One Minute After Death – A Christian Understanding of What Happens at Death

Rusty Wright examines the question of what happens to us after we die. Many Christians have questions about this and there is a lot of information floating around on the topic. Rusty applies a biblical worldview perspective to explain a distinctly Christian view of this topic we all have an interest in. When we examine the Bible, we can develop a clearer picture of God's answer to this question.

This article is also available in Spanish.

"I was dying. I heard the doctor pronounce me dead. As I lay on the operating table of the large hospital, a loud, harsh buzzing began to reverberate in my head. At the same time, I sensed myself moving quickly through a long, dark tunnel. Then suddenly I found myself outside my own physical body! Like a spectator, I watched the doctor's desperate attempts to revive my corpse.

"Soon…I encountered a 'being' of light who showed me an instant replay of my life and helped me evaluate my past deeds.

"Finally I learned that my time to die had not yet come and that I had to return to my body. I resisted, for I had found my afterlife experience to be quite pleasant. Yet somehow I was reunited with my physical body and lived."{1} Many people have reported near-death experiences (NDEs). What do they mean? What happens when we die?

While writing a book on this subject, I interviewed people with fascinating stories. A Kansas woman developed complications after major surgery. She sensed herself rising

out of her body, soaring through space, and hearing heavenly voices before returning to her body.

An Arizona man in a coma five months after a motorcycle accident said he saw his deceased father, who spoke with him.

Various theories attempt to explain these NDEs. Physiological explanations suggest a physical cause—perhaps a blow to the head or lack of oxygen in the brain. Pharmacological explanations point to drugs or anesthetics. Psychological explanations propose mental causes such as defense mechanisms or wish fulfillment. Spiritual explanations cite NDEs as previews of the afterlife, either genuine (if divine) or distorted (if demonic). Applications of these theories can be complex.{2} During my sophomore year at Duke University, the student in the room next to mine was struck by lightning and killed instantly. For days our fraternity was in a state of shock. People were asking questions such as, “Where is Mike now?” “Is there life after death?” “If so, what is it like?”

LIFE AFTER DEATH?

Can we know whether there is life after death? What method would we use to find out?

The experimental method, useful for scientific questions, is inadequate for evaluating NDEs. It is impossible in medical emergencies to establish the required controlled situations and repeatability. Scientists also have no mind-reading machines to evaluate mental/spiritual experiences. And finding volunteers for NDE experiments would be difficult.

The experiential method receives mixed reviews. NDEs can provide useful information, but the mind can trick us. Dreams, fantasies, hallucinations, drug trips, drunkenness, states of shock—all can evoke mental images that seem real but aren’t.

Some suggest a spiritual method for evaluating these phenomena. What if we could find a spiritual authority,

someone with trustworthy credentials, to tell us the truth about afterlife issues?

Following Mike's death, I explained to the men in our fraternity that an increasing number of educated men and women believe that Jesus Christ is a trustworthy spiritual authority. Once I, myself, was skeptical of Christianity, but examining the evidences for Jesus' resurrection convinced me He could be trusted. I found the resurrection of Christ one of the best attested facts of history.{3} If Jesus died and came back from the dead, He could accurately tell us what death and the afterlife are like. The fact that He successfully predicted His own resurrection helps us believe that He will tell us the truth about the afterlife. What did Jesus and those He taught say about it?

WHAT IS THE AFTERLIFE LIKE?

Jesus indicated that the afterlife will be personal.

Our personalities will not be annihilated. We won't blend into the great impersonal ocean of cosmic consciousness, as some propose. We will continue to exist. We will not become angels, as others suggest. Angels are "ministering spirits" sent out to serve believers in Christ.{4} They are already-created beings, distinct from humans.{5} At the moment Jesus died on the cross He cried out, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Earlier, a thief who hung on a cross next to His said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus responded, "I tell you the truth. today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43).

Jesus believed that His own spirit was going to be with God. He also believed that the thief (apparently the thief's soul or spirit) would be with Him in heaven that same day. Clearly, Jesus was not thinking of death as annihilation but as a

separation from the physical body.

Elsewhere Jesus implied that our personalities somehow remain intact after death. He once said, “Many will come. . .and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11).

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the forefathers of the Jewish nation—had died centuries earlier. Yet Jesus, speaking about a future event, mentioned them by name. He implied that their personalities were maintained.

Did you ever wonder if you’ll be able to see departed loved ones after you die? Apparently those who participate in eternal life will be able to recognize each other. King David, who reigned over the ancient nation of Israel around 1000 B.C., spoke of being with his dead son again.{6} Jesus’ disciples once caught a glimpse of Moses and Elijah, two long-dead heroes of Israel, and recognized them. {7}

Jesus taught that eternal life will be relational.

