

What Happens When People Die?

1. The Souls of Believers Go Immediately Into God's Presence. Death is a temporary cessation of bodily life and a separation of the soul from the body. Once a believer has died, though his or her physical body remains on the earth and is buried, at the moment of death the soul (or spirit) of that believer goes immediately into the presence of God with rejoicing. When Paul thinks about death he says, "We would rather be *away from the body and at home with the Lord*" (2 Cor. 5:8). To be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord. He also says that his desire is "to *depart and be with Christ* for that is far better" (Phil. 1:23). And Jesus said to the thief who was dying on the cross next to him, "*Today you will be with me in Paradise*" (Luke 23:43). The author of Hebrews says that when Christians come together to worship they come not only into the presence of God in heaven, but also into the presence of "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23). However, as we shall see in more detail in the next chapter, God will not leave our dead bodies in the earth forever, for when Christ returns the souls of believers will be reunited with their bodies, their bodies will be raised from the dead, and they will live with Christ eternally.

a. The Bible Does Not Teach the Doctrine of Purgatory: The fact that the souls of believers go immediately into God's presence means that *there is no such thing as purgatory*. In Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is the place where the souls of believers go to be further purified from sin until they are ready to be admitted into heaven. According to this view, the sufferings of purgatory are given to God in substitute for the punishment for sins that believers should have received in time, but did not. Speaking of purgatory, Ott says:

Suffrages operate in such a manner that the satisfactory value of the good works is offered to God in substitution for the temporal punishment for sins which the poor souls still have to render. It operates by way of remission of temporal punishments due to sins.

But this doctrine is not taught in Scripture, and it is in fact contrary to the verses quoted immediately above. The Roman Catholic Church has found support for this doctrine, not in the pages of canonical Scripture as we defined it in chapter 3 above, and as Protestants have accepted it since the Reformation, but in the writings of the Apocrypha, particularly in 2 Maccabees 12:42–45:

[Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the Jewish forces] also took a collection, man by man, to the amount of 2,000 drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking into account the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish *to pray for the dead*. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore *he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin*.

Here it is clear that prayer for the dead is approved, and also making an offering to God to deliver the dead from their sin. But in response it must be said that this literature is not equal to Scripture in authority, and should not be taken as an authoritative source of doctrine. Moreover, it contradicts the clear statements about departing and being with Christ quoted above, and thereby opposes the clear teaching of New Testament Scripture. Furthermore, when it talks about

the offering of Judas making “atonement [Gk. ἐξιλασμός (“propitiation”)] for the dead” it contradicts the explicit teaching of the New Testament that Christ alone made atonement for us. Finally, this passage in 2 Maccabees is difficult to square even with Roman Catholic teaching, because it teaches that soldiers who had died in the mortal sin of idolatry (which cannot be forgiven, according to Catholic teaching) should have prayers and sacrifices offered for them with the possibility that they will be delivered from their suffering.

Roman Catholic theology finds support for the doctrine of purgatory primarily in the passage from 2 Maccabees quoted above, and in the teaching of the tradition of the church. Other passages cited by Ott in support of the doctrine of purgatory are 2 Timothy 1:18; Matthew 5:26; 1 Corinthians 3:15; and Matthew 12:32. In 2 Timothy 1:18, Paul says, concerning Onesiphorus, “When he arrived in Rome he searched for me eagerly and found me—may the Lord grant him to find mercy from the Lord on that Day—and you well know all the service he rendered at Ephesus” (2 Tim. 1:17–18). The claim of those who find support for the doctrine of purgatory is that “Onesiphorus . . . apparently was no longer among the living at the time of the Second Epistle to Timothy.” This seems to be based on the fact that Paul refers not to Onesiphorus himself but “the household of Onesiphorus” (2 Tim. 1:16); however, that phrase does not prove that Onesiphorus had died, but only that Paul was wishing blessings not only on him but on his entire household. This would not be unusual since Onesiphorus had served in Ephesus where Paul had worked for three years (2 Tim. 1:18; cf. 4:19). To build support for purgatory on the idea that Onesiphorus had already died is simply to build it on an assumption that cannot be supported with clear evidence. (It is not unusual for Paul to express a wish that some Christians would be blessed in the Day of Judgment—see 1 Thess. 5:23.)

In Matthew 12:32, Jesus says, “Whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.” Ott says that this sentence “leaves open the possibility that sins are forgiven not only in this world but in the world to come.” However, this is simply an error in reasoning: to say that something will not happen in the age to come does not imply that it might happen in the age to come!¹³ What is needed to prove the doctrine of purgatory is not a negative statement such as this but a positive statement that says that people suffer for the purpose of continuing purification after they die. But Scripture nowhere says this.

