What Happens After Death? A Christian Perspective

Dr. Pat Zukeran brings a biblical perspective to a question we all would like to know: what happens to me after I die? He looks to the Bible to determine what we can and cannot know about our life after we pass out of our present bodies.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

Differing Perspectives on Death

For the entire existence of mankind, we have struggled with the question, "What happens after death?" Our answer to this dilemma has great implications for our life here on earth. Although many avoid the issue, we must sooner or later address the question. There are many competing answers to this question.

Atheists believe that at death one ceases to exist. There is no afterlife or eternal soul that continues in eternity. All there is to look forward to is our inevitable death, the future death of mankind, and the universe. It is in the face of this future that the atheist must seek to find meaning and purpose for his own existence.

The Eastern and New Age religions that hold to a pantheistic worldview teach that one goes through an endless cycle of reincarnation until the cycle is broken and the person becomes one with the divine. What form a person becomes in the next life depends on the quality of life lived in the previous life. When one unites with the divine, he ceases to exist as an individual, but becomes part of the divine life force, like a drop of water returning to the ocean.

Those who hold to the animistic or tribal religions believe

that after death the human soul remains on the earth or travels to join the departed spirits of the ancestors in the underworld, also called the realm of the shadows. For eternity they wander in darkness, experiencing neither joy nor sorrow. Some of the spirits of the deceased may be called upon to aid or torment those on earth.

Islam teaches that at the end of history, God will judge the works of all men. Those whose good deeds outweigh their bad deeds will enter into paradise. The rest will be consigned to hell. The Koran teaches that in paradise men will be drinking wine and entertained by heavenly maidens and that they may take several of these maidens for their wives.

Most worldviews must accept their belief in the afterlife on *untested* faith, but the Christian hope is sure for two reasons; the resurrection of Christ and the testimony of God's Word. The Bible gives us the true view of what happens after death. However, many Christians have a misunderstanding of the afterlife. Some believe that they become one of the angels, others believe they go into a state of "soul sleep," while others believe they will be floating on clouds playing harps. In this article, we will examine some popular misconceptions of what lies beyond the grave and perceive what the Bible teaches.

Christians can be assured that death is not something to be feared. Instead, at death we arrive home in heaven. To live means we exist in a foreign country. Death has lost its sting and now is a victory through the resurrection of Jesus our Lord.

Near Death Experiences

For the past thirty years, thousands of people have reported experiencing what are called near death experiences (NDEs). NDEs are encounters where a person, being in full awareness, leaves the body and enters another world. Such experiences

have resulted in life transformation in many individuals. What are we to make of these accounts?

Let us understand that NDEs come from those who have been *clinically* dead, not *biologically* dead. In clinical death, external life signs such as consciousness, pulse, and breathing cease. In such cases, biological death results if no steps are taken to reverse the process. Biological death, on the other hand, is not affected by any amount of attention, for it is physically irreversible.{1}

The NDE accounts occur at various stages of clinical death. Some occur when the patient is comatose, very close to death, or pronounced clinically dead. Other accounts occur when the patient's heart stops beating. Others occur while the patient's brain ceases to register any activity on the EEG monitor. There have not been any cases of biological or irreversible death for a significant amount of time followed by a resurrection.

What has intrigued scientists and theologians in their study of NDEs is that many of the patients have similar experiences. These include leaving the body and watching from above as doctors work on it, entering a dark tunnel, seeing light, seeing others, meeting a spirit being, experiencing peace, and then returning to the body.

Scientists and doctors from various worldviews have sought to explain this phenomenon. Those from an atheistic worldview have sought to give naturalistic explanations. Their explanations range from hallucination induced by medication, chemical reactions the brain experiences in near death crises, previous encounters long forgotten, and others. These fall short of explaining NDE events.

