

16: What Happens When A Believer Dies?

Moving on to what the Bible tells us about things that have yet to happen, in this study we are going to think about death and heaven. Later we will look more closely at what we know about the Lord's return, the final judgement and what happens to those who are not saved.

What Is Death?

Death is something most of us fear, and that is understandable for it is not a natural thing: it came into the world only because of Adam's sin.

"Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

Romans 5:12

The Bible says death is a fearful thing and a curse but it also tells us that Jesus has overcome death and taken away its sting for those who are His. Although we still have to pass through death we can look beyond it, with confidence, to many things He has promised us.

Question: What does Paul mean when he says, in 1 Corinthians 15, that the sting of death has been removed?

Death itself is described as an end of physical life and as the separation of body and soul.

"Shortly I must put off my tent, just as our Lord Jesus Christ showed me."

2 Peter 1:14

But it is never described as an absolute end or annihilation. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13, Paul describes Christians who have died as "those who sleep" because they are not gone for ever: one day they will return.

What Happens When We Die?

Those who die in Christ leave behind their physical bodies and go straight to heaven to be with the Lord.

"Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise."

Luke 23:43

"We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord."

2 Corinthians 5:8

They are immediately and completely set free from the power and influence of sin and there they remain, for a while, consciously enjoying the blessings of heaven.

"Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

1 John 3:2

But that is not the completion of their salvation — there is more to come.

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true,

until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Then a white robe was given to each of them; and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed."

Revelation 6:9 – 11

What Is Heaven Like?

Although we are not told where heaven is, we do know that it is a physical place, not just a state of existence. We know, for example that Elijah, who never died, is there, as is the Lord Jesus Christ in His resurrected body.

We are not given a literal description of what heaven is like. The Bible mostly uses imagery to describe it. We know it is a place of perfect joy and we know that it is where God is — indeed it is His presence that makes it heaven.

Question: What images does the Bible use to describe heaven? What does each of them tell us about it?

Will We Know One Another In Heaven?

We are not told specifically that we will know one another in heaven but there are many things that lead us to believe we will. We know that our identities will be retained — Moses and Elijah, for example, were identifiable on the Mount of Transfiguration.

Jesus Will Return

One day Jesus will return to finally overthrow evil and rule with all authority.

"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only."

Matthew 24:36

He will bring with Him all those believers who have died and their bodies will be raised: new and perfect.

"He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies."

Romans 8:11

Those who are still alive at that time will not have to pass through death. They will be changed instantly and will ascend to meet those who are returning from heaven.

"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."

1 Thessalonians 4:11

Then, we will be given a home on a new earth where we will reign with Jesus for eternity.

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; 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

Question: What wrong notions about heaven do you commonly hear people putting forward?