterranean realm of shadowy consciousness after death, this is not the biblical usage. In the four New Testament verses that quote Old Testament passages containing *sheol*, *hades* is used for *sheol* (Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15; Acts 2:27, 31). As with *sheol*, *hades* is rendered as "the grave" or "death" or left untranslated as *Hades* in recent Bible versions.

As with *sheol*, the word *hades* likewise does not refer to a place of fiery torment. Indeed, the apostle Peter refers to Christ Himself as having been in "Hades" (Acts 2:27, 31) or "hell" (King James Version), referring to the time He was entombed before His resurrection. Again, both words simply refer to the grave. And in the grave, there is no consciousness at all (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 10; Psalm 6:5; 146:4, KJV).

One word refers to the imprisonment of demons

A second Greek word, *tartaroo*, is also translated "hell" in the New Testament. This word is used only once in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4), where it refers to the present restraint or imprisonment of the fallen angels, or demons.

The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* explains that *tartaroo* means "to confine in Tartaros" and that "Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss in which rebellious gods were confined" (Lawrence Richards, 1985, "Heaven and Hell"). Peter used this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning

kingdom forever, even forever and ever" (verses 17-18).

The world transformed

Jesus Christ will return to the earth with power and authority. He will establish God's Kingdom, replacing the human kingdoms under the sway of Satan the devil. Satan, who now deceives the whole world (Revelation 12:9), will be removed from the scene (20:1-3). The "saints of the Most High"—all the faithful people of God then resurrected at Jesus' return—

angels were "delivered . . . into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment." These fallen angels are now restrained while awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity. The place where they are restrained is the earth, where they wield influence over the nations, not some dark netherworld.

Furthermore, *tartaroo* applies only to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which people are punished after death.

A word does refer to burning—burning up, that is

It is only with the remaining word translated "hell"—the Greek word *gehenna*—that we see some elements people commonly associate with the traditional view of hell. However, this word also has significant differences from the popular conception.

Gehenna "is derived from the Hebr[ew] expression, ga-Hinnom, Valley of Hinnom . . . Religiously it was a place of idolatrous and human sacrifices . . . In order to put an end to these abominations, [Judah's King] Josiah polluted it with human bones and other corruptions (2 Kgs. 23:10, 13, 14)" (Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1992, p. 360).

Thanks in large part to its evil reputation, this valley bordering Jerusalem on the south came to be used as the city garbage dump. Trash was burned there, along with the bodies of dead animals and criminals. Fires day and night consumed the refuse.

Gehenna is used 12 times in the Bible, with 11 of those recording Christ's words. When Jesus spoke of *gehenna*, His listeners knew that this

"hell" was a *consuming* fire in which garbage and the bodies of the wicked *were destroyed*. He bluntly warned that this destroying fire would be the fate of the incorrigibly wicked (Matthew 5:22, 29-30; 23:15, 33; Luke 12:5).

But when would this take place? The book of Malachi reveals that the future age to come is when the unrepentant wicked will be incinerated in an all-consuming inferno and turned to ashes on the earth (4:1-3).

The book of Revelation calls this inferno "the lake of fire"—with those cast into it at the end experiencing "the second death," a death from which there will be no resurrection (Revelation 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

In the time frame revealed in the Bible, this follows 1,000 years of Christ's reign on the earth (Revelation 20:1-6) and a resurrection to physical life of all those who have never known God and His ways (verses 5, 11-13). Those resurrected at that time will have the opportunity to learn God's ways, repent and receive His gift of eternal life. Some, however, will refuse that gift. The Bible records their tragic epitaph: "And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire" (verse 15).

Those who with full understanding willfully choose to reject God's way won't be allowed to continue living in the misery their choice will bring. They will *die* and cease to exist, not suffer forever.

We see, then, that an examination of all the words translated "hell" and of related concepts in Scripture shows that the traditional view of an ever-burning place of torment where the wicked are punished for eternity cannot be found in the Bible.

will reign with Jesus over the earth. Assisted by His resurrected followers, Christ will fill the earth with the knowledge of God “as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

The apostles taught that Jesus will return and reestablish the nation of Israel. At that time He will also offer the gift of salvation and eternal life to all of mankind. Said the apostle James in Acts 15: “And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written: ‘After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David [the royal house of Israel], which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will set it up; so that the *rest of mankind* may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name, says the Lord who does all these things’” (verse 15-17).

James here quotes the Old Testament book of Amos, which goes on to describe the conditions that will be extant after Jesus reestablishes the nation of Israel. Note what God reveals in Amos, starting with the words quoted by James in Acts:

“On that day I will raise up the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, and repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old; that they may possess the remnant of Edom [ancient Israel’s adversarial national neighbor], and all the Gentiles who are called by My name,’ says the LORD who does this thing.

“Behold, the days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of grapes him who sows seed; the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will bring back the captives of My people Israel; they shall build the waste cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink wine from them; they shall also make gardens and eat fruit from them. I will plant them in their land, and no longer shall they be pulled up from the land I have given them,’ says the LORD your God” (Amos 9:11-15).

What a beautiful picture of the prosperity and peace the nations will at last be led to enjoy after Jesus returns!