Many NDEs have occurred without medication. Drowning victims are one example. Also, thousands of NDE victims were able to clearly describe places and people with exact detail while

they were clinically dead. One girl, while near dead, was able to describe what her family did that night at home, what was made for dinner, where everyone sat and even what was said. Others were able to describe in detail objects in rooms nearby and far away from them. One patient described a shoe on the rooftop of a hospital. When the nurses looked, they found the shoe exactly as described. A boy in an accident involving his brother and mother told those around him moments before he died, "They are waiting for me now." The doctor discovered that at that exact time in another hospital the boy's mother and brother had just died. Dr. Gary Habermas and J.P. Moreland provide a comprehensive discussion of NDEs in their book *Beyond Death*, arguing that naturalistic explanations cannot satisfactorily explain the events that occur in NDEs.

NDEs may not conclusively prove there is a heaven or hell, but they do indicate that at death the soul separates from the body, and that a person's spirit is conscious and coherent at death.

However, NDEs do not accurately reflect what lies beyond the grave. NDEs deal with accounts that give a short glimpse behind the curtain of death and therefore they give us an incomplete picture. Colossians 1:18 tells us that Jesus "is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy." Christ overcame biological death and lives forevermore as ruler over all creation. His supremacy over everything was established through His resurrection. Also, we know that Satan masquerades as an angel of light and can produce counterfeit appearances. It is imperative that we evaluate all experiences in light of Scripture.

Can We Communicate with the Dead?

Do the spirits of the dead have the ability to communicate with the living? One of the most popular current TV shows is "Crossing Over," with psychic John Edward. He, like other

psychics, claims to have the ability to communicate with the spirits of the deceased. He amazes spectators with his ability to reveal details about which only the deceased loved one may have known. From this communication, people attempt to receive comfort, advice, and encouragement.

The Bible teaches that communication with the dead is not possible. Throughout the Bible God commands His people not to indulge in the practice of necromancy, the art of communicating with the dead.

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 states,

> Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead . . .

The Canaanites consulted spirits and the dead in hopes of gaining power and predicting future events. This practice is an abomination to God and it is for this reason the Canaanites were ejected from the land. Israel was warned not to imitate the Canaanites or they too would suffer a similar fate.

Contacting the dead is forbidden because the spirits of the dead cannot contact the living. In Luke 16, the rich man who was suffering in hell sought a way to communicate with his living family to warn them of their fate. However, he was not able to communicate in any way nor could the living communicate with him.

Who, then, are mediums and spiritists contacting? If they are indeed contacting a spiritual being, it is most likely a demonic counterfeit. Although the demonic spirit may communicate some truths, the ultimate intention of the spirit is to deceive and take one away from the Lord. This practice can ultimately lead to demonic possession and injury to the person.

In Acts 16:16 Paul encountered girl who could predict the future because a spirit possessed her. Knowing this, Paul eventually cast the spirit out of the girl. Throughout the Bible the practice of necromancy is forbidden.

Some will try to defend necromancy by pointing to 1 Samuel 28. Here Saul requests the Witch of Endor to call up Samuel from the grave. The spirit of Samuel arises and delivers a prophetic message to Saul. Bible scholars take two views on this. Some believe it was a demonic counterfeit masquerading as Samuel. I believe since the prophecy given came to pass, this was indeed Samuel the prophet. Despite Saul's disobedience to God, God made an exception here.

Whichever view you take, it is clear this verse does not encourage one to consult mediums. Saul at this point in his life was out of God's will and because the Spirit of God had left him, he could not receive any word from God. In desperation, he disobeyed God as was the pattern of his life and suffered the consequence. His story teaches us a lesson and is not an example to follow.

One Minute After Death

What happens when we breathe our final breath? The Bible teaches what will occur.

First our immaterial soul and spirit will be separated from our physical body. Second, we will immediately receive the judgment that will determine our eternal destiny. Those who have trusted in Christ's payment on the cross for our sins will enter into eternal life in the presence of God. 2 Corinthians 5:8 states, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." There will be no delay in a state of unconsciousness many call "soul sleep." We will immediately be in God's presence.

Second, the soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our

old sin nature is eradicated. Hebrews 12:23 mentions “the spirits of righteous men made perfect.” The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle with sin that Paul described and all Christians fight comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

Those who reject this gift, will receive what they have chosen, eternity separated from God in Hell. Hebrews 9:27 states, “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.” There is no second chance and there is no cycle of reincarnation. Our eternal destiny is determined by the decision we make for Christ here on earth.

