



THE DEATH QUESTION
What happens when we die?
1 John 5:11-12

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For several weeks, we've been asking life's biggest questions. I've called them the "human questions," questions everyone wonders about. Questions like ... What is the key happiness and the meaning of life? ... Is God real, and if He is, is He relevant to our lives today? Questions like ... What is truth, and how do we determine right and wrong? And toughest question of all ... Why is there so much evil and suffering in the world? How do you explain it?

Whether you are a Christian or not, spiritual or secular in your thinking, you wonder about these questions. So, the purpose of this series was to get you, if you're not a Christian, to assess your secular answers. And if you are a Christian, to equip you to ask questions and engage in spiritual conversations.

This morning we're asking the ultimate question, *the death question. What happens when we die?*

We don't like to talk about death. We dread it and we try to ignore it. But death is inevitable. It's inevitable for us and for those we love. And when it happens, losing a loved one knocks the breath out of us. It shocks and stuns us. And it's never the right time. That's why the Bible says that death stings.¹ All of us will face the death of someone we love. And, one day, all of us are going to die.

Many famous people died this past year; including Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, and Pat Summit, the winningest coach in women's basketball. Also singer David Bowie and Princess Leia Carrie Fisher. Also Nancy Reagan and Mohammad Ali. Other famous people who died this past year included Arnold Palmer, actor Bill Paxton, and television icon Mary Tyler Moore. Also James Bond's Roger Moore, Gene Cernan, the last man to walk on the moon, and the colorful Prince.

And some of you had family and friends die this past year too. So where are they now? What happened to David Bowie, to Fidel Castro, to Arnold Palmer, and to Prince? What happens when someone dies?

There are a lot of opinions out there. I Googled the phrase "what happens when we die" and got 410,000 results. There are thousands of opinions on the internet about what happens when we die. Oprah has an opinion. Larry King has an opinion. Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have an opinion. Atheists have an opinion. Christians and Jews have an opinion. Throughout history, every generation, every culture, and every person has had an opinion.

So who's right? What happens when we die?

- When am I going to die? How am I going to die? What will it feel like to die?
- Is there really life after death, or do we just cease to exist?
- Is there really a place like hell? And how could a loving God send anyone to such a terrifying place?

- Is heaven for real?
- What will we do in heaven? Will we just sit on a cloud and play the harp all the time?
- Will we be married in heaven?
- Will there be sex in heaven?
- How old will we be?
- What language will we speak?
- Will some people have better seats than other people?
- Will animals be in heaven? Will they talk like the animals in Narnia?
- Will we fly around with wings like angels?
- What if my loved ones are not in heaven? How can I enjoy heaven if my loved ones are in hell?

What happens when we die?

THE SECULAR ANSWER

The secular answer is explained by Dr. Neil deGrasse Tyson. Dr. Tyson is the Director of the Hayden Planetarium in New York. He is one of the world's leading astrophysicists and a popular speaker on scientific topics. Here is a video of Dr. Tyson being interviewed by Larry King answering the question "What happens when we die?" [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Dr. Tyson is a scientist and holds a naturalistic, biological view of death. When you're dead, you're dead. Worms eat your corpse and you become fertilizer for flowers. And he is not distressed by this fate; it is natural and beautiful to him.

Phil Zuckerman, in his book *Living the Secular Life*, holds the same view as Dr. Tyson. "Everything dies. Everything. That's just how it works ... When I'm dead, I'm dead ... But for now I'm here ... you have to live life to the fullest ... Because there is no other life."² And then he adds, "Secular people don't believe in life after death, but rather, they believe in life *before* death."^{3/4}

In response to such secular thoughts about death, pastor-author Tim Keller, who has had hundreds of conversations with atheists and skeptics, says a human being must bury hope to believe like that. Keller believes human nature is inherently hopeful. One thing that distinguishes us from all other animal life is hope, looking to the future, and living with expectation. We long for what's next. But if the secular view is right, then secularism and atheism is the death of hope. Can we really live with such hopelessness? Do we have to, or is there an alternative? That's why Christianity is worth considering, because it offers hope. It promises life after death. And not as some fantasy, but a verbal promise from the God who created us.

Death is coming. To that, all of us agree. Tyson and Zuckerman gave us the secular answer, so what about the Christian answer?

THE CHRISTIAN ANSWER

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the believers in the city of Thessalonica who asked the same question we are asking. And he said, “Dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, NLT). God wants us to know what happens when we die, and when our loved ones die, so that we do not “grieve like people who have no hope.”