All will learn God’s way

As appealing and satisfying as physical blessings of abundance and security are, God is working out a far greater purpose. Everything physical is temporary, including the physical prosperity of the Millennium and even human life. God has much more to offer than just a comfortable physical life.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks not just of a physical restoration (Jeremiah 31:1-4), but of the *spiritual* restoration Jesus will also accomplish when He returns: “Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took

them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: *I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people*” (verses 31-33).

Remember James’ words in Acts 15. Speaking of the physical nation of Israel, he says that God promises to “rebuild its ruins” and to “set it up, so that the *rest of mankind* may seek the LORD” (verse 17). This physical and spiritual restoration will spread from Israel and Judah to the rest of

Will the Torment of the Wicked Last Forever?

“**H**e shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever, and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

At first glance this passage may seem to confirm the traditional idea of a seething, sulfurous hellfire, mercilessly and eternally tormenting helpless immortal souls. But if we don’t already hold to a preconceived mental picture of hell, we can quickly grasp that this passage describes a considerably different circumstance.

First, notice the setting for this passage. From the context we see that the events it describes *occur on earth* amid earth-shaking events and disasters occurring immediately before or at Christ’s return, *not* in hell or the afterlife at all. This warning describes the punishment that will befall all the earth’s inhabitants “who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Chapter 13 describes this “beast”—an end-time dictatorial superpower opposed to God—and its mark. Those who accept this mark show that their allegiance is to this powerful system rather than God, and in chapter 14 God reveals the consequences of that choice—warning of the terrifying punishments that will precede Christ’s return (see verses 14-20 and the following two chapters).

Notice also in this passage that the *smoke* from these terrifying events ascends forever—it does not say that the people’s *actual torment* continues forever. David wrote in Psalm 37:20 that “the wicked shall *perish* [not be tortured forever in hell] . . . Into smoke they shall *vanish away*.”

The smoke is also no doubt associated with God’s wrath poured out on earth as described in Revelation 16—which includes widespread destruction, great heat, warfare and a massive earthquake. All these events will generate massive fires and a huge amount of smoke.

The properties of smoke are such that it “ascends forever and ever” (Revelation 14:11)—meaning that nothing will prevent or stop it. Being a column of heated gas containing tiny, suspended particles, it rises, expands and eventually dissipates. Moreover, the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” does not have to mean for all eternity. It could just refer to this happening in the culmination of the ages.

The reference in verse 11 to the wicked receiving “no rest day or night” speaks of those who continue to worship the beast and his image during this time. They will be in constant terror and fear for their lives, and thus aren’t able to find a moment’s rest during this terrifying time of God’s anger.

Rather than describing eternal torment of people in hell, from the context we see that this passage is actually describing specific events to take place on earth at the end of this age.

the world. God plans to use the Israelites to extend His promises to all mankind (Galatians 3:26-29).

The spiritual restoration is the most important work Jesus Christ will accomplish at this time, offering the gift of salvation to everyone. No more will worldly politics confuse people, because Jesus will rule over all the nations (see Revelation 11:15; Daniel 7). No more will religious confusion be found on the earth, because at that time God will open the minds of *all people* and draw them to Christ (Ezekiel 36:26-27; Isaiah 11:9; 25:7; Joel 2:27-28).

Those in the *first* resurrection are given a vital part to play in this great work. Raised to glorified eternal spirit life at Christ's return, they will reign with Him as kings and priests on the earth, assisting in the teaching of God's truth to all humanity (Revelation 5:10; 20:6; Isaiah 30:20-21).

What about those who never really knew God?

So far we've seen that salvation is offered to some people in this



Jesus was describing a time during which the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical "queen of the South" from Solomon's time will rise with those from Christ's generation and live at the same time.

age—prior to Jesus coming to rule the world. We've also seen that when Jesus returns to reign He will offer salvation to mankind in general.

But, as we've previously asked, what about all those who have died, or will yet die, in this age without ever being called to salvation? This group represents the majority of all people who have ever lived. What is their eternal fate?

John said those not resurrected at the time of Jesus' return ("the rest of the dead") will live again at the end of the Millennium: "But the rest of the dead did not live again *until the thousand years were finished*" (Revelation 20:5).

A few verses later comes some description of this later resurrection period: "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

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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 Hades [the grave] delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works" (Revelation 20:11-13).

Jesus spoke of a future period of *judgment* when all will understand His teachings—when people from all generations will live and be judged *at the same time*: "Then He began to rebuke the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent: 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon [ancient pagan cities], they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon *in the day of judgment* than for you.

"And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, will be brought down to Hades; for if the mighty works which were done in you had been done in Sodom [the depraved city that God destroyed], it would have remained until this day. But I say to you that it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom *in the day of judgment* than for you'" (Matthew 11:20-24).

The ancient wayward pagans mentioned here lived and died without ever coming to know God and His offer of the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Note that Jesus says they *would* have repented if they had been given the opportunity the cities of His day had. Is it fair, then, that they would never receive such an opportunity?

In similar examples, Jesus refers to the long-dead people of the pagan city of Nineveh, to the queen of the South (of Sheba) of Solomon's time and again to ancient Sodom along with Gomorrah, these serving as the epitome of wickedness (Matthew 10:14-15; 12:41-42). God doesn't tolerate perversion and sinfulness, but it is evident that He has not finished working in the lives of the people of these ancient generations. This requires that they be resurrected—brought to life again—and at last instructed in God's ways.