In 1 Corinthians 3:15 Paul says that on the Day of Judgment, the work that everyone has done will be judged and tested by fire, and then says, “*If any man’s work is burned up* he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” But this does not speak of a *person* being burned or suffering punishment, but simply of *his work* as being tested by fire—that which is good will be like gold, silver, and precious stones that will last forever (v. 12). Moreover, Ott himself admits that this is something that occurs not during this age but during the day of “the general judgment,” and this further indicates that it can hardly be used as a convincing argument for purgatory. Finally, in Matthew 5:26, after warning people to make friends quickly with their accusers while they are going to the court, lest the accuser hand them to the judge and the judge to the guard and they be put in prison, Jesus then says, “You will never get out till you have paid the last penny.” Ott understands this as a parable teaching a “time-limited condition of punishment in the other world.” But surely there is no indication in context that this is a parable—Jesus is giving practical teaching about reconciliation of human conflicts and the avoidance of situations that naturally lead to anger and personal injury (see Matt. 5:21–26). Other passages of Scripture that have sometimes been referred to in support of the doctrine of purgatory simply do not speak directly about this idea at all, and can all easily be

understood in terms of punishment and deliverance from distress in this life, or of a life of eternal blessing with God in heaven in the life to come.

An even more serious problem with this doctrine is that it teaches that we must add something to the redemptive work of Christ, and that his redemptive work for us was not enough to pay the penalty for all our sins. But this is certainly contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Moreover, in a pastoral sense, the doctrine of purgatory robs believers of the great comfort that should be theirs in knowing that those who have died have immediately gone into the presence of the Lord, and knowing that they also, when they die, will “depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

b. The Bible Does Not Teach the Doctrine of “Soul Sleep.” The fact that souls of believers go immediately into God’s presence also means that *the doctrine of soul sleep is incorrect*. This doctrine teaches that when believers die they go into a state of unconscious existence, and the next thing that they are conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises them to eternal life. This doctrine has been taught occasionally by one person or another in the history of the church, including some Anabaptists at the Reformation, and some of the Irvingites in England in the nineteenth century. In fact, one of John Calvin’s first writings was a tract against this doctrine, a doctrine that has never found wide acceptance in the church.

Support for the doctrine of soul sleep has generally been found in the fact that Scripture several times speaks of the state of death as “sleep” or “falling asleep” (Matt. 9:24; 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 13:36; 1 Cor. 15:6, 18, 20, 51; 1 Thess. 4:13; 5:10). Moreover, certain passages seem to teach that the dead do not have a conscious existence (see Ps. 6:5; 115:17 [but see v. 18!]; Eccl. 9:10; Isa. 38:19). But when Scripture represents death as “sleep” it is simply a metaphorical expression used to indicate that death is only temporary for Christians, just as sleep is temporary. This is clearly seen, for example, when Jesus tells his disciples about the death of Lazarus. He says, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep” (John 11:11). We should notice that Jesus does not here say, “The soul of Lazarus is sleeping,” nor, in fact, does any passage in Scripture say that the soul of a person is sleeping or unconscious (a statement that would be necessary to prove the doctrine of soul sleep). Rather Jesus simply says that *Lazarus* has fallen asleep. Then John explains, “Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, “Lazarus is dead” (John 11:12–13). The other passages that speak about people sleeping when they die are likewise to be interpreted as simply a metaphorical expression to teach that death is temporary.

As for the passages that indicate that the dead do not praise God, or that there is a ceasing of conscious activity when people die, these are all to be understood from the perspective of life in this world. From our perspective it appears that once people die, they do not engage in these activities any longer. But Psalm 115 presents the full biblical perspective on this viewpoint. It says, “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor do any that go down into silence.” But then it continues in the very next verse with a contrast indicating that those who believe in God will bless the LORD forever: “*But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and for evermore. Praise the LORD!*” (Ps. 115:17–18).

Finally, the passages quoted above demonstrating that the souls of believers go immediately into God’s presence and enjoy fellowship with him there (2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23; Luke 23:43; and Heb. 12:23) all indicate that there is conscious existence and fellowship with God immediately after death for the believer. Jesus did not say, “Today you will no longer have consciousness of anything that is going on,” but, “Today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Certainly

the conception of paradise understood at that time was not one of unconscious existence but one of great blessing and joy in the presence of God. Paul did not say, “My desire is to depart and be unconscious for a long period of time,” but rather, “My desire is to depart *and be with Christ*” (Phil. 1:23)—and he certainly knew that Christ was not an unconscious, sleeping Savior, but one who was actively living and reigning in heaven. To be with Christ was to enjoy the blessing of fellowship in his presence, and that is why to depart and be with him was “far better” (Phil. 1:23). That is why he says, “We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8).