Many assume that after receiving Christ all that remains is a joyful entrance into heaven. Scripture teaches that Jesus will reward us according to how we lived our life on earth. He taught this principle in the parable of the talents in Luke 19. Each servant was entrusted to administer the talents the master gave him. Upon the return of the master, each servant had to give an account for his stewardship. The wise servants were rewarded doubly while the wicked servant was removed.

The lesson for the Christian is that each of us will give an account for our time here on earth. This is not the same as being judged on our salvation status. Christ’s death on the cross allows all who believe to enter God’s kingdom. We will be judged on our works done since the time of our salvation. This judgment of believers is called the *Bema Seat judgment.* This event is described in 1 Corinthians 3:11-15:

> No man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. If any man’s work, which he has built upon it, remains, he shall

> receive a reward. If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

Paul states that Christ is our foundation. Our works are the building on this foundation. The materials of gold, silver, and precious stones refer to works done with pure motives for the glory of God. The works of wood, hay, and straw are works done with the wrong motives to glorify self.

At the Bema Seat, our works will be tested with divine fire. Those works that were done for the glory of God will endure the flames and will be our reward. Some will regretfully see all their works on earth burned up before their eyes and enter heaven with little or no reward.

The unbeliever will be judged and sentenced to hell. At the end of the age, he faces the Great White Throne judgment. Here, all the unrighteous dead from the beginning of time are judged based on their rejection of the Savior. They are then thrown into the lake of fire for eternity. Revelation 20:11-15 says:

> And I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and the books were opened; . . . and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. . . . And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Knowing that as Christians we will one day give an account for our lives, we should live as wise stewards over what God has given us. Knowing the fate of the unsaved should fill us with boldness to share Christ unashamedly, with urgency to all. Knowing what lies beyond the grave should motivate us to live life on earth with a mission.

What Will We Be Like in Heaven?

Upon our physical death, the soul is separated from the body and enters immediately into the presence of the Lord. Looking again at Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 5:8, he says, "We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord." The soul in heaven is made perfect in holiness and our old sin nature is eradicated. As discussed above, Hebrews 12:23 mentions "the spirits of righteous men made perfect." The spirits of the saints are in heaven and they have been made perfect. The struggle that Paul and all Christians fight with sin comes to an end forever when we, after death, enter our glorified state.

We will not remain in heaven as a soul without a body. At God's appointed time, there will be a final resurrection where the spirit will be unified with the resurrected body. Although Christians have various views on when this resurrection will take place, we all agree on the resurrection of the body. What will the resurrected body look like?

Philippians 3:20-21 says, "And we eagerly await a savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." 1 John 3:2 promises, "But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

From these two passages we know that our glorified bodies will be like that of Christ. We will not be deified, but we will have the same qualities of His resurrection body. First, our heavenly bodies will be our glorified earthly bodies. Christ's body that died on the cross was the same one that was resurrected. His glorified body was able to travel through walls, appear suddenly, and ascend to heaven.

2 Corinthians 5:1 reads, "[W]e have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." The hands

of God will make the resurrected body. 1 Corinthians 15:39-40, 42b-43 tells us:

> All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. . . . The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

In answering the mockers of the resurrection, Paul explains that our heavenly bodies will possess flesh that is of a different variety than our earthly ones. They will be bodies of flesh, but as different from our earthly bodies as humans are from animals.

We further conclude that, like a seed, the body will be sown or buried and then one day be raised to life. It is buried in death, decay, weakness, and dishonor. When it is resurrected, it will be changed in every way. It is raised imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. We will then have eternal, permanent, and perfected bodies.

We will also maintain our identities. In Luke 16:23, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham all retained their identity. Imagine, one day we will no longer struggle with the weakness of sin, sickness, and aging. A great future is in store for those in Christ.

What Will We Do in Heaven?

What will we do in heaven for all eternity? Some envision playing golf for eternity, while others envision saints floating on clouds strumming harps of gold. Although great thoughts, they fall short of the glorious future that actually

awaits those in Christ. We are told relatively little about what activities will occur in heaven. We are only given a brief glimpse of our life to come.

