

What Is Death?

Rod Reynolds

What is death? There are many ideas about death. Often they have in common the idea that when humans die they don't really die but continue to live a conscious existence, somewhere, somehow.

The Bible teaching is very clear about the state of the dead. But the Bible's clear teaching has been enshrouded in myths and superstitions.

The ideas about an immortal soul continuing after death in heaven, hell, or purgatory common in popular Christianity are also found in various heathen religions and philosophies. Scriptures where the Bible mentions "heaven" or "hell" have had read into them ideas alien to Scripture, ideas adopted from pagan religions in the first centuries after Christ as Church leaders turned from Biblical teachings and embraced pagan concepts in the guise of Christianity. Understanding what death really is can help you better understand your own nature and that of your loved ones. It can help you better understand God, his plan and purpose for mankind, and how he will accomplish it.

Scripture tells us that human beings are made of the dust of the earth (Genesis 2:7; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:47-48). God told Adam that if he disobeyed his command he would die (Genesis 2:17). Adam was not created immortal, but he did have the opportunity to receive the gift of immortality had he chosen to obey God (Genesis 2:9; cf. 3:22). Having chosen the path of rebellion, God told Adam and Eve, the progenitors of mankind, that they would "return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you are, And to dust you shall return" (Genesis 3:19).

And so, through sin, death has passed upon all mankind. That is, we all die in the same manner as Adam (Romans 5:12; 1 Corinthians 15:22; Hebrews 9:27).

While human beings are made of the elements of the earth, there is more to physical life than a collection of chemicals. Mere chemicals, dead matter, do not of themselves have life. The well-known physicist, Werner Heisenberg, like not a few other scientists, recognized

“features of organic nature that are not contained in physics or chemistry, like the concept of life itself” (*Physics and Philosophy*, p. 104; cf. “[The Mystery of Life’s Origin](#),” and “[Scientists Refute Darwinism](#)”).

The Bible reveals that there is a spiritual dimension to human existence. There is a spirit in man (Job 32:8). Without spirit there is no life (Psalm 104:29-30). Both the human spirit, and the breath of life, the chemical processes which support life, sustained by the intake of oxygen and other elements, and the expulsion of wastes, are necessary for physical human life to continue.

The spirit that God gives us imparts life, but that spirit in man is not of itself a living entity or living person. When life sustaining chemical processes cease, and the spirit departs, life ceases. And the body of flesh decays and returns to the dust (Job 34:14-15; cf. Ecclesiastes 8:8; John 19:30). The spirit of a human person who dies returns to God, who gave it (Ecclesiastes 12:7; cf. 3:21).

Humans do not have an “immortal soul” that continues to live as a conscious entity upon the death of the body. Scripture teaches, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20).

The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *nephesh*, and it can have a variety of meanings. It is used in Scripture of a living being, including any creature made of flesh (Genesis 1:21, 24; 2:19; 9:15). When God breathed the breath of life into Adam's nostrils he “became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7, KJV; “living being,” NKJV). So man does not *have* an immortal soul, man *becomes* a living soul at the time his life begins.

The word *nephesh* is also used of one's life, any life sustained by blood, including human physical life (Genesis 9:4-5; Exodus 4:19). It's used of persons (Genesis 14:21; 46:26; Exodus 1:5). The term is even used in the sense of a dead body (Leviticus 21:11; Numbers 6:6).

In Psalm 16:9-10 is a prophecy concerning Jesus Christ, “My flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol [the grave], Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” Jesus’ “soul,” his body in this case, was not left in the grave to decay, or “see

corruption” (cf. Acts 2:25, 31; 13:29, 35-37; also see our article, [“The Truth About Hell”](#)).

We also find in the New Testament that “souls” are subject to death (James 5:20; Greek: *psuche*, life, living being. From *psucho*, to breathe). When one dies, his life ceases, but God has the power to restore life to the dead, as he did with his friend Lazarus, and so death is often likened to a “sleep” in Scripture (John 11:11-14; 12:1), as we will discuss in more detail below.

But God also has the power to destroy one’s life utterly and permanently. Jesus spoke of this permanent and irrevocable death as follows: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28). This is the “second death,” of which more will be said later (Revelation 21:8). Note that the “soul” (meaning life, in this case) is destroyed in “hell” (*Gehenna*), it does not continue to exist there (see [“The Truth About Hell”](#) for further discussion).

The ancient Egyptians in their idolatrous, polytheistic religion came to believe that human consciousness continues after death. The Greeks commonly “believed that the soul, or thinking principle in man, survived the destruction of the body” (*The Pantheon*, Edward Baldwin, p. 120). Similar beliefs were common among many other heathen nations of antiquity.

Although this concept was absorbed eventually into popular Christianity, it is not in accordance with what the Bible itself teaches about death. The Bible teaches that in death one has no remembrance of God, and no capacity to praise him (Psalm 6:5; 30:9).