The fact that Hebrews 12:1 says, “We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,” just after an entire chapter spent on the discussion of the faith of Old Testament saints who had died (Heb. 11), and the fact that the author encourages us to run the race of life with perseverance because we are surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses, both suggest that those who have died and gone before have some awareness of what is going on in the earth. Scripture says very little about this, probably because it does not want us to speak to those who have died or to pray to them or to contact them in any way (note Saul’s great sin in this in 1 Sam. 28:7–25). Nonetheless, Hebrews 12:1–2 does give us this slight hint, probably as an encouragement to us to continue also to be faithful to God as were those who have died and gone to heaven before us. Similarly, at the end of Hebrews 12, the author tells us that when we worship we come into the presence of God in heaven, and we come not to “the spirits of just men who are sleeping in an unconscious state” but “to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb. 12:22–24).

Revelation 6:9–11 and 7:9–10 also clearly show the souls or spirits of those who have died and who have gone to heaven praying and worshiping, for they cry out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?” (Rev. 6:10), and they are seen “standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!” ’ (Rev. 7:9–10). All of these passages deny the doctrine of soul sleep, for they make it clear that the souls of believers experience conscious fellowship with God in heaven immediately upon death.

c. Did Old Testament Believers Enter Immediately Into God’s Presence? Some have said that, although the souls of believers *since Christ’s resurrection* go immediately into God’s presence in heaven, the souls of believers who died *before Christ’s resurrection* did not enjoy the blessings of heaven but went into a place of waiting for Christ’s work of redemption to be complete. Sometimes this is called the *limbus patrum* or simply limbo. This view has been especially common in Roman Catholic theology, but it has also been held by some Lutherans. Some of the support for this doctrine comes from a particular view of the idea of Christ’s descent into hell, which we discussed in an earlier chapter.²¹

Not many Scripture references talk about the state of Old Testament believers after they had died, but those that give us any indication of their state all point in the direction of immediate conscious enjoyment in the presence of God, not of a time of waiting away from God’s presence. “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for *God took him*” (Gen. 5:24; cf. Heb. 11:5). Elijah was not taken to a place on the border of hell, but he “went up by a whirlwind *into heaven*” (2 Kings 2:11; cf. Matt. 17:3, where Moses and Elijah appear, talking with Jesus). And David is confident that he will “*dwell in the house of the LORD for ever*” (Ps. 23:6; cf. 16:10–11; 17:15;

115:18). Moreover, when Jesus answers the Sadducees, he reminds them that God says, “I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” and then says, “He is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Matt. 22:32), thus implying that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were living even at that very moment, and that God was their God. Moreover, in the story of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus does not say that Lazarus is unconscious, but reports Abraham as saying about Lazarus, “Now he is comforted here” (Luke 16:25). Abraham himself is portrayed as dwelling consciously in a place that is very desirable—that the rich man longed to go to—certainly not a place on the fringe of hell. It is important to notice that since this is before Christ’s resurrection, Lazarus was in the same situation as the Old Testament saints.

Therefore it seems likely that Old Testament believers also entered immediately into heaven and enjoyed a time of fellowship with God upon their death. However, it may well have been true that additional rich blessings and much greater rejoicing came to them when Christ returned to heaven at his ascension. But this does not mean that they were transported to heaven for the first time, or that that was the first time they enjoyed the blessing of God’s presence.

d. Should We Pray for the Dead? Finally, the fact that the souls of believers go immediately into God’s presence means that *we should not pray for the dead*. Although this idea is taught in 2 Maccabees 12:42–45 (see above), it is nowhere taught in the Bible itself. Moreover, there is no indication that this was the practice of any Christians at the time of the New Testament, nor should it have been. Once *believers* die they enter into God’s presence and they are in a state of perfect happiness with him. What good would it do to pray for them anymore? Final heavenly reward will be based on deeds done in this life, as Scripture repeatedly testifies (1 Cor. 3:12–15; 2 Cor. 5:10; et al.). Further, the souls of *unbelievers* who die go to a place of punishment and eternal separation from the presence of God. It would do no good to pray for them either, since their final destiny has been settled by their sin and their rebellion against God in this life. To pray for the dead therefore is simply to pray for something that God has told us has already been decided. Moreover, to teach that we should pray for the dead, or to encourage others to do so, would be to encourage false hope that the destinies of people might be changed after they die, something which Scripture nowhere encourages us to think. It may lead people to much useless anxiety and much time essentially wasted in prayers that will have absolutely no results, and will thereby divert attention from prayers that could be made for events for this life and could have great effect in advancing the work of the kingdom. We should spend time praying according to God’s will.

