

What happens after death?



People want to believe there is something beyond this life. From ancient cultures and primitive tribes to today's most advanced societies, they have feared death and longed for an ideal, enduring existence.

Do you think of death as a leap into the unknown? Or do you feel sure there is some kind of conscious existence after death, perhaps a soul or spirit which will live on apart from your body?

If you are honest with yourself, you may at least have wondered if death is final.

Life after death

The Bible gives definite answers about what happens after death, answers which may surprise you.

- Death is an unconscious state. Under normal circumstances it is the end of existence.
- If you believe in Jesus Christ and live by the principles he taught, God promises you will not stay dead forever.
- Jesus is going to return to earth. When he returns the faithful will be raised from death and given a new kind of life that will not end.

The "first fruits" symbol

Jesus Christ is alive today. As the first person to rise from death and become immortal, he is a guarantee that God can and will fulfil His promise. For this reason the Bible calls Jesus the "first fruits" of a future immortal people.

The people of Jesus' time would be familiar with this term. The first fruits were the first ripe grain or fruit: for example, the early grain which matures in the summer. They assured the farmer there would be a good harvest.

The New Testament takes up this idea as a symbol of the resurrection of Jesus. The fact Jesus rose from the dead provides a small sampling of God's power to give life to the dead. It is God's guarantee of the final "harvest" or resurrection of all true believers at his coming:

"But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of

them that slept.

For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

But every man in his own order; Christ the first fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming."

I Corinthians 15, verses 20, 22, and 23

Jesus' mission when he comes back will be to set up a new world order, to replace the major world powers with a government that will bring true peace and justice. But before he makes himself known to the world an unprecedented event will take place- the Resurrection.

Those who are brought back to life will include people who have died since Adam. Jesus will judge them along with those who are alive to see if they have lived up to their commitment to God in faith. To those who have, Jesus will give a nature like his- immortal, perfect, free from sin and its effects.

Life after death is at the very heart of the gospel message. But this life is not a natural right of possession. Nor is it a reward you earn. Rather, it is a gift from God to all who have been faithful to Him and believed in His promises.

God's power to give life

If you had been living a century ago, you might have laughed at the idea a tiny atom could release tremendous power. Yet the not-too-distant future will see a miraculous display of a much greater power- God's power to raise the dead and give eternal life.

Human beings can destroy life. In fact, they could wipe out all life on this planet several times over. Think of the destructive power nations have at their fingertips right now.

Then, try to imagine a creative, lifegiving power infinitely greater than the most formidable nuclear weapon. A power able to revive people who died years ago. A power able not just to end life, but to give unending life. And not some impersonal Force, but a loving Father. God, the Creator.

The miracle of resurrection

The Bible speaks of the believer's death as a sleep. Resurrection is an awakening from the sleep of death, a rising from the dead, a coming back to life. Says Daniel:

"And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Daniel 12, verse 2

Many - not all - shall awake. For those who do not know of or care about God, death is final.

Back in Genesis, the sentence was first passed on Adam after he chose to disobey God:

"For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Genesis 3, verse 19

Every human being faces this fate. The Bible states:

"His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish."

Psalms 146, verse 4

Without an understanding of God's purpose, human beings simply perish; they cease to exist. But in the Bible, God has laid down the way for you to overcome this universal human problem, to take advantage of His lifegiving power through belief in His son

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“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

John 3, verse 16

You might wonder how God could bring back to life a body that was decayed, or burned up, or decomposed. Remember that God has infinite power. “In the beginning” He created Adam “of the dust of the ground”. The Almighty God who created the first man will most surely recreate others from the dust.

A gift with conditions

For a gift as wonderful as eternal life, common sense suggests there are conditions to be met. In daily life conditions and qualifications apply to many things you try to gain.

For instance, when you apply for a job, you have to meet its requirements. An employer may demand specific skills, experience, the right kind of personality and motivation. You accept the need for conditions and standards to qualify for the position.