First, the moment that saints of all the ages anticipate is seeing the Lord they served face to face. This will be the first and greatest moment after physical death. From then on we will have fellowship in His presence for all eternity.

Second, our life in heaven involves worship. A vivid picture is found in Revelation 19:1-5:

> After this I heard what seemed to be the mighty voice of a great multitude in heaven, crying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. . . .” And again they shouted, “Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.” And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshipped God who was seated on the throne, saying, “Amen. Hallelujah.” Then a voice came from the throne saying: “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him both small and great.”

Like the sound of roaring waters comes the praise from the saints of all ages. Recently the men from our church described the experience of singing the hymn How Great Thou Art at a Promise Keepers conference. Nothing they said could accurately describe that majestic experience. The closest they could come to putting it into words was, “Awesome! Just awesome!” Can you imagine what it will be like when we sing “Holy, Holy, Holy” along with the saints of all ages in the presence of God? Our worship here is preparation for our future, grand worship in heaven.

Third is the aspect of rest. Heavenly rest here does not mean a cessation from activity, but the experience of reaching a goal of crucial importance. In Hebrews 4:9-11 the writer, addressing the people of God states, “There remains, then, a

Sabbath rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his." Heaven is the final goal reached after our pilgrimage here on earth. We will rest from our sufferings and struggles against sickness, the flesh, the world, and the devil.

Fourth, we will serve the Lord. Luke 19:11-27 teaches a parable about stewardship. The wise servants who multiplied their master's talents were given rule over ten and five cities. Revelation 22:3 tells us, "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and his servants will serve him." In 1 Corinthians 6:3 Paul rebukes the carnal Christians who cannot settle their own disputes and asks them, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" In Revelation 3:21 the Lord Jesus promises, "To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with Me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne." Apparently we will be given authority over a sphere in God's eternal kingdom. How much we are given depends on our faithfulness to Him on this earth.

Fifth, we will experience fellowship with God and with one another. One of the most painful experiences in life is to say goodbye. Whether it is to see loved ones move to another residence or because of death, farewells are a painful time. For the Christian, there is hope in knowing, our goodbyes are not permanent. One day we will meet again and this time we will never say goodbye again. What awaits the believer after death is a glorious future that cannot truly be imagined!

Notes

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"Is There Salvation After Death?"

I have a question that I hope you can help me with. I have a friend that believes that salvation can happen after physical death. He says that he believes that Christ is the way to the Father but that can happen after death. Is there any scripture that says that salvation, through believing in Jesus Christ, must happen before physical death?

Thanks for your question. Hebrews 9:27 states that it is appointed to man to die once and then the judgment. This indicates that after death, there is the judgment, and there is no mention of a second chance. In Jesus' parables of the kingdom, judgment follows after death. One example is Luke 16, Lazarus and the rich man. Immediately after they died, Lazarus was taken to Abraham's bosom and the rich man to hell. Even in hell the rich man saw that he was wrong and sorry for his sin but could not change his outcome. I am sure if he had a second chance, he would not have been there. Parables like these indicate there is no second chance. Finally, we are saved by faith. Faith is defined in Hebrews 11:1 as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Saving faith is exercised while on earth. When we are face to face with the Lord, we will no longer be exercising any kind of faith; we will see as 1 Corinthians states, "face to face." So all scripture indicates judgment after death. The burden is on those who say there is a second chance after death. Where are

the verses to uphold that view?

Thanks for your question. I hope this helps.

Patrick Zukeran
Probe Ministries

One Minute After Death (radio transcript)

The Other Side of Life

Do you believe in life after death?{1}

Picture the operating room of a large hospital. A man is dying. As the doctors frantically try to save him, here is what he perceives and thinks:

> *"I am dying. I hear the doctor pronounce me dead. As I lie on the operating table, a loud, harsh buzzing reverberates in my head. At the same time, I sense myself moving very rapidly through a long, dark tunnel. Suddenly, I find myself outside of my own physical body. Like a spectator, I watch the doctor's desperate attempts to revive my corpse.*
>
> *"Soon I encounter a 'being' of light, a loving, warm spirit who shows me an instant replay of my life and helps me evaluate my past deeds.*
>
> *"Eventually, I learn I must return to my body. I resist, for my afterlife experience has been quite pleasant. Somehow, though, I am reunited with my physical body and live."{2}*

This composite account of a near-death experience or “NDE” is adapted from the best selling book, *Life After Life*, by Dr. Raymond Moody, who brought these experiences to wide public awareness. Often the episodes involve out-of-body experiences or “OBEs.”

