

What happens when a Christian dies?

Separation

To answer this question we first need to correctly define death. We usually consider death as the cessation of life but it is more accurate to describe death as separation; the separation of our spiritual nature from our physical nature. This is why people say at someone's death, "He's gone"; their body is still there, but their spirit/soul¹ has gone. Death also separates the deceased person from their family and friends.

In Eden, Adam was given free access to every tree except for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The penalty for eating from that tree would be "when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen. 2:17) or literally 'in dying you will die'. After disobeying and eating the fruit, Adam lived for another 900 years but that same day two things happened. Firstly, he died spiritually; he was separated from the presence of God. Secondly, the process of physical death began in his body; this process culminated in his physical death when his spirit/soul was separated from his physical body.

Death in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, two Hebrew words that are translated as the grave; *qeber*, refers to the place of burial; *sheol*, is the location where a person's spirit/soul go after death. Sheol was considered to be a waiting place for the dead. This refers to both distance another, different dimension.

When Abraham died (Gen. 25:8) he was "gathered to his people" as were Moses and Aaron (Num. 27:13). David wrote about God delivering him "from the depths of the grave" (Ps. 86:13) and prophesied that Messiah would not be abandoned in the grave nor his body see corruption (16:10). Job anticipated death and resurrection (Job. 19:25).

When Jesus recounted the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus, (Luke 16:19–31) it was pre-Calvary and reflected the Old Testament's view of death. We are unsure if this incident was an actual occurrence or a parable; either way, Jesus would not have given incorrect information. In the incident, Sheol is not mentioned; rather it is identified as Abraham's side, or Abraham's bosom (16:22). The rich man is in hell (16:23), or

¹ Spirit and soul refer to our immaterial nature; body refers to our material or physical nature. Our spirit is our God-consciousness; our soul is our self-consciousness; our body is how we connect with the physical world. Spirit and soul are often used interchangeably and are vitally connected but can be divided by the word of God (Heb. 4:12).

Hades which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew Sheol. Both words, Sheol and Hades have the same meaning, the waiting place of the dead.

From the incident of the rich man and Lazarus we observe several things;

- 16:22–23 The rich man is _____
- 16:25 Lazarus is _____
- 16:24 The rich man _____
- 16:25 The rich man _____
- 16:26 The rich man _____
- 16:29 The rich man prays but _____

What happened at the Cross?

Jesus hung on the cross for six hours. He was crucified at 9am, the time of the morning sacrifice; he died at 3pm, the time of the evening sacrifice. At midday “a darkness came over the whole land until 3pm” (Mark 15:33). It was around 3pm that Jesus made three powerful statements; “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46); “It is finished” literally meaning ‘the debt is paid’ (John 19:30); finally, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

It is considered that the darkness occurred when the Father, “made his soul an offering for sin” and imputed to Jesus the sins of the whole world (2 Cor. 5:21). The transaction was concluded at the cross; “It is finished” was a triumphant declaration and led to his final words of absolute confidence, “Into your hands I commit my spirit”.

His body was placed in Joseph’s tomb, what happened to his spirit/soul? Psalm 16:10 predicted that he would not be abandoned in the grave inferring that like all others his spirit/soul would go to Sheol. Obviously he would be with the righteous dead, or Abraham’s side. He promised the thief, “today, you will be with me in paradise”² (Luke 23:43).

Jesus prophesied that for “three days and three nights he would be in the heart of the earth,” an allegorical term referring to Sheol / Hades (Matt. 12:40). This may correlate with a reference of Jesus going and “preaching to the spirits in prison” (1 Peter 3:19). This does not mean he gave the unrighteous dead a second opportunity to turn to God; more likely he

² Paradise can be translated as garden; some people incorrectly claim the thief was not converted but would simply be buried in a garden. Jesus said, “you will be with me”; they were not buried together, yet Jesus said they would be together wherever that was.

announced to the righteous dead that sin's debt had been paid in full and death was about to be defeated.³

When Jesus rose from the dead "he led captives in his train" (Eph. 4:8). This may refer to the spirits/souls of the righteous dead being released from Sheol / Hades and accompanying Jesus to heaven. Hebrews 12:22–23 lists the identities of those in heaven and includes "the spirits of righteous people made perfect."

What happens when a Christian dies?

Having emptied Sheol / Hades of the righteous dead, Christ led them to heaven. So what happens to a New Testament believer when they die? Their bodies are buried or cremated, but their spirit/soul goes to be with the Lord. We are confident of this because of the words of ...