Life in heaven will focus on a personal relationship with Him and on meaningful relationships with each other. These will be the warmest and most enriching relationships we could ever have.

Before His death, Jesus promised His disciples that one day they would be with Him again: “I am going. . .to prepare a place for you. And. . .I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3).

Paul, a first-century believer in Jesus, wrote about his “desire to depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1:23).

Jesus defined life in heaven when He said, “This is eternal life: that they [people who believe in Him] may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3). In other words, eternal life will involve getting to

know God and the meaning of life better.

Eternal life will be enjoyable.

Paul also wrote, “No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (l Corinthians 2:9).

John, Jesus’ disciple, wrote, “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4). Another New Testament writer encourages us to “fix our eyes on Jesus…who, for the joy set before him endured the cross…and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). Eternal life with God will be joy that defies description and exceeds our imagination.

Life after death will be eternal.

It will never end. Have you ever watched a movie so good you wished it would never end?

Have you ever savored a dessert so sweet, you wished it would last and last? Have you ever had a relationship so fulfilling you hoped it would go on forever? Eternal life will be that good, and better! It will never end. “God has given us eternal life,” wrote John, “and this life is in His Son” (l John 5:11).

Jesus taught that eternal life involves all of the positive and none of the negative. God loves us and desires only the best for us now and in eternity.

How sad that some people don’t take advantage of all He has provided.

DON’T STOP!

Chattanooga cardiologist Maurice Rawlings, M.D., tells of a patient who had a cardiac arrest in Dr. Rawlings’ office. Throughout the attempted resuscitation, the patient faded in and out. Each time the doctor interrupted the heart massage,

the patient appeared to die again.

When the man came to, he screamed, “I am in hell!” A look of sheer terror clouded his face. “Don’t stop!” he begged. “Don’t you understand? I am in hell. Each time you quit I go back to hell! Don’t let me go back to hell!” The patient survived and put his faith in Christ to take away his sins and secure his place in heaven.{8} The place the Bible calls hell, or hades, is the current home of those who do not accept Jesus’ gift of forgiveness. It is a place of constant, conscious torment.{9} Hades is not the final dwelling place of those who die without a personal relationship with Christ. John says these will be judged at the “great white throne” judgment. Since no one’s deeds are sufficient to earn eternal life, those without Christ’s pardon will be cast into the “lake of fire.”{10} Jesus said that “the eternal fire…has been prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matthew 25:41).

Not a pleasant subject. But remember, God does not want you to perish in hell. He loves you and wants you to spend eternity with Him. Not without Him.{11} Paul wrote that God our Savior wants all people to be saved (or made safe from the consequences of sin, which is separation from God). He wants us to know Him because He is truth.{12} God sent Jesus Christ, His Son, to pay the penalty for our sins (attitudes and actions that fall short of God’s perfection). Jesus literally went through hell for us. We simply need to receive His free gift of forgiveness—we can never earn it—to be guaranteed eternal life. “Whoever hears my word, Jesus says, “and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24).

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

According to the latest figures, the death rate in this country is still 100 percent. Every day on this planet about 140,000 people die.

What most of us are interested in is not “What happens to people when they die?” but “What will happen to me when I die?”

Some seek to avoid the issue of death or to insulate themselves from concern through popularity, possessions, pursuits, or power. Many feel that whatever belief makes you feel comfortable is OK. Do any of these descriptions fit you?

A nightclub near Cincinnati was packed one evening. Suddenly a busboy stepped onto the stage, interrupted the program, and announced that the building was on fire. Perhaps because they saw no smoke, many of the guests remained seated. Maybe they thought it was a joke, a part of the show. When they finally saw the smoke, it was too late. More than 150 people died as the nightclub burned.

As you consider death, are you believing what you want to believe or what the evidence shows is true? Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies” (John 11:25).

Place your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you, too, will live even if you die.

Notes

1. Adapted from Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. 21-22.
2. For a more complete discussion, see the book from which this article is adapted: Rusty Wright, *The Other Side of Life* (Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 1979, 1994).
3. See, for example, Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972).
4. Hebrews 1:14.
5. Hebrews 2:16.
6. 2 Samuel 12:23.
7. Matthew 17:14.
8. Maurice Rawlings, M.D., *Beyond Death’s Door* (Nashville:

Thomas Nelson, 1978), pp. 19-20.
9. Luke 16:23-24.
10. Revelatlon 20:11-15.
11. John 3:16.
12. I Timothy 2:3-4

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