Jesus was describing a time during which people from all past ages—the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical "queen of the South" from Solomon's time will rise with those from Christ's generation and live at the same time. Together they will come to understand the truth about who Christ was and the purpose of life. Those from different generations will find it remarkable that the people of Jesus' time rejected Him.

A resurrection to physical life

From the prophet Ezekiel we learn that those who are part of this

resurrection are not yet transformed into immortal spirit beings, as are those in the first resurrection, but are instead initially restored to physical, fleshly, mortal life. Ezekiel was given a vision concerning this astonishing future event—a resurrection in a valley of ancient bones (Ezekiel 37:1-7).

The prophet watched as the dry bones appeared to reassemble themselves into skeletons, then were covered with flesh and stood as a great multitude of resurrected people (verses 8-10). These represent the multitudes of ancient Israel, whom God will bring out of their graves to then place His Spirit within them (verses 12-14).

Yet it is evident that more than Israel will be included. When we put this account together with Christ's statements about ancient pagans being raised to life at the same time as those of the Jewish cities of His day—and with John's statement in Revelation 20:5 that those not revived in the first resurrection will live again at the end of the Millennium (the first 1,000 years of Jesus' eternal reign), it becomes clear that not just Israelites but people of all nations from past ages will return to life in this resurrection.

They are restored to only mortal life at this time, because they will not yet have chosen the way of eternal salvation through Christ and demon-

Are the Wicked Punished in an Ever-Burning Hell?

It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire—where 'their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:47-48).

Did Jesus here warn of unending suffering in hellfire?

The quoted phrase "hell fire" is translated from *gehenna*—the Greek form of the Hebrew *Gai Hinnom*, meaning Valley of Hinnom, which was just outside Jerusalem. In Jesus' day this area was a garbage dump in which fires burned constantly, fueled by trash and the dead bodies of animals and criminals.

Jesus used this desolate and miserable place to represent the fate of unrepentant sinners. Notice that Jesus said the *worm* does not die, not that the people punished in hellfire do not die. The punishment is eternal, meaning that it is permanent and complete. But this does not mean that the incorrigible are kept

alive perpetually and tortured incessantly by a vengeful God.

Burned remains of the bodies in the original *gehenna*, the Valley of Hinnom, decomposed and were infested with maggots. The fire was not extinguished—it burned as long as there was trash to keep it burning—and the maggots (the "worms" of Mark 9:48) were not destroyed. Maggots are the wormlike larvae of flies. Flies swarm over the decaying refuse and keep it continuously infested with maggots. Then, instead of dying, those creatures turn into more flies in a continuing cycle.

The bodies of animals and people thrown into *gehenna*, however, either decayed or burned up and, of course, were eventually completely consumed. Similarly, unrepentant sinners will not be tormented forever. Quite the contrary, they will be completely and eternally annihilated in the lake of fire, referred to in Revelation 20:14.

strated commitment to God. But once restored to life they will finally have that opportunity.

At the end of the Millennium, then, all who have not yet been accounted for in previous steps of God's plan will stand before Him. In Revelation 20:12 the "books" (Greek *biblia*, from which we get the word "Bible") being "opened" at that time evidently refers to the books of Scripture being opened to their understanding (compare Luke 24:32). For the first time in their lives they will be led to correctly comprehend God's Word, the teachings of the Bible. God will thereby offer them the opportunity to receive eternal life.

Note that "another book was opened, *which is the Book of Life*" (Revelation 20:12; compare Philippians 4:3). And they, like each previous generation, will be judged by their works—that is, their works at that time.

Judgment takes place over time

What does it mean to be judged in this context? Will people be immediately rewarded or condemned at the time of their resurrection based on what they did in their past lives before coming to understand God's truth?

Judgment is more than the final decision to reward or condemn a person. Judgment is a *process* that takes place over time and ultimately culminates in a final decision.

As we saw before, Jesus addressed the fact that there is more than one resurrection by stating that "the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation [or judgment]" (John 5:28-29).

The more common meaning of the word *krisis*, translated "condemnation" in this verse, is *judgment*, as it is usually translated. This word refers to a *process of evaluation* rather than an act of sentencing or punishment.

Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words defines it as "the process of investigation, the act of distinguishing and separating, . . . a judging, a passing of judgment upon a person or thing" (1985, p. 119). *Krisis* is typically distinct from the related term *krima*, which refers to "the sentence pronounced, a verdict, a condemnation, the decision resulting from an investigation" (ibid.).

In Revelation 20:12-13, the word for "judged" is a form of the related Greek verb *krino*, meaning "to separate, select, choose" (ibid., p. 336). While this could mean rendering a final decision, it can also include the evaluative process beforehand that goes into coming to the decision—as it surely must when we consider that God's judgment of people takes place over time.

As we saw earlier, those who are called in this life and respond by believing and heeding God will be given eternal life at Christ's return. For them it will not be necessary to undergo evaluation during the Millennium or after-

ward (John 5:24). That's because they are being judged now (1 Peter 4:17), not later. This current judgment is an *ongoing process*, with those called by God responding faithfully to His truth and bearing fruit over time (John 15:2-8; Galatians 5:22-23)—or turning from that calling (2 Peter 2:20-22).