Jesus, "Where I am, my servant will be" (John 12:26)

Jesus, "You will be where I am" (John 14:3)

Stephen, "I see heaven open" (Acts 7:56) – another dimension

Paul, "to be with Christ, which is better by far" (Phil. 1:23)

Paul, "at home with the Lord" (2 Cor. 5:6–8)

Paul, "death cannot separate us from the love of God" Rom. 8:38–39).

Physical death has no effect on our spiritual relationship with the Lord. Should you see the body of a believer who has died, it appears to us they are asleep; however, they are very much alive. There is no strong evidence that they can see us, and certainly they do not pray for us.⁴

Will we know one another in heaven? Absolutely, Abraham was gathered to his people; David expected to be re-united with his son (2 Sam. 12:23); Peter recognised Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration. One of the joys of heaven will be reunion; collectively, as the Church located in heaven is united with the Church on earth; and personally, as we re-unite with friends and loved ones.

What are the believers doing in heaven? They are waiting for three fantastic events, the Return, Resurrection and the Rapture.

³ There is no Biblical evidence that Jesus went down to Hades to wrestle with the devil. Rather, Sheol has always been under God's rule, "If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there" (Ps. 139:8); and Jesus disarmed powers and authorities triumphing over them at the cross, (Col. 2:15).

⁴ Hebrews 12:1 speaks of being "surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses". These are the men and women of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 whose lives prove we too can live by faith. The concept of them leaning over the balustrade of heaven or sitting in heaven's grandstand cheering us on is inspiring but not necessarily accurate.

Return, Resurrection, Rapture.

Return refers to the Return of Christ, “we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him” (1 Thess. 4:14). The spirits/souls of believers from both the Old and New Testaments will return with the Lord at his Return.

Resurrection refers to the bodies of believers that will be raised to life at the Return. “The dead in Christ will rise first” (4:16). There will be a resurrection of the bodies of the righteous dead and an immediate reunion with their spirit/soul.

Rapture refers to the believers who will be alive at his Return. “We who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them (those returning with Christ) in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air” (4:17). The word caught up is *harpazo*, and means to carry off, snatch away, pluck, seize. The English word rapture is connected to the word raptor, a bird that catches its prey with its talons. “The Spirit suddenly took Philip away” (Acts 8:39); “I know a man who was caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2); “The male child (Christ) was snatched up to God and his throne” (Rev. 12:5).

Imagine a train line that had a terminus, “the end of the line.” For years it operated exactly like that, it went no further than the end of the line. But then the line was extended, more track was laid down and stations were added further on. The terminus was the terminus no more, just another station on the line. Until Calvary, Sheol / Hades was the end of the line, the train went no further. But Christ conquered death and extended ‘the line’ to heaven. Now death is just one of the stations on the journey, no longer is it the end of the line, this train is bound for glory.

Next week, session 7 is titled “Top Secret” and considers the time of the Lord’s Return and the time of the Rapture of the Church.

For discussion: Human life is impossible outside of the atmosphere of planet earth. Astronauts can leave the atmosphere but only in a sealed vehicle. Should they go outside the rocket or space station, they need their own sealed unit. The Bible identifies three individuals who have left planet earth and in their bodies are living outside earth’s atmosphere.

1. Who are they?
2. How can they survive?
3. What does this teach us?

1. Enoch, Elijah and Jesus
2. Jesus is life and the author of life. His resurrected, glorious body is similar yet different to the body he had on earth. His body is real, ageless and not dependent on any earthly requirements to sustain life.

Moses “was with the Lord forty days and forty nights without eating bread or drinking water” (Exod. 34:28). It is impossible for human life to continue without food and water, unless they are in the presence of God that sustains them. Enoch and Elijah have been in the presence of God for thousands of years, their bodies have not aged, they are sustained by the presence of God.

3. The implications for us is that “there is a man in the glory”, that is, Jesus, in his real, resurrected, glorious, ageless body is in heaven today. Because he is there, we will be there with him. And, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

This train bound for glory comes with transformation, “we will all be changed, the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality” (1 Cor. 15:52–53).

Answers from page 2

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| 16:22–23 | The rich man is fully conscious |
| 16:25 | Lazarus is being comforted |
| 16:24 | The rich man has been judged and is in torment |
| 16:25 | The rich man can remember |
| 16:26 | The rich man couldn't cross over to where Abraham was |
| 16:29 | The rich man prays but his prayers were unanswered |