

What Happens When We Die & When Does It Happen?

As believers we know that since we have trusted in Jesus to have paid the penalty for our sins we will go to be with him in heaven when we die.

But when we die, do we go to heaven right away or is there a waiting period?

We've been promised new bodies—resurrection bodies—but do we get them right away or so we exist as “souls” or spirits for awhile?

And if that's the case, when do we get our new bodies?

And what about the “Final Judgment”—do we still have to go through that? And if so, when?

The Bible doesn't speak to these questions and so we are left to our imaginations, and when people are left to their imaginations, they can come up with some odd ideas.

There was a 19-year-old girl in my former congregation who had scored 100% on the final examination in confirmation class.

Her father died shortly after she graduated from high school and at his funeral she gave a testimonial of her love for him.

It was a beautiful testimony, but she ended it by saying, “I know that there is now another angel in heaven.”

It's a lovely thought, but there's only one thing wrong: when we die, we don't become angels.

Angels are one order of created beings and humans are another.

Then there was a member who made an appointment to see me one day about a problem he had with the prospect of eternal life.

I was prepared to give him theological answers, but when he came in he sat down in my office and said, “I don’t see what’s so great about heaven! Who wants to sit on a cloud and play a harp forever?”

When Karen and I were in Italy we visited the El Duomo Cathedral in Milan.

Inside the cathedral dome there are frescos painted by Signorelli—the artist who inspired Michelangelo—which depict the joys of heaven and the sufferings of hell.

The pictures of heaven are inspiring and the punishments of hell are horrifying, but they are simply products of the artist’s imagination and have no Biblical basis.

All we know from the Bible about the nature of heaven and hell is that the former is glorious and the latter is horrendous.

The Apostle Paul was once allowed to see heaven and all he would say about it was that it was simply beyond man’s imagination.

He wrote, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what GOD has prepared for those who love him.”

So although the Bible does give us a clear idea of how beautiful heaven is and how horrible hell is, it doesn’t answer the questions we started out with.

But as the saying goes, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread,” so I’ll take a chance on being foolish.

First of all, the Bible speaks of two deaths and two resurrections.

The first death—the one we are familiar with—is the death we die in our bodies.

Both believers and unbelievers experience this death.

“Dust we are and to dust we shall return.”

But after we die a physical death in our bodies, there is radical difference between what happens to us and what happens to unbelievers.

What determines that difference is whether or not we had what is called a “first resurrection” while we were still alive.

This first resurrection is when we come to faith in Jesus Christ.

All of us were all born spiritually dead in the sin we inherited from Father Adam.

Ephesians 2: “...you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world.”

But when we heard and believed the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, we came to life.

Again, *Ephesians 2*: “...because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions.”

Colossians 2: “...you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, but God made you alive with Christ.

It's called being “born again.”

As Jesus said to Nicodemus: “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

Everyone who hears and believes the Good News—the Gospel—is raised up from spiritual death to spiritual life.

This is the first resurrection.

The second resurrection is when your body dies and you leave this world behind and are raised up to heaven.

A question is: does this second resurrection happen immediately—the second we die—or do we first have to go through the final judgment?

How exactly does that work?

Well, to understand how it works, you first have to try very hard to stop thinking in worldly terms.

When you leave this world behind, you leave behind a world of space and time because heaven is beyond time and space.

The Jews of Paul's time called it "the third heaven."

The first heaven was the blue sky and clouds you see when you look up at the sky in the daytime.

The second heaven was the moon and stars and the black space you see when you look up at night.

The third heaven was where God dwells with all the saints and angels.

It was "out of this world," which meant that it was not part of the created universe.

So when we talk about "heaven," we need to abandon all thoughts of our present universe and try to think in a new way.

Our present universe—the one we are familiar with—was created by God.

First God created matter and energy and then he organized them into planets and galaxies.

Then he created time by appointing days and seasons and years.