When Jesus returns, He will reward each according to His works (Matthew 16:27), the fruits that result from an accumulated attitude and character developed over time. Many scriptures describe the results God is looking for in our lives (see Romans 12; Colossians 3-4, Ephesians 4-6; James 2:20-24; Revelation 22:14).

God is concerned with our hearts, our innermost thoughts and motivation. He looks on the heart, seeing what we are really like (1 Samuel 16:7). God expects us to emulate Jesus Christ in all we think and do (Philippians 2:5; 1 Peter 2:21). Someone who is Christlike is genuine. His or her outward actions—conduct and works—reflect the heart, the inward person. We all will be judged for our habitual actions, for these show what we have become (2 Corinthians 5:10). The way we live—how we treat others and respond to God's laws—reflects what we believe and value, demonstrating whether we are in harmony with God's ways or not.

Same standards and opportunity

Eventually all will be judged in the same sense, “for God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

Being judged according to works does not imply that one *earns* the gift of salvation. It simply means that a person demonstrates by his life that he believes in Jesus Christ and is willing to obey God (Matthew 7:21). A person living that commitment will naturally demonstrate in his life the positive results of that choice and way of life (Galatians 5:22-23; James 2:14-26).

God will give sufficient time to those resurrected after the 1,000 years to prove by their actions and decisions that they do indeed believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior and are willing to submit to His way of life, surrendering their own will—just as He gives those called now the period of their lifetimes today.

With Satan the archdeceiver removed permanently at the end of the Millennium (Revelation 20:10), those who are part of the second or general resurrection that follows will at last have their formerly closed minds opened to the truth of God's plan. They will then have the opportunity to decide whether they will do the Father's will or not.

After having had their spiritual eyes opened and this truth revealed to them, they will be judged according to their works, their response to their new understanding. They will be given the same responsibility that was

extended to others at earlier stages of God's plan. They will have the opportunity to develop faith in Jesus Christ and demonstrate their belief and commitment by the way they live.

It should be clarified that the second resurrection is not a *second chance* for salvation. Rather, those in this resurrection will receive their *first and only* opportunity to really know and serve God.

Those in this resurrection who remain faithful to God will in the end be raised to glory to join those in the first resurrection—being likewise transformed into immortal spirit beings to live with God as His divine family and Kingdom forever.

The plan of God, just as He promised, is a perfect and complete plan—and one that is totally equitable and just. Through His plan, He will ultimately offer the gift of eternal salvation to all who have ever lived (Ephesians 1:9-10).

What of those who reject the offer of salvation?

Sadly, some—by their choice—will *not* receive the wonderful gift of eternal life. Describing their fate, John wrote: “Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the *second* death. And anyone *not found written*

Are Some Tortured Forever in a Lake of Fire?

“**T**he devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are [or were cast, as many acknowledge this should be rendered]. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Does this verse say that these two end-time individuals, the Beast and False Prophet, will be tormented for eternity?

The Beast and False Prophet are human beings. While still alive, they will be cast into the lake of fire. “Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:20).

We see from Malachi 4:1-3 and Mark 9:47-48 that any human being thrown into the lake

of fire *will be destroyed*. He will perish. But he will not be *tormented* for eternity.

Revelation 20:10 is speaking of Satan the devil being cast into the lake of fire at the end of Christ's 1,000-year reign. Reference to the Beast and False Prophet being cast in is only parenthetical here—as they will have died when that happened 1,000 years earlier. They will not still be burning there. Thus being tormented “forever and ever” applies principally to Satan—and presumably to his demonic cohorts as well (compare Matthew 25:41).

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the Greek phrase translated “forever and ever” here, *eis tous aionas ton aionon*, literally means “unto the ages of the ages.” While this might mean for eternity, it could also mean until the culmination of the ages, which would allow for an ending point soon after the casting into the fire.

in the *Book of Life* was cast into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:14-15).

The second death is utter destruction from which there will be no resurrection. The lake of fire will totally consume those who are cast into it. This parallels a prophecy in Malachi 4:1-3, which says that the wicked will ultimately be burned up and turned to ashes.

Who are the ones not found in the Book of Life who will meet this fiery end? Remember that by this time God will have given the opportunity to everyone who has ever lived to accept and receive the gift of eternal life, represented in these verses as having one’s name inscribed in the Book of Life. Those whose names are not written in it will themselves have *chosen* by their own actions and decisions *to be excluded*.

John goes on to show that those cast into the lake of fire are unrepentant sinners: “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” (Revelation 21:8).

This is not to say that everyone who has ever been guilty of any of these things will be burned up in the second death, for God will forgive us of any of these things upon repentance. Rather, those described here are the incorrigibly wicked—those in the end who, though being taught God’s way and embracing it initially, still persist in their sins—refusing to repent and outright rejecting God and His salvation (Hebrews 6:4-8; 10:26-31).

God will not *force* His way on anyone. If a person knowingly *chooses* not to repent, rejecting God and His plan of eternal life, that person will be judged by his actions and destroyed.

Not tormented forever

Being destroyed does not mean *living on* as an immortal soul. As already stated, it means being turned to ashes—and *utterly ceasing to exist*.

