

## What Happens When We Die

By Dr. David A. DeWitt

- *What is the difference in the death experience for believers and unbelievers?*
- *What is life like for believers after they die?*
- *What will happen after believers have been in heaven a while?*

This brochure is about what happens to people at the moment of death and after death. [For more discussion on these subjects, see the *Concepts*' brochures *A Biblical Perspective of Death for Believers* and *The Great White Throne Judgment* by Ellen J. DeWitt.] Here we shall focus on what happens to a believer in Jesus Christ, but we shall first say a little about an unbeliever's death.

### **Death is not light at the end of a tunnel. Death is when the soul departs from the body (Genesis 35:18)**

In the 1980s, several pantheistic writers made popular an idea that when we die we go through a long tunnel with light at the end. This, they claimed, was the testimony of several people with near-death or *pronounced dead* experiences. But, of course, all these people share one obvious characteristic--they did not die from their experience. When people die, they don't come back and tell us about it. So, at best, the tunnel-light testimony is one of a sick person, not a dead one. It could be that the brain produces such an effect when it becomes starved of oxygen, but that is a sickness experience not a death experience.

### **Do People Go To Purgatory?**

Purgatory is a Roman Catholic doctrine which is not supported biblically. It is the concept that a person goes through a purge-a-tory, that is, being purged of sin through temporary suffering. To hold such a view requires faith in Roman Catholic "sacred tradition." There is no such place ever mentioned in the Bible.

### **When an Unbeliever Dies**

The death process is described specifically by Jesus Christ in Luke 16:19-31.

*Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the {crumbs} which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame." But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and {that} none may cross over from there to us." And he said, "Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house--for I have five brother-- that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." But he said, "No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!" But he said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead."*

The unbeliever here is a rich man who has been living a life of luxury (see also James 5:5). [By the way, this is probably not a parable, since the believer Lazarus is named, and parables don't otherwise name people. Even if it is, Christ's parables described actual situations, so either way, we should assume this is an actual death description.] For the unbeliever, we read,

*the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment* (vv. 22-23). So when an unbeliever dies, he or she is conscious in a place of torment called Hades. There is no evidence that anyone works their way out of this place. Hades is not hell (the lake of fire). It is probably the bad part of what the Old Testament calls *Sheol*. Sheol is a word that sometimes means death or the place of death or the bad part of the place of death, depending on the context. So,

**The unbeliever is in Hades, awaiting judgment.  
At the end of the world, he or she is resurrected  
to a Great White Throne judgment, judged for his  
or her deeds, and cast into an eternal lake of fire  
(Revelation 20:11-15).**

There is no biblical statement about the relationships among the inhabitants of the lake of fire.

## **When a Believer Dies**

Death for a believer is also described by Christ in Luke 16. But for the believer, it was different. We read, *Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom* (v. 22). So we can assume,

**At the point of death, believers see angels who escort them to the heavenlies.**

Before the death of Christ, a believer apparently went to the good part of Hades (Abraham's bosom or paradise (Luke 23:43). But today, after the death of Christ, *to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord* (2 Corinthians 5:8). So it would seem that for our age (of grace or the church), believers are taken by angels to the presence of Christ, somewhere in the heavenlies. This does not, however, mean we are immediately standing before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:6; Ephesians 1:3, 20; 1 Corinthians 4:4-5; John 5:8-9; and Romans 14:9-12). And, I might add, all the old jokes about a long line of people facing St. Peter to let them through the gates of heaven are without any biblical foundation.

## **What We Are Like Right after We Die**

- (1) Believers will be with other believers who have died before them (Genesis 25:8-17; 35:29; 49:29, 35; Judges 2:10; Hebrews 11:13-16).
- (2) We will, it seems, have our same personalities (minus our sin nature) (1 Samuel 28:11-25; Luke 16:19-31; Matthew 17:1-3).
- (3) We will not be disembodied spirits, ghosts, or angels. We will have a bodily form (Romans 8:18, 23; Revelation 7:9).
- (4) We will be aware of the situation on earth when we left it (Revelation 6:9-11), but not necessarily awhile after our death.
- (5) We are comforted from earthly trials (Luke 16:25; Revelation 6:11; 7:16-17; 21:4; 1 Samuel 28:15).
- (6) We will be in the general vicinity of the presence of God, which means spectacular, bright, colorful, pure surroundings (Daniel 7:9, 10, 13, 14; Revelation 4:3-6).
- (7) We will also be among various different angelic beings who will also be there (Ezekiel 1:4-14).
- (8) Everything will be in the context of glorifying God (Revelation 4:8-11; 5:8-14).
- (9) And we will be actually involved in serving God in some way (Revelation 7:9-12).

## **After We Are There a While...**

There are several events that take place after a believer is in heaven:

- (1) We shall receive a different body. It seems like the body we have upon our arrival in the heavenlies is an intermediate body as described in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8. (See also 1 Samuel 28:12-14; Matthew 17:3; Luke 16:23; and Revelation 7:14).

(2) At the Rapture, we will receive an eternal immortal body of substance, though not earthly flesh and blood (Job, 19:25-27; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50f). This new body will not sexually reproduce (Mark 12:25-27), but it will be able to eat (Luke 24:42-43; Revelation 19:9), pass through physical structures (like walls, John 20:26), but it will be without physical defect (Revelation 7:9-17). It also may not look exactly like our old bodies (John 20:14).

(3) We receive (or lose) rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ. All believers appear before Christ in judgment, not for sin (Hebrews 10:17), since Christ paid for that on the cross, but for an evaluation of their behavior on earth. These rewards will determine our service before God for eternity (1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10; James 5:7-9; and Romans 14:10-12). A sobering thought!

(4) We will go through something called *the marriage of the Lamb*, where we will be *clothed in fine linen* representing *the righteous acts of the saints* (Revelation 19:7-8).

Eventually, believers (saints) will:

(5) return with Christ at His Second Coming,

(6) reign with Him for 1000 years on earth, then

(7) go with Him to our eternal state in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 19:22).

## Questions and Answers

**Q:** *What is the difference in the death experience for believers and unbelievers?*

**A:** Believers are escorted by angels to the presence of Christ in the heavenlies. Unbelievers open their eyes to a Hades of suffering, later to be resurrected to the Great White Throne, judged, and cast into the Lake of Fire.

**Q:** *What is life like for believers after they die?*

**A:** No death, no reproduction, no trials, but an awareness of who and where they are.

**Q:** *What will happen after believers have been in heaven a while?*

**A:** (1) They receive an intermediate body.  
(2) At the Rapture, they receive a new eternal (resurrected) body.  
(3) They receive rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.  
(4) They experience the Marriage Feast of the Lamb.  
(5) They return with Christ to the earth.  
(6) They reign with Christ on the earth.  
(7) They enter the New Jerusalem with Christ.