

Life After Death



The following notes contain some of the material presented in the series "Is God for Real?"

Is life after death really possible? What happens to a person when they die? In spite of the fact that death seems to have a universal effect on everyone, people hold many different ideas about what happens at death. So biblically, what actually happens when you die?

Almost everyone who has ever lived has pondered this question at some time in their life. In Job 14:14 we read, "If a man dies, shall he live again?" Certainly, the ancient Egyptians thought they knew the answer. They believed that their king, the Pharaoh, would have a life beyond the tomb, so they buried him with many articles to use in the afterlife. The massive Pyramids at Giza still testify to the strength of their belief. However, the tombs have been emptied of their treasures by robbers and the bodies of many of the Pharaoh's still lie on display in the Cairo museum for all to see. They never got to use the chariots, thrones, boats, games and other things that were buried with them. So, what does happen when you die? Some believe that a person goes straight to heaven or hell at death. Others believe you come back as a ghost and visit old friends or enemies. Others believe you go to purgatory to be purified – before eventually moving on to your final destination. Still others believe that you are reincarnated, returning as another life form, and some believe that death is the final end, while others believe that death is a sleep until a resurrection at the end of the world. But what is the truth? This question of what happens when you die is one that affects every one of us, so it is surely a very important question.

Someone once said that there are only two important questions in life: 1. Has anyone ever cheated death? and, 2. Is it available to me? The Bible answers both of these questions with a resounding YES! Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again to new life. Furthermore, He has promised this resurrection to anyone who believes in Him, (Revelation 1:18; John 3:16). But when?

In order for us to understand what happens at death, we need to go back to the beginning to understand what constitutes life in the first place. How did God bring humans to life? In Genesis 2:7 we read, "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 being." In the Old King James Version of the Bible it says that man became a living 'soul.' Notice it does not say that God gave man a soul, but rather that man 'became' a living soul. This verse identifies that mankind consists of a body and the breath of life. These two together make a soul or a living being. Some might say, 'but isn't the soul immortal?' The Bible tells us that the soul, or person, can, and indeed does die. Notice Ezekiel 18:4, "The soul that sins it shall die." The Bible also teaches that 'all have sinned,' (Romans 3:23), therefore all die. At death, the Bible tells us, 'the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. Here the spirit refers to the 'breath of life.'

So where did the idea of an immortal soul come from? The answer is that it came into the Christian church through pagan Greek philosophy. Tertullian, an early Christian writer took Plato's opinion that, 'every soul is immortal.' The teaching of the immortal soul is present in many, many ancient religions. On the other hand, the teaching of the Bible is that death is an unconscious sleep. At death the individual is no longer aware of anything, but rests until the resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ at the end of the world.

Notice these verses: “His spirit departs, he returns to his earth; In that day his plans perish,” (Psalm 146:4). Even more explicit is Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, “For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. Also, their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun.” Here we are told that the dead know nothing. According to the Bible, the dead don’t praise the Lord, (Psalm 115:17), they lie down but don’t rise up, (Job 14:10-12), and they go to sleep in death, (Psalm 13:3). Also, in the New Testament, Jesus taught that the dead are asleep. We can read about it in John chapter 11. Jesus had a friend named Lazarus who was sick. He said of him, ‘our friend Lazarus sleeps,’ (John 11:11). Then Jesus tells His disciples plainly that Lazarus was dead, (John 11:14). Thus, Jesus also taught that the experience of death is like being in a dreamless sleep.

But what of the hope of the resurrection? Will the dead ever live again? Yes, there is indeed a resurrection from the dead. Jesus raised Lazarus back to life to demonstrate that He had power over death and the grave. There are also other examples in the Bible of special resurrections, but these are the exception, not the rule. Yes, the dead in Christ will be made alive again, but this does not immediately follow death. The Bible teaches that the resurrection from the dead occurs at the Second Coming of Christ. Notice what the Old Testament prophet Daniel says about the resurrection at the end of the world, “And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time. And at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 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 12:1-2). Here the resurrection takes place after the time of trouble at the end of the world. This point is emphasised in 1Thessalonians 4:13-18 which says, “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. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words”. Furthermore 1Corinthians 15:51-55 teaches us that the dead are raised at the last trumpet, and that the faithful living receive immortality at the same time as the faithful who are dead.

Of the hundreds of scriptures in the Bible on the subject of death, the vast majority tells us that death is like a sleep. Some point to the thief on the cross as evidence that the saved go straight to heaven. However, if we look at this story carefully we recognise that Jesus was telling the thief that on that day – when all looked lost – He promised Him a place in paradise. Jesus was not saying that He and the thief would be in paradise that very day. How can we be so sure? Because Jesus didn’t go to paradise on that day either. When Mary Magdalene saw the resurrected Jesus early on Sunday morning, He said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father,” (John 20:17).

Jesus has gone to prepare a place in heaven for each one of us. He will soon return to take His children home. If we should die, we shall sleep the sleep of death, and be resurrected at His glorious appearing. Now that is an event we can all look forward to.

If you would like to know more about this subject, or others in the series, ‘Is God for Real?’ then please contact one of our staff and they will be happy to help you.