We have already seen that man is mortal. Death is to be compared with a deep sleep, a state of unconsciousness. One reason God gave us a temporary, physical life was so that, if we choose not to accept the terms, conditions and requirements of eternal life, our lives could be mercifully but permanently brought to an end.

Many people, however, believe in a perpetual, ever-burning hellfire or a condition of spiritual torment in which evil people are tortured throughout eternity. But the Bible’s simple teaching conveys nothing like this. Our God is a loving, merciful Father who would never consign anyone to such an unconscionable fate.

In a familiar verse Paul tells us, “For the wages of sin is *death*, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Life that goes on forever is a *gift* God grants to those who will be in His family

forever. Death from which there is no hope of a resurrection is reserved for those who reject God’s offer of eternal life in the Kingdom of God. They do not continue on forever in torment. Rather, those who ultimately refuse to walk in God’s ways and receive His gift of immortality will *cease to exist*.

We learned earlier that this life in human flesh is temporary for everyone (Ecclesiastes 3:2; Hebrews 9:27). Those who have fulfilled the purpose of physical life will be resurrected in bodies composed of spirit to receive the gift of eternal life. Those who were never called will be brought up by a resurrection to a restored physical existence and judged, given their opportunity for eternal life. Those who reject the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and eternal life that comes through His sacrifice will be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

Jesus warned that some will fall into this category. He said that the righteous would be given eternal life but that the wicked would go into everlasting punishment (Matthew 25:41-46). Notice that Jesus does not say that those condemned will be tortured for eternity. He said their *punishment* is to be everlasting—that is, everlasting death, complete unconsciousness and even ceasing to exist, from which there is no resurrection (Revelation 20:14).

Some might conclude that such a fate is cruel. But God, after all, is the Creator of life. He has the authority and power to eliminate the life of all who choose to reject the purpose for which He created them.

Furthermore, the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act of justice *and* mercy on God’s part. To allow the corrupt to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would consign them and others to great sorrow and anguish. Therefore God will not grant them eternal life in perpetual misery, and neither will He torture them for all eternity. Rather, both body and soul (the person’s physical being, including life and consciousness) will be completely destroyed (Matthew 10:28).

For more on what the Bible says about hellfire and the fate of the unrepentant wicked, be sure to read “The Biblical View of Hell” beginning on page 32 and the related sidebars throughout this chapter.

Summary

Throughout the ages some have been given the opportunity for eternal life through Jesus Christ. Yet the vast majority of human beings have not been called in their lifetimes to understand God’s plan. As Jesus explained in the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:3-23), others besides the faithful may have been called, but for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the powerful deception and influence of Satan and his demons—they have failed to fully respond to God’s calling. All will be sorted out by a merciful God in the time of judgment.

After Jesus Christ returns, He will expand the process of offering salvation to all mankind. Everyone who lives during the 1,000 years immediately after He returns will receive the opportunity to accept the gift of eternal life available through Him. Following the Millennium will come a physical resurrection of all who did not receive the calling to salvation during their lifetimes. Then they, too, will be called—their first opportunity for salvation, not a second chance.

Lazarus and the Rich Man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Many interpret one of Jesus' parables to mean that people have immortal souls that go to heaven or hell immediately at death. But does this parable really say that? Let's examine the matter, paying close attention to the historical context.

Jesus presents the following story: "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

"But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

"And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

"But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'" (Luke 16:19-31).

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the time that Jesus uses to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally.

Bible language expert Dr. Lawrence Richards, in discussing this passage in *The Victor Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology) to point out a spiritual lesson about how we view and treat others.

In this view of the afterlife, Hades, the abode of the dead, was "thought to be divided into two compartments" and "conversations could be held between persons" in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous. "Jewish writings also picture the first as a verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs," separated from the second, which was described as a parched and dry land. These elements show up in Christ's allegory.

"In Christ's story God was the beggar's only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him! . . . It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His

The Scriptures overwhelmingly show that God's great purpose and desire is to give eternal life to His children and to keep them from failing (Jude 21-24; Romans 8:31-32; 2 Timothy 4:18; Luke 12:32). All will be given the opportunity to believe in Jesus Christ, accept eternal life through Him and prove their commitment to God by their works, the actions in their lives. Only those who knowingly, purposefully and willfully defy God and reject the sacrifice of Jesus Christ will be refused eternal life.

conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ has said, 'You cannot serve God and Money' (16:13). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, 'What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight' (16:15).

"There's no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced . . . And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said . . .

"During this life the wealthy man would surely have been featured on the 1980s TV program, 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.' The cameras would have focused on his marble mansion with its decorative wrought iron gates . . . and the fabulous feasts he held for his important friends.

"As the TV equipment was taken into the rich man's home, a cameraman might have stumbled over the dying beggar, destitute and abandoned just outside the rich man's house . . . Surely he was beneath the notice of the homeowner, who never gave a thought to the starving man just outside, though all Lazarus yearned for was just a crumb from the overladen tables.

"If we look only at this life, the rich man seems to be both blessed and fortunate, and the poor man, rejected and cursed. There is no question which state people would highly value, and which they would find detestable.

"But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by 'Abraham's side,' a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from the place of blessing by a 'great chasm' (16:26). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible—or appropriate! . . .

"The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone. Despite frequent injunctions in the O[ld] T[estament] for the rich to share their good things with the poor, this rich man's indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God's ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself. Ah, how well the rich man depicts those Pharisees who 'loved money' and who even then were sneering at Jesus!