While writing a book on this subject, I interviewed people with some 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 for five months after a motorcycle accident said he saw his deceased father, who spoke to him.

Actress Sharon Stone has described her own close call with death. She was hospitalized with bleeding from an artery at her skull’s base. “I feel that I did die,” she relates. She tells of “a giant vortex of white light” and says “I kind of poof sort of took off… into this glorious bright…white light. I started to see and be met by some of my friends. people who were very dear to me. It was very, very fast, and suddenly I was back. I was in my body and I was in the room.” Stone says the experience affected her “profoundly” and that she “will never be the same.”{3}

What do these near-death experiences mean? How should we interpret them? This article offers a biblical perspective.

Interpreting Near-Death Experiences

What are some possible explanations for the NDEs? Hundreds of people claim that they have died and lived to tell about it. Are their near-death and out-of-body experiences genuine previews of the afterlife? Hallucinations caused by traumatic events? Or something else?

Some patients have been pronounced clinically dead and later are resuscitated. Others have had close calls with death, but

were never really thought dead (such as survivors of automobile accidents). Still others did die permanently but described what they saw before they expired.

Determination of the point of death is a hotly debated issue. In the past, doctors relied merely on the ceasing of the heartbeat and respiration. More recently they have used the EEG or brainwave test. Whatever one considers the point of death, most would agree that these folks have come much closer to it than the majority of people living today.

A number of possible explanations for the OBEs have been offered. Different ones may apply in different situations.

The physiological explanations suggest that a "physical" condition may have caused some of the out-of-body experiences. For instance, cerebral anoxia (a shortage of oxygen in the brain) occurs when the heart stops. The brain can survive for a short while (usually only a few minutes) without receiving oxygen from the blood. Anoxia can produce abnormal mental states.{4} Patients who recover from heart failure and report OBEs may be merely reporting details of an "altered state of consciousness," some say.{5}

Electronic brain stimulation can produce out-of-body sensations. Researchers at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne in Switzerland placed electrodes in the brain of a woman suffering from epilepsy. As they stimulated her brain's right angular gyrus, she reported sensing she was floating about six feet above her body.{6}

The pharmacological explanations say that drugs or anesthetics may induce some of the near-death experiences. Some primitive societies use drugs to induce OBEs in their religious ceremonies.{7} LSD and marijuana sometimes generate similar sensations.{8} Even many medically accepted drugs have produced mental states akin to those reported by the dying. Ketamine is an anesthetic that is administered

intravenously{9} and produces hallucinatory reactions.{10}

Psychological and Spiritual Explanations

How should we interpret near-death experiences? What do they mean? So far this we have examined physiological and pharmacological explanations, that is, causes involving the body or drugs. Consider two other categories: psychological and spiritual explanations. The psychological explanations suggest that the individual's mind may generate the unusual mental experience. Sigmund Freud, writing about the difficulty of coping with the thought of death, said it would be more comfortable in our minds to picture ourselves as detached observers.{11} Some modern psychiatrists theorize that the OBE is merely a defense mechanism against the anxiety of death. That is, since the thought of one's own death is so frightening, the patient's mind invents the OBE to make it seem as if only the body is dying while the soul or spirit lives on.

Other psychologists wonder if the patient may be confusing his or her *interpretation* of the experience with what actually happened.{12} The conscious mind needs an explanation for an unusual vision; therefore, it interprets the event in familiar terms. Thus, say these psychologists, resuscitated patients report conversations with deceased relatives or religious figures common to their culture.

The spiritual explanations view many of the OBEs as real manifestations of the spiritual.

Many have noted that earlier reports of NDEs seemed to contradict some traditional Christian beliefs about the afterlife. All of the patients Christian and non-Christian reported feelings of bliss and ecstasy with no mention of unpleasantness, hell, or judgment.