According to Scripture, when one dies, “His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish” (Psalm 146:4, KJV). “...the dead know nothing...” (Ecclesiastes 9:5). “...there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave...” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The dead have no awareness of the affairs of the living, nor any power to directly influence them. “...their love, their hatred, and their envy

have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share In anything done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:6). In this verse "Nevermore" (NKJV), or "forever" (KJV), is from the Hebrew *`owlam*, which may mean forever, or may mean a period of long or indefinite duration, depending on the context. Since the Bible says all who have died shall be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22), here *`owlam* means for the duration of time until a resurrection in another age.

As mentioned above, death is frequently likened to a "sleep" in Scripture. As, like a person in a deep sleep, there is a lack of awareness. "Consider and hear me, O Lord my God; Enlighten my eyes, Lest I sleep the sleep of death" (Psalm 13:3, see also Job 3:11-22; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11, 13; Acts 13:36; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 51-52; 2 Peter 3:4). When one dies he "sleeps" in the grave, till called back to life (Job 14:12-15).

While, as we've seen, one's spirit returns to God at the time of death, that is not the same as a conscious "soul" going to heaven to continue living. David, a man after God's own heart, is not in heaven (Acts 2:29, 34; 13:22). Jesus, having died, had not yet ascended to his Father after three days (John 20:17). No one has ascended to heaven, except Jesus (John 3:13). The phrase "who is in heaven" in this verse is apparently a parenthetical expression added by John. Jesus had ascended into heaven at the time John wrote his gospel. He did ascend to heaven visibly forty days after his resurrection (Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus (as a human being who had been resurrected to eternal life) only ascended after he had descended into the lower parts of the earth, the grave (Ephesians 4:8-10; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). Of all humans at this time only Jesus has immortality, because at present, he alone has been resurrected to eternal life (1 Timothy 6:16; Revelation 1:18).

As far as hell is concerned, we have covered that subject, as well as the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in other articles, which you are invited to study (see "[The Truth About Hell](#)," and "[Lazarus and the Rich Man](#)").

While death to many may seem to have an awful finality to it, the

good news is that there is a remedy for death. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order" (1 Corinthians 15:22-23). Even the vast bulk of mankind, who have not found salvation in this lifetime, will be resurrected at the time set for this by God, as discussed below.

The "first resurrection" occurs at the time of Christ's second coming (1 Corinthians 15:17-24; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-17; Revelation 20:1-6). Note that if there is no resurrection, those who have "fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (1 Corinthians 15:18). The hope beyond this life for those who are truly converted and faithful to God in this age is the resurrection, not our "soul" going to heaven (Acts 24:15). Following the first resurrection, a resurrection to immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52-54), "the rest of the dead" do not "live again" until after the thousand year period following Christ's second coming. That is, they are dead, not alive in heaven, nor in an imaginary cauldron of fire many conceive of as "hell" (Revelation 20:5).

After the thousand year period (the "Millennium") is a "second" or "general" physical resurrection, whereupon the dead stand before God and are judged (cf. Revelation 20:11-13; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 11:23-32). In this period of judgment, those having been resurrected at that time will be taught of God (John 6:45), and have an opportunity to repent, free of Satan's influence.

The Bible speaks of the wicked who refuse to repent despite being given every reasonable opportunity, as being burned up like "chaff with unquenchable fire" (Matthew 3:12; cf. Proverbs 29:1; Isaiah 66:24). Note that the term "unquenchable fire" does not signify a fire that never, ever goes out. God prophesied of a fire that could not be quenched affecting the people of ancient Judah and Jerusalem (Jeremiah 17:27; 21:12). This prophecy had long since been fulfilled by time of Nehemiah, but it was not then burning (Nehemiah 2:17). However, it had proven "unquenchable," until it had fulfilled the purpose God had in mind for it.

When the fires of Gehenna have done their job in consuming the wicked and purging the earth, they, too, will go out, and there will be a "new heaven and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:7, 10, 12-13; Revelation

21:1). That is, the same globe, but completely renewed. The incorrigibly wicked, who will have been burned up, leaving them “neither root nor branch,” will be ashes under the feet of those who will have learned to fear God (Malachi 4:1, 3). There is to be no eternally burning hell, and no endless torture for lost humans.

Following the judgment of the general resurrection, death and hell (*hades*, the grave) themselves will be, in a sense, cast into the lake of fire, along with the incorrigibly wicked, who will suffer the “second death” (Revelation 20:14-15; 21:8). Only those made righteous in God’s sight will remain (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:27). After that, “...there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:4).

What the Bible teaches about death is clear if we read it carefully. The pagan mythological concept of immortal souls cast into hell is foreign to the picture of death and future punishment found in Scripture. Neither do men go to heaven when they die. Rather, when our lifetimes in this age end our consciousness ceases, and we sleep in our graves until a resurrection.

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 619
Wentzville, MO 63385
USA