"And so Jesus' first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which are hateful to Him. A love of money may serve you well in this life. But in the world to come, you will surely pay.

"But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have 'Moses and the Prophets' (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead . . .

"In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus' words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor . . .

"This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed" (1994, pp. 193-195). This is the point of the allegory Jesus uses, Dr. Richards explains, not to teach the popular (but erroneous) idea of heaven and hell.

Steps in Dealing With Grief

God, in His great love for us, has revealed answers to some of the greatest questions we face: What is life? What is death? What happens after death? We can find great comfort in the knowledge that God has a plan for all of mankind and that death is a temporary separation. We will be reunited with our loved ones through the resurrections God has promised.

Ultimately this understanding can help us better cope with a loss caused by death. Yet we cannot deny or diminish the feeling of loss created by death. We still sorrow and grieve. How can we deal with our grief? And how can we encourage others who are grieving?

Grief is a deeply personal and traumatic experience. In dealing with grief, you may find it helpful to understand the grieving process. Writers on the subject have identified several stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. (For example, see Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's model in *On Death and Dying*, 1969.)

We will briefly examine each stage to help you understand grief and be prepared to deal with death. But bear in mind that a person in mourning may not experience these stages sequentially. No timetable for working one's way through grief exists. Someone may feel several of the stages described here but not others. Another may experience various stages simultaneously. And having already gone through a certain stage doesn't mean one can't return to it. Each person's experience can be different.

Stages of grief: denial

When one experiences denial, his physical responses might include sweating, faintness, nausea or a racing heart, just as with any other victim of shock. The mind and emotions become overwhelmed. Some simply may not be able to deal with the reality of death.

Some withdraw from the world around them. Others may feel as though they must be having a bad dream and that they'll soon awaken from it. Perhaps this is God's way of providing us a protective buffer. It's during this time that we can begin to sort out and process our feelings at our own pace and comfort level.

Several important principles should be considered at this stage of the

grieving process. First, it helps to talk about one's thoughts and feelings. Those who are grieving have been deeply hurt by their loss. They need the opportunity to heal, to be taken care of. They can enable people around them to be of assistance by letting those who want to help know



what they are experiencing. You can help by encouraging them to talk openly about their grief, to talk about the circumstances surrounding the death of their loved one.

Encourage them to share the relationship they enjoyed with their loved one, what it was that made

No matter how deep the sorrow of those who are grieving, let them know that they are not alone, that others will do what they can to help share the load if given the opportunity.

that person different, why they loved him or her. To cope with their grief, they should feel free to talk from the heart, to share their feelings regarding the loss they've suffered and the loneliness they are enduring.

At distressing times like these, the support of friends and loving family is invaluable. "A friend loves at all times" and "there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother" (Proverbs 17:17; 18:24). The day will come when they will be happy to do the same for you. No matter how deep their sorrow, let them know that they are not alone, that others will do what they can to help share the load if given the opportunity.

At such a time those who are grieving often lose sight of the need to take care of themselves physically. Caring for their health and well-being is often the last thing on their minds. Help them to realize that they are important, that their lives are valuable.

During times of grief it is easy to grow emotionally and physically depleted. Those who have suffered loss need to watch their diet, avoid fast food and eat well-balanced and nutritious meals.

Exercise, another must, is good for relieving stress buildup and discharging anger and frustration. It helps the appetite and promotes better sleep. Exercise can be as simple as a 30-minute walk several times a week.

Rest is yet another way to take care of one's body. Grief is exhausting. Going without rest only compounds the difficulty.

Stages of grief: anger

Once denial begins to wear off, our natural tendency is to want to blame somebody—anybody—for our loss and pain. This anger may not be rational. We might find ourselves angry with the deceased, even if the person died through no fault of his or her own, because of what the loss is doing to us. We may be angry because of the timing of the death. When we are grieving, anger might be vented toward authority figures—the doctor, the hospital staff, family members or even God. We may wonder why God did not intervene in the situation to prevent the death. This anger may also lead to feelings of guilt.

Anger is a powerful emotion. It can lead to negative behavior or be harnessed



We should remember the positive aspects of the life we shared with our loved one. Memories are golden. We will forever carry with us times spent together and enjoyed with the one we have lost.

for our own benefit. Remember that God says, “Be angry, and yet do not sin” (Ephesians 4:26, NASB). We can take the energy our anger generates and channel it into positive action. For example, we can do those odd jobs around the house we’ve been putting off. Taking up a new hobby or perhaps continuing our education by enrolling in some evening classes can help us positively channel our emotions. An outstanding way to displace anger is to be of service to others. Helping others will ease their burdens and lighten our emotional load during our grieving.

Stages of grief: bargaining

In the bargaining stage some want to play let’s make a deal with God. They imagine that if they promise to do this or that, God will return things to the way they used to be. At this point, those grieving often begin their pursuit of understanding the death of their loved one. This is a normal part of the healing process. They come to realize that there is no bargaining with death. It is only through acceptance of the facts that the reality of

death can be turned into hope and positive action.

In their pursuit of understanding, those who have suffered loss should not leave out the source of information that has the answers to the questions they ask regarding death—God’s Word, the Bible.