2. The Souls of Unbelievers Go Immediately to Eternal Punishment. Scripture never encourages us to think that people will have a second chance to trust in Christ after death. In fact, the situation is quite the contrary. Jesus’ story about the rich man and Lazarus gives no hope that people can cross from hell to heaven after they have died: though the rich man in hell called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame,” Abraham replied to him, “Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and *none may cross from there to us*” (Luke 16:24–26).

The book of Hebrews connects death with the consequence of judgment in close sequence: “just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment ...” (Heb. 9:27). Moreover, Scripture never represents the final judgment as depending on anything done after we die, but only on what has happened in this life (Matt. 25:31–46; Rom. 2:5–10; cf. 2 Cor. 5:10).

Some have argued for a second chance to believe in the gospel on the basis of Christ's preaching to the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3:18–20 and the preaching of the gospel "even to the dead" in 1 Peter 4:6, but those are inadequate interpretations of the verses in question, and, on closer inspection, do not support such a view.

We should also realize that the idea that there will be a second chance to accept Christ after death is based on the assumption that everyone deserves a chance to accept Christ and that eternal punishment only comes to those who consciously decide to reject him. But certainly that idea is not supported by Scripture: we all are sinners by nature and choice, and no one actually deserves any of God's grace or deserves any opportunity to hear the gospel of Christ—those come only because of God's unmerited favor. Condemnation comes not only because of a willful rejection of Christ, but also because of the sins that we have committed and the rebellion against God that those sins represent (see John 3:18).

The idea that people have a second chance to accept Christ after death would also destroy most motivation for evangelism and missionary activity today, and is not consistent with the intense missionary zeal that was felt by the New Testament church as a whole, and that was especially exemplified in the missionary travels of the apostle Paul.

The fact that there is conscious punishment for unbelievers after they die and that this punishment goes on forever is certainly a difficult doctrine for us to contemplate. But the passages teaching it appear so clear that it seems that we must affirm it if we are to affirm what Scripture teaches. Jesus says that at the day of final judgment he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the *eternal fire* prepared for the devil and his angels," and he says that "they will go away into *eternal punishment* but the righteous into eternal life" (Matt. 25:41, 46).

These passages show that we cannot accept as faithful to Scripture the doctrine of *annihilationism*. This is a doctrine that says that unbelievers, either immediately upon death, or else after suffering for a period of time, will simply cease to exist—God will "annihilate" them and they will no longer be. Although the idea initially sounds attractive to us, and it avoids the emotional difficulty connected with affirming eternal conscious punishment for the wicked, such an idea is not explicitly affirmed in any passages of Scripture, and seems so clearly to be contradicted by those passages that connect the eternal blessing of the righteous with the eternal punishment of the wicked (Matt. 25:46) and that talk about punishment extending to the wicked day and night forever (Rev. 14:11; 20:10).

Although unbelievers pass into a state of eternal punishment immediately upon death, their bodies will not be raised until the day of final judgment. On that day, their bodies will be raised and reunited with their souls, and they will stand before God's throne for final judgment to be pronounced upon them in the body (see Matt. 25:31–46; John 5:28–29; Acts 24:15; and Rev. 20:12, 15).

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Have you thought very much about the possibility of your own death? Has there been an element of fear connected with those thoughts? What, if anything, do you fear about death? Do you think that these fears have come from the influence of the world around you or from Scripture? How would the teachings of Scripture encourage you to deal with these fears?

2. Has this chapter changed your feelings about your own death in any way? Can you honestly contemplate it now as something that will bring you nearer to Christ and increase your own trust in God and faithfulness to him? How would you express your hopes regarding your own death?
3. Do you think you would have the courage to refuse to sin even if it meant being thrown to the lions in a Roman coliseum, or burned at the stake during the Reformation, or thrown in prison for years in some foreign country today? Do you think the Christian martyrs throughout history had thought that they would have enough courage when put to the test? What happened to them to equip them for this suffering (read 1 Cor. 10:13)? If you can obtain a copy, you may wish to read the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, a stirring testimony of faith in God and of God's faithfulness in the second century A.D. Have you settled in your own mind that obedience to Christ is more important than preserving your own life? What would make you hesitant to believe this or act on this conviction?
4. If you have experienced the death of a believer who was close to you, do you think that your reaction to that death was one of sorrow mingled with joy? How has this chapter influenced the way you feel about that situation, if at all?
5. Have you previously believed in the doctrine of purgatory? If you no longer believe in it now, can you describe the way the doctrine made you feel, and the way you now feel emotionally about the fact that that doctrine is not true and there is no such place as purgatory?
6. If death itself is viewed as part of the process of sanctification, then how should we view the process of growing older and weaker in this world? Is that the way the world views aging? What about you?¹

¹ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan Pub. House, 2004), 816-25.