So the universe—creation—is comprised of three things: matter and energy and time.

But God has said that the time will come when He will destroy this universe, which means that he will destroy matter and energy **and time**.

Matthew 24: "...the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky and the heavenly bodies will be shaken....Heaven and earth will pass away."

Then He will replace the old universe with a new and perfect creation.

Revelation 21: "He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!'"

This new creation is called by various names in the Bible:

The New Jerusalem.

The paradise of God.

The third heaven.

The wedding feast of the Lamb.

And we who believed in Jesus Christ and trusted him to give us eternal life, will go to dwell in this new creation.

Sometimes people ask what happens to believers who die **before** this world ends and God makes this new creation?

There have been a lot of theories advanced to explain what happens to us during this interim between our death and the coming of the new heavens and the new earth.

One is that we exist only as souls or spirits until we get new bodies.

Another is that we fall into a “soul sleep” and wake up when our new bodies arrive.

All of these ideas—and the questions they give rise to—are based on our worldly way of thinking—in other words in terms of the laws that govern our present universe—laws of matter and energy and time.

But we have to take time out of the equation because in heaven there is not only no beer, there is no such thing as “time.”

Time is part and parcel of our present creation, and when we enter heaven we leave our present creation behind.

Heaven—and eternity—are not a matter of time going on forever, but of **timelessness**.

Heaven, you might say, is a continual “now.”

“When does the final judgment take place?”

It’s taking place right now.

When we die we are already a sheep or a goat and we are immediately dispatched to our appropriate destination.

“When do we get new bodies?”

Immediately.

Where there is no time, there is no “later.” All is now.

“When we die do we go immediately to heaven?”

You bet!

Luke 23; “[The thief on the cross] said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Jesus answered him, ‘I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.’”

When we enter eternity it's going to be a whole new ball game because “eternity” is not time going on forever; eternity is a continual “present tense.”

But what about people who do not undergo a first resurrection?

What happens to them?

Those who harden their hearts against God and turn deaf ears to the Good News of salvation remain dead in their sins.

Like zombies, they are alive in their bodies but they are spiritually dead.

After their physical death they appear as goats at the final judgment and are dispatched to their appropriate destination, which is a lake of burning fire, along with the devil and his angels and antichrists.

And as John writes: “The lake of fire is the second death.”

In the Scriptures it is described as a place where there is “weeping and the gnashing of teeth,” where, according to the prophet Isaiah, “their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”

And what about the people who lived and died before Jesus appeared on earth?

Does the Old Testament speak of an afterlife for them—of there being a heaven and a hell?

Yes it does.

Daniel 12: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life and others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

In the *Old Testament*, the saved were called “the righteous” and the unsaved were called “the wicked.”

When the righteous die, they are “gathered together with their ancestors.”

And when the wicked die, they descend into Sheol—a place of darkness and suffering: in other words, hell.

Jesus Himself testified to an afterlife for the Israelites who lived during the Old Testament era when he said to the Sadducees, “Have you not read what God said to you: ‘I am the God of Abraham the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’ He is not the God of the dead but of the living.’”

So, yes, there were those who were saved and those who were unsaved during Old Testament times.

The Bible sums it all up by saying that God keeps two books in heaven.

One is a *Book of Deeds*, in which are recorded the names of everyone who ever lived along with everything they thought and said and did while they were alive.

The other is a *Book of Life* in which are recorded the names of all those who are saved: the predestined or the elect.

In the 4th Chapter of the *Book of Philippians*, Paul refers to, “my fellow workers whose names are written in the Book of Life.”

The Angel Gabriel prophesies to Daniel that, “...everyone whose name is found written in the book of life” will be saved.

And in the *Book of Revelation* it says that, “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

It’s all settled, folks!

If you’re a believer, your name is in the *Book of Life* and your destination is heaven.

This is God’s decision and not yours, so you can regard it as a fact.

And leave the rest to God. Amen.