As is emphasized throughout this publication, God has a plan. You and all of your loved ones are very much a part of it. God doesn’t want anyone to be overcome with sorrow and be without hope. With this in mind, remember that the apostle Peter said to submit to God, “casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:7).

Stages of grief: depression

Reality eventually sets in. We are confronted with the necessity to go on with life without the one we have loved. It is easy to begin to plague ourselves with the thoughts of what should have or could have been.

For many, this can be the most difficult stage to go through. Signs of depression include a feeling of melancholy, unconcern about the outside world or a loss of interest in eating and sleeping. Feelings of guilt, helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness are common.

During this stage we should remember the positive aspects of the life we shared with our loved one. Memories are golden. We will forever carry

How Can We Help Those Who Are Grieving?

There are practical ways we can help friends and loved ones who are grieving. Here are a few:

- **Listen carefully.** A heavy burden lies on the hearts and minds of those who are grieving. They need to know that they can grieve without being criticized or judged by anyone, especially someone with whom they share their deepest thoughts. We shouldn’t worry about what we will say or about having to say something profound. That isn’t what is needed by those who are grieving.

- **Show compassion.** We show our compassion for others by recognizing their suffering and desiring to relieve them of it. We can be compassionate people by helping them with the tasks at hand. How do we know what to do? We can simply ask. We might help notify family and friends of the

death. We might prepare the home to receive the many visitors who may arrive. We could organize the collection of food that others will bring. We might ask if we could watch the children for the family to give parents some time to themselves. We can help in everyday, practical ways.

- **Stay close after the funeral.** After the funeral we should not immediately forget about those grieving. They will have a great deal of support in the hours and days immediately after the death of their loved one, but will anyone be there to listen and be compassionate a week later, a month later, several months later? It’s at times like these, when we go back to our routines, that those who are grieving remember that their loved one isn’t in their routine any longer. These are the times the grieving most need our support.

with us times spent and enjoyed with the one we have lost. These are a treasure that nobody can take from us and are part of the legacy our loved one left for us.

Furthermore, it is vital to realize that we need not ever walk alone in our grief. God is still with us, even in times of mourning. “For He Himself has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ So we may boldly say: ‘The LORD is my helper; I will not fear’” (Hebrews 13:5-6).

At times like these we must remember to keep the lines of communication open with God. He can help us deal with grief. Ask Him for strength and courage. “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). He is the “God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Stages of grief: acceptance

Eventually, as we deal with our grief, we come to understand and accept that we are beginning a new chapter in life. We come to know a new normal. New realities must be adjusted to because we are in a new situation. Because of the trial we are going through, we become stronger, deeper and better for having faced and endured this great difficulty. Emotional balance returns little by little, like the healing of a physical wound.

The time required for the healing process can be different for each person. Some will still feel emotions such as guilt, depression or anger. This isn’t necessarily negative. It just means that the loved one impacted their lives in a powerful way and is still missed. These feelings are to be expected; they’re normal.

No one can ever take the place of a loved one we have lost. But we will come to the point where we’re ready to move forward and meet new challenges.

Moses was a man beloved by the nation of Israel, but there came a time when God allowed him to die. The nation had to move forward even though the Israelites grieved over losing him: “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, it came to pass that the LORD spoke to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, saying: ‘Moses My servant is dead. Now therefore, arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people, to the land which I am giving to them—the children of Israel’” (Joshua 1:1-2).

Life went on for Israel without one of its greatest leaders. God further stated: “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you nor forsake you. *Be strong and of good courage*” (verses 5-6).

God gives us the same promise today. We just need to look to Him in faith. If we draw near to Him, just as He was near to Moses and Joshua,

so He will be with us. He is there to help us enter a new phase of our life with new challenges. God will provide the same strength and support He gave His faithful followers back then.



This, too, shall pass away

Time is a great healer. This is especially true in the case of the loss of a loved one.

In a speech before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society in 1859, Abraham Lincoln commented: “It is said an Eastern monarch once charged his wise men to invent him a sentence to be ever in view, and which should be true and appropriate at all times and situations. They presented him with the words, ‘And this, too, shall pass away.’ How much it expresses. How chastening in the hour of pride. How consoling in the depths of affliction.”

No one can ever take the place of a loved one we have lost. But we will come to the point where we’re ready to move forward and meet new challenges.

As bleak as life seems after the death of one we love, we must remember that this, too, shall pass away. The joy of life can return. With the help of God, with the understanding of His great purpose for life, with the hope of the future, we can find the strength to overcome grief.

Especially we hold tightly to the promise of that wonderful day when we will be joyfully reunited with our lost loved ones—and ultimately of the time when death and all suffering will pass away forever (Revelation 21:4).

Until then, as Solomon wrote, “to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven: . . . a time to die; . . . and a time to heal; . . . a time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1-4). Emotional healing will come. A time to sing, a time to laugh and a time to dance will return.

Everlasting Life Conquers Death

Death has always been humanity's enemy. It brings loneliness, sadness, disorientation. But it need not be a mystery nor be entirely devastating. Even though it is inevitable, death is not the end.

Though at times death seems unfair and arbitrary, it does not thwart God's plan for eternal life. Through a resurrection God will reunite us with family and friends and extend His promises to all who have ever lived.

