

What Happens When We Die? (Kingdom of God, part 7)

In between the Kingdom of God as we currently experience it, and its ultimate fulfillment (the Millennium and the New Heavens and New Earth) there is obviously a gap. What happens to all the Christians who have died and will die before the end of the age? One of the most profound questions of life is, what happens when a person dies? Men of all cultures and times just know that there has to be more than just this current life.

There are occasional accounts of people who have seen heaven or hell. These may (?) be valid and encouraging, insofar as they agree with the scriptures, but even then, should not be given real authority in our belief systems.

e.g., "Visions of Heaven and Hell" by John Bunyan (author of Pilgrim's Progress)

"Scenes Beyond the Grave" by Marietta Davis, 1856 (or "Nine Days in Heaven")

"Heaven is for Real" – Todd Burpo (father), 2010

"My Visits to the Galactic Council of Heaven" – Whoa! Red flags waving! Warning bells! Ding, ding, ding!

The common perception is that when a person dies, they immediately go to judgment and then are either admitted to heaven or dispatched to hell. This is not quite accurate, for these reasons:

1. Formal judgment will happen at a specific time, at the end of the age, not every time a person dies. There is no doubt which way that judgment will go though, so the righteous and unrighteous dead do exist separately.
2. The Bible distinguishes between "Hell", "lake of fire", "Sheol", "Hades", "Paradise", etc. in the original languages. Unfortunately, in English, the distinction is often lost, because "hell" is used for many of them.
 - a. "Sheol" – used in the OT for either the grave, or more generally, "the place of the dead"
 - b. "Hades" – used in the NT as the place of the dead, though usually referring to the unsaved
 - c. "Paradise" – in the NT, the place of the saved, righteous dead, also called "Abraham's bosom"
 - d. "Tartarus" – 2 P. 2:4 – the place of "the angels that sinned", chains of darkness, waiting for the judgment
 - e. "Gehenna" – Greek form of the Hebrew "gey Hinnom" or the valley of Hinnom, a local place of Jerusalem that was a burning dump, and so used figuratively to describe Hell and its torments
 - f. "Lake of fire" or "Hell" – lake of brimstone (burning sulfur). Same as Gehenna. The ultimate destination of Satan, the Antichrist, the demonic host, and the wicked dead, after their final judgment.

False Views of the After-Life

1. That there is no after-life – life is nothing more than the physical properties of the body, and so the decay of the body is the complete end of our existence. This seems to bring a philosophical problem: If this life is all there is, with no rewards or punishment afterwards, then the great villains of history (like Hitler and Stalin) will have escaped with no greater consequence than the holiest of men. Why should we even attempt to live well, if it all ends at death?
2. "Soul sleep" – that the soul is not conscious, but is just "sleeping" until the judgment
3. Annihilation – that the judgment of the soul is complete destruction, to the point of non-existence.
4. Purgatory – that sins committed after baptism are still held against us and that we must suffer the pains of punishment in purgatory for some extended period of time before being released into heaven. Our "sentence" can be shortened by officials of the Roman Catholic church at their discretion, but usually requiring payment of money by living relatives.
5. Reincarnation – that people do not stay dead, but are reborn as another person, or even an animal, until they eventually work off their "Karma" (they get their sin-balance paid off)
6. Absorption – that at death we are reabsorbed into some "universal life principle" or generic humanity (pantheism)
7. That after death men become angels (like in the movie "It's a Wonderful Life", or sentimental songs)

What CAN we know about the state between death and the final judgment? (from scripture – remember the message on Dt. 29:29)

1. That it commences immediately at death. Lk. 23:43, Lk.16:22
2. That it is forever – Mt. 25:46 "everlasting punishment . . . life eternal"
3. Where is it? It is not to be thought of in purely physical terms, but generally it is referred to either as "up" to be with the Lord, or "down" to the pit, "cast down to hell", to the "nether parts of the earth". Paul said someone (himself) was "caught up" into paradise and heard unspeakable words. (2 Cor. 12:3-4)

4. Jacob said he was being “gathered unto my people” - Gen. 49:29-33. All through the books of the Kings, it is said, so-and-so “slept with his fathers, and was buried with his fathers”. Mt. 22:32 – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob
5. For the believer, death is a good thing, a welcome end to a faithful life here below
 - Num. 23:10 – (Balaam) “Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!”
 - Job 19:25-27 – there is a redeemer, and hope of a resurrection body
 - Prov. 14:32 – ... but the righteous hath hope in his death.
 - Phl. 1:20-24 – To live is Christ and to die is gain. We have a desire to depart, and to be with Christ.
6. What kind of an existence is it?
 - a. Lk. 16:19-31 – Rich man and Lazarus
 - Lazarus was “carried by the angels” to “Abraham’s bosom”, while the rich man simply “died and was buried”, and then was “in hell” (Hades).
 - It is individual existence, and a continuation of what we were on earth (not just “wrapped up in the Cosmos” and some vague notion of universal “life”)
 - It is conscious, not just “sleep” – able to see, speak, remember, be in torment or comfort, regret
 - That state is fixed and unchangeable, and there is no passing between the two (“a great gulf fixed”).
 - The state of the wicked – thirst, torment, flames, utter hopelessness
 - The state of the righteous – comfort and rest, being in the presence of the redeemed (and Christ)
 - b. Jn. 14:1-4 – In the Father’s house are many mansions (dwelling places). Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for us, and that he would come again and receive us unto himself, so that where he is, we would be also.
 - c. 2 Cor. 5:1-11
 - We have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.
 - We should earnestly desire our heavenly “house”
 - While in the flesh we dwell in a body, but are absent from the Lord. After death it is the opposite.
 - We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ
 - d. Observations from the book of Revelation
 1. It is to be in the presence of God and Christ
 - 3:21 – overcomers will sit with Christ in his throne
 - 7:14-17 – Christ dwells among them
 2. There are rewards
 - 2:7, 10 – overcomers will eat of the tree of life in Paradise, and receive a crown of life
 - 2:17 – will eat of the hidden manna; receive a white stone and a new name
 - 3:5 – clothed in white raiment, and are acknowledged by Christ as his own
 - 19:6-9 – the marriage supper of the Lamb, the wife is arrayed in fine linen
 3. Comfort and rest, blessedness
 - 6:9-11 – martyrs slain for the word of God are in a place of rest
 - 7:14-17 – No hunger or thirst, no oppressive heat. The Lamb shall feed them, lead them to fountains of living waters. God will wipe away all tears
 - 14:13 – Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them
 4. Worship
 - 4:10 – 24 elders worship, speak (5:5), sing (5:9)
 - 6:9-11 – martyrs slain for the word of God can make appeals to God, are dressed in white
 - 7:9-10 – great multitude from all nations –standing before throne, before the Lord, clothed with white robes, palms in hands
 - 7:14-17 – before the throne, serve God day and night in the temple
 - 14:1-4 - 144,000 on Mt. Zion, redeemed from the earth. “Harping with their harps”, singing a new song
 - 15:2-4 – (those who overcome the Antichrist) sing the song of Moses, harping on a sea of glass
 5. Responsibility with Christ
 - 2:26-27 – overcomers will receive power over the nations and will rule them with a rod of iron
 - 5:10 - made kings and priests, and shall reign on the earth
 - 20:4-6 – martyrs given thrones and judgment, and shall reign and rule with Christ 1000 years