As you might expect, God will choose at the resurrection men and women who fulfil His conditions. He will choose those who have shown in their lives that they are the kind of people He wants in His kingdom. The gift of immortality is not automatic to everyone.

The blessings of the kingdom are for those who have done the will of God— who have made a covenant with Him through baptism and have lived up to their commitment.

This is not to say that you can earn eternal life. No matter how good a person may seem, human attitudes and behavior are never perfect. In God’s eyes we are all sinful. No one can legitimately say, “I am so good that I deserve eternal life.” That is why eternal life is called a “gift”, not an earned reward.

“The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Romans 6, verse 23

The gift is for those who have seriously tried to meet God’s conditions. It is like a gift from a father to a son or daughter who has shown love and good faith.

At the resurrection, the faithful of all times will be raised from the dead to meet Jesus and to receive the blessing of eternal life in his kingdom.

“Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.”

Matthew 25, verse 34

What will happen to you?

Benjamin Franklin once observed that in this world nothing is certain except death and taxes.

Taxes are an obvious fact of life. But somehow death seems less real. Death always happens to someone else. It’s hard to face the fact it will ever happen to you.

But God’s offer to resurrection and eternal life is open to all. No matter who you are, no matter what kind of life you led beforehand, you can qualify for His gift.

However, it’s not like winning a lottery or some other game of chance. The Bible openly describes the kind of people God wants in His kingdom. So to some extent, winning the prize is within your control:

- Know and understand the principles of God’s truth found in the Bible.
- Develop a strong faith in this truth and in Jesus Christ.
- Put your faith into action according to Bible teaching.

What will happen to you when you die? The answer depends on your response to God now.

Recap

Death - the end of existence - is the fate every human being faces.

To those who respond to His message, God offers resurrection from death and eternal life in His kingdom.

Recommended Bible Readings

Death and the mercy of God: Psalm 146. Isaiah 26 and 40.

Jesus’ return: Matthew 24 and 25.

The resurrection: I Corinthians 15.

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The Bible versus Church doctrine

During the 16th century the Bible was translated into English from the ancient languages in which it was written—mainly Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New. The version translated by William Tyndale is widely recognized for its accuracy.

As Tyndale translated the Scriptures, he examined their messages very closely. He came to realize that the church was not teaching the truths revealed in the Bible.

Because he rejected Church tradition in favor of the Bible's authority, he was put to death as a heretic in 1536.

Before he was burned at the stake, Tyndale wrote that the scriptural teaching of resurrection ruled out a belief in souls going to heaven, hell, and purgatory:

“In putting departed souls in heaven, hell, and purgatory, you destroy the arguments wherewith Christ and Paul prove the resurrection. If souls be in heaven, then what cause is there for the resurrection?”

The Bible's promise of life after death stands apart from the idea of an immortal soul. The dead are “asleep.” When Jesus returns, he will raise and judge them. Those who are judged faithful will have eternal life in his kingdom on earth.

What is a soul?

The word “soul” in the Bible

In the Creation account, Adam, the newly created man, came alive when God breathed into him “the breath of life”.

“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.”

Genesis 2, verse 7

The statement “man became a living soul” implies that the living soul was Adam himself, now a conscious, breathing person. Indeed, throughout the Bible the word “soul” usually refers to a complete living being, body and all.

Source of the immortal soul concept

Belief in a soul or spirit separate from the body, which lives on after a person dies, is of non-Biblical origin.

- Ancient peoples such as the Persians, Babylonians and Greeks had their own concepts of an immortal soul distinct from the body. The immortal soul entered Jewish and Christian thought from sources like these outside the Bible.
- Reincarnation (sometimes called the transmigration of souls) is the idea that, depending on your deeds, your soul is reborn into a higher or lower form of life. This Hindu explanation of what happens after death has gained popularity in the West as the influence of the Church has declined.

The idea of an immortal soul is appealing although it cannot be proven. Its origins are in human philosophy rather than the word of God.