Eventually there will come a time when death itself will be banished. Writing about the resurrection that will take place when Jesus returns, Paul paraphrased from the book of Hosea: "For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O Death, where is your sting? O Hades [grave] where is your victory?'" (1 Corinthians 15:53-55). Death will be swallowed up and defeated in the victory of eternal life.

Holding on to this view of the future can give us hope and optimism at a time of great loss. "But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep [died], lest you sorrow as others who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

A future beyond our wildest hopes

Some people are put off by the thought of eternal life. Some feel this life is painful and difficult enough, so why would anyone want to live forever? Others may think that eternity sounds vague and uninteresting, that if it means they have to give up pleasure in this lifetime it just isn't worth the effort. They would rather experience all the good times they can for now and worry about eternity some other time.

In all the scriptures we've read we've seen that God wants to give us an everlasting, eternal, immortal life. We are assured that it is more valuable than any physical treasure (Colossians 1:26-27; 2:2-3). But exactly what will we be doing for eternity? If receiving eternal life requires effort and sacrifice in this life, is it going to be worth it?

Let's remember the limitations of our human experience and observation. God is so far above us that it's difficult for us to understand His ways and thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9). What God is preparing to give us is beyond our

wildest imaginations and fantasies: "Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly *above all that we ask or think*, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever" (Ephesians 3:20-21).



God is Creator. He plans, builds, implements. He designed the universe and devised His plan and our reward before He even started creating it (Matthew 25:34). He is planning and preparing an infinitely more exciting and rewarding life for us in His divine family (John 14:1-3). We can only try to begin to imagine the incredible and eternally enjoyable life He wants to give us—an eternal life free from human limitations and disappointments, weaknesses and suffering.

Pain, disappointment and death will be no more. Regarding the vision he received of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Revelation

God designed the universe and devised His plan and our reward before He even started creating it. He is planning and preparing an infinitely more exciting and rewarding life for us in His divine family.

21:1), the apostle John wrote: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be *no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying*. There shall be *no more pain*, for the former things have passed away" (verse 4).

From Revelation 21 and 22 we learn that those who receive eternal life will be a family, the children of God, with community relationships in the New Jerusalem. Relationship principles that God is teaching us now will be as applicable then as they are today. That is why God wants us to learn and apply His ways in our lives now. What we can take with us for all eternity is our love and concern for one another.

The full hope and meaning of an eternal existence with God and Jesus Christ is truly beyond our ability to grasp or express. "Beloved, now we are children of God; and *it has not yet been revealed what we shall be*, but we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2).

John states that God hasn't revealed everything that He has in mind for us, as we can't yet conceive of what it means to be fully like the glorified Jesus Christ. Our finite minds couldn't contain it.

We have seen prophecies that take us into the future about 1,000 years beyond Christ's promised return. As Paul wrote, we see spiritual concepts and promises in a kind of vague outline as if we were looking through a steamed-up mirror (1 Corinthians 13:12). But someday, as Paul also says in this verse, we *will* see clearly—just as clearly as God sees everything about us.

Responding to God in faith

Is it worth it to seek God's Kingdom rather than sinful pleasures or priorities in this world? Many are not so sure.

But God assures us that His promise of eternal life is more than worth the effort, struggles and disappointments of life and death: "Therefore *do not lose heart*. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but *for a moment*, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things *which are not seen*. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are *eternal*" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

Everlasting life is, after all, a matter of faith (John 3:16). Faith is not just a warm, vague feeling that Jesus has done everything for us. Faith is a frame of mind that is expressed by the kind of person you choose to be, the actions that express what you believe (James 2:20-24). When all is said and done, we must have faith that eternal life is worth anything we might be required to endure to receive it (Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:12-14).

Learning more about life, death and what happens after death should make quite an impact on how you live. That knowledge should make you pause and consider what use you



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are making of the precious gift of life and whether you are using it to prepare for the eternal life God offers you.

Psalm 90 was composed by Moses. In this prayer to God he contrasts the

power of God with the frailties of man. He writes of God's view of time, of the relative mere moment that represents our lifetime, and of the punishment that is sometimes necessary to correct man's ways. In verses 10-12 he says: "The days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years, yet their boast is only labor and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away. Who knows the power of Your anger? For as the fear of You, so is Your wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may gain a *heart of wisdom*."

Regrettably, most people seem to notice that life is short only after much of it has slipped away. We must learn to number our days,



Faith is a frame of mind that is expressed by the kind of person you choose to be, the actions that express what you believe.

keeping in mind that our time will pass and we must take care to make the most of it (see Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5). Solomon told us to remember the Creator in the days of our youth (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

What will you do?

Peter wrote of the culmination of God's plan. He prophesied of the time during which everything physical will be burned up and replaced by new heavens and a new earth. Then he asks a challenging rhetorical question: *How does that knowledge change your life?* "But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, *what manner of persons ought you to be*, in holy conduct and godliness . . . ?" (2 Peter 3:10-11).

Understanding the meaning of life, death and what follows this physical life can give priceless comfort and hope in the face of death. It should also have a great impact on the *kind of person you are*, motivating you to live carefully and make wise choices. Knowing that the purpose of this life is to prepare you for an eternal life of power and ability beyond anything you can imagine should encourage you to turn to God so He can begin to fulfill His purpose in you!

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