So, what happens when people die? Here is the Christian answer.

1 John 5:11-12. “And this is the testimony.” Here is the truth. Here is what God’s Word says. “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12, NIV). ***What happens when we die is determined by what we believe about Jesus.***

While He was on earth, Jesus said that those who believe will enter “eternal life,” but those who did not believe will enter “eternal punishment” (Matthew 25:46, NAS). And the Bible says that “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27, ESV). When we die, we will stand before Jesus and He will ask us what we believe.

What happens when we die is determined by what we believe about Jesus. “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12, NIV).

IS THERE REALLY A PLACE LIKE HELL?

What about those who don’t believe? Jesus said those who do not believe will enter “eternal punishment.” Most of us don’t like to think about hell. C. S. Lewis said that if there was one doctrine he could remove from Christianity it would be hell.⁵ And we agree with him. Because we rub shoulders with people who do not believe – family members, good friends, close neighbors – and it’s hard to believe these people, mostly good people, might actually go to hell. But the Bible talks about hell. Jesus warned us about hell.

Francis Chan was compelled to write a book on hell when he realized it was not just a doctrine, but rather “the destiny of many people.”⁶ He was sitting in a coffee shop working on the manuscript of this book when that thought hit him. “The place buzzes with life. Meanwhile, I sit here reading passage after passage after passage, which all say that *some of these people are going to hell*. It sickens me ... There are at least a dozen people within ten feet of me right here, right now, that may end up in the agony that I’m studying? What do I do?”⁷

When we ask the question “What happens when we die?” it is not a philosophical question. We are talking about people’s destiny.

Is there really a place like hell? The answer is yes. And it is a demonstration of the justice of God.

The Bible says one day Jesus will return “from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9, NAS). That is a terrifying picture of God’s justice.⁸ God is not vengeful, spiteful, or mean. He is holy and righteous and just, and cannot allow sin to go unpunished.

Max Lucado writes that “if there is no hell, God is not just. If there is no punishment of sin ... if there is no hell, God is blind toward the victims and has turned his back on those who pray for relief. If there is no wrath toward evil, then God is not love, for love hates that which is evil.”⁹

God does not want to send anyone to hell! The Bible says that God “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV). “The Lord is ... patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish” (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus said, “This is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life” (John 6:40). Hell is not God’s choice; it is man’s choice. And, hell is just because it is the reaction of a God of justice.

- Hell is just because God is holy and just. His holiness cannot tolerate sin. Therefore, it is only right that a holy God judge sin as He sees fit, even if that includes hell.
- Hell is just because we have free will. God gives us freedom to choose. He does not force Himself upon us. He does not make us obey Him.
- Hell is just because sin has consequences, consequences that God has fully warned us about.
- Hell is just because of His grace. God has given every person a chance to repent, to believe in Jesus and to turn back to Him. He has provided a way of escape. He sacrificed His Son so that we might escape hell and be saved from His holy wrath.

Would a loving God actually send someone to hell? Yes. But before He would, He placed the biggest obstacle He could in front of hell’s gate – the cross, with His Son on it. He did everything He could to stop people from choosing hell. Yet, man chooses it by refusing to believe and worship Him. One theologian explained that hell is not the act of a mean, “vindictive God,” but the “natural consequences of the sinful life chosen by those who reject Christ.”^{10/11}

WHAT WILL HEAVEN BE LIKE?

But for those who do believe, “eternal life.” What will heaven be like? Will we sit on a cloud and play a harp all day? Will it be like one, long, eternal church service? To be honest, that sounds boring. So what will heaven be like?

For one thing, *heaven is a real place*. Heaven is not a state of mind. It is a place being prepared for us at this very moment. Jesus promised His disciples and He promises us, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms ... and I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:1-3, NIV). Did you hear Him? Jesus is preparing “a place for you” at this very moment.

In heaven we will see God. The Bible says, “To be absent from the body” is “to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8). The moment a Christian closes their eyes in death is the same moment a Christian opens their eyes in heaven and sees Jesus. “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then *face to face*” (1 Corinthians 13:12). And John agrees. “We shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).¹² Surely, that moment will trump every other moment in our lives. Surely, no sports highlight, no academic degree, no career achievement, no family memory, no grand adventure, and no amount of money will ever compare to that moment. The greatest moment in our existence will be the moment when we see Jesus face to face.

In heaven, there will be relief. Revelation 21 promises that “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Heaven will be a place of relief, of rest, of peace. No more tears, no more pain, and no more struggle.

And heaven will be Paradise. When the thief on the cross begged Jesus, “Remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” Jesus answered, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:42-43). I love that! Jesus called heaven “Paradise.” Heaven will be wonderful, peaceful, satisfying, fulfilling. It will be a place beyond our wildest imagination.¹³

JESUS AS JUDGE

To understand heaven and hell we must understand the heart of God. The Bible says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His godly ones” (Psalm 116:15, NAS). The eyes of the Lord tear up when someone dies. And the Bible says He “desires all people to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4, ESV), and “He is patient ... not wanting anyone to perish” (2 Peter 3:9, NIV). And nothing reveals the heart of God more than the price He paid to save us. Nothing proves His love more than the sacrifice of His own Son.¹⁴

Jesus died on the cross for our sins. And He rose from the dead proving to be the Son of God. He has “broken the power of death” (2 Timothy 1:10, NLT). And He declares, “I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades” (Revelation 1:18, NIV).

As the Risen Lord, Jesus has the authority to judge the world and to decide the fate of every human being.¹⁵ And the Bible describes what that moment will be like.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.” ... Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” ... Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life. (Matthew 25:31-34, 41, 46, NIV)

What happens when we die is determined by what we believe about Jesus.

“And this is the testimony.” Here is the truth. Here is what God’s Word says. “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11-12, NIV).

Each of our lives is like an hourglass. The grains of sand represent the days we have to live. At birth, your glass was turned over, and the grains of sand started running out. And just as there are a limited number of grains in the hourglass, you have a limited number of days to live. That’s why David asked God, “Remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered – how fleeting my life is” (Psalm 39:4, NLT).¹⁶ None of us knows when we will die, but we know we will.

So, the question is: Are you ready?

And I’m not talking about having life insurance or a will. I’m talking about being ready to stand before God. What happens when we die? “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12, NIV). What you believe about Jesus will determine your eternal destiny. If you’re not a Christian at this point in your life, don’t turn down the offer of eternal life from the one who loves you so much that He sacrificed His Son for you.

Admit your need for God. Admit your sin. Admit your need for God’s forgiveness and He will forgive you. Believe that Jesus paid the price for your sin on the cross. The Bible says, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved” (Romans 10:9). Becoming a Christian is not about being good and it’s not about being religious. It’s about believing in Jesus Christ. And the moment you do, you will have the hope of heaven, the hope of one day seeing Jesus face to face, and being with Him forever in a place He called “Paradise.”

NOTES

¹ See 1 Corinthians 15:55.

² Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), page 168.

³ *Ibid.*, page 197.

⁴ Another secular person was interviewed in an article in *The Atlantic* on facing death, and said, “When I die, I am dead and gone ... My afterlife will be in the memories of those I knew, those who loved me ... This gives me a beautiful, shockingly beautiful sense of the Now. Being in the present, the here and now, is the ultimate reward of life ... There is no other reward, no judgment, no heaven, no hell. Just now.” [From “What Do Atheists Think of Death?” *The Atlantic*, May 16, 2010.]

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1940, 1966), page 119. [See also Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 2004), page 26.]

⁶ Francis Chan & Preston Sprinkle, *Erasing Hell* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2011), page 17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, page 72.

⁸ W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1966), Volume 4, page 184.

⁹ Max Lucado, *When Christ Comes: The Beginning of the Very End* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1999), page 117.

¹⁰ Who will go to hell? Anne Graham Lotz answers that question. [Anne Graham Lotz, *The Vision of His Glory: Finding Hope through the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996, 1997), page 218.]

Each one who said believing in the cross was not necessary ...

Each one who said there are other ways to God besides Jesus Christ ...

Each one who believed ... as long as we are sincere it doesn't matter what we believe ...

Each one who thought it narrow-minded to think there is only one way to God ...

Each one who hoped their good deeds would outweigh their bad deeds so that God would let them into heaven ...

Each one who decided to just take the chance, believing a loving God would never send anyone to hell ...

Each one who said there is no such thing as judgment and hell, and that there is no such thing as God.”

¹¹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), page 1241.

¹² See also Revelation 22:4.

¹³ Read Revelation 4, as John describes the glory of heaven.

¹⁴ See Romans 5:8.

¹⁵ See Acts 17:30-31.

¹⁶ See also Job 14:15, Psalm 144:4, and James 4:14.