However, further research uncovered negative experiences. For

instance, Raymond Moody wrote of one woman who was supposedly "dead" for 15 minutes and said she saw spirits who appeared "bewildered." "They seemed to shuffle," she reported, "as someone would on a chain gang not knowing where they were going. they all had the most woebegone expressions. It was quite depressing."{13}

Dr. Moody observed, "Nothing I have encountered precludes the possibility of a hell."{14}

Some have felt that OBEs are inconsistent with the biblical concept of a final judgment at the world's end. No one reports standing before God and being judged for eternity. Dr. Moody responds that "the end of the world has not yet taken place," so there is no inconsistency. "There may well be a final judgment," he says. "Near-death experiences in no way imply the contrary."{15}

So, is there a life after death?

Is There Life After Death?

The spring of my sophomore year in college, the student living in the room next to me was struck and killed by lightning. For some time after Mike's death, our fraternity was in a state of shock. My friends were asking questions like, "Is there a life after death?" and "How can we experience it?"

Is it possible to know whether there is an afterlife? What method would you use to find out?

Some suggest using the *experimental method* of science and applying it to the near-death experiences. However, these events normally are not controlled, clinical situations. They're medical emergencies. Even if scientists could establish controls, we have no mind-reading machines to verify mental/spiritual experiences. And think about recruiting subjects. Would you volunteer to undergo clinical death for

research purposes?

Some suggest relying on personal *experience* to answer the question. But the experiential method has its drawbacks, too. 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.

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 encouraged my friends to consider Jesus of Nazareth as a trustworthy spiritual authority. As somewhat of a skeptic myself, I'd found the resurrection of Christ to be one of the best-attested facts of history.{16} 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{17} helps us believe that He will tell us the truth about the afterlife.

Jesus and His early followers indicated that the afterlife would be personal, that human personalities would continue to exist.{18} Eternal life would be relational, involving warm, personal relationships with God and with each other.{19} Eternal life would be enjoyable, defying our description and exceeding our imagination. "No mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him," wrote one early believer.{20} And eternal life would be eternal. It would never end. "God has given us eternal life," wrote one of Jesus' closest friends, "and this life is in His Son."{21}

The sad thing is that some people don't want to take advantage of eternal life.

How to Be Sure You'll Live Forever

Maurice Rawlings, M.D., a cardiologist, tells of a patient who had a cardiac arrest in Dr. Rawlings' office. During the attempted resuscitation, the patient screamed, "I am in hell!" "Don't stop!" he begged in terror. "Each time you quit I go back to hell!"{22}

The biblical hell, or Hades, is the current home of those who do not accept God's forgiveness. The final abode of those who refuse forgiveness is called the "lake of fire."{23}

Not a pleasant subject. But remember, God loves you and wants you to spend eternity with Him.{24} He sent Jesus, His Son, to die and pay the penalty for our sins (attitudes and actions that fall short of God's perfection). 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."{25}

How should we interpret the near-death experiences? Here's my perspective as one who believes the evidence supports Jesus' and biblical reliability.{26} If a given NDE contradicts biblical statements or principles, I do not accept it as being completely from God. If the experience does not contradict biblical statements or principles, then it *could* be from God. (Body, drug or mind could also influence it.)

A given NDE could be completely spiritual and yet not be from God. Jesus spoke of an evil spiritual being, Satan. We are told that Satan "disguises himself as an angel of light,"{27} but Jesus called him "a liar and the father of lies."{28} I'm not accusing all near-death experiencers of being in league with the devil. Just a friendly word of caution that some may be being deceived.

Once a nightclub near Cincinnati was packed to the brim.

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 program, and felt comfortable with that explanation. When they finally saw the smoke, it was too late. More than 150 people died as the nightclub burned.{29}

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 if he dies."{30} I encourage you to place your faith in Jesus if you haven't yet. Then you, too, will live, even if you die.

Notes

1. This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, "One Minute After Death," *Pursuit* magazine, Vol. V, No. 2, 1996; Rusty Wright, "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the End, *Collegiate Challenge,* Vol. 17, 1978, pp. 2-5; and Rusty Wright, *The Other Side of Life* (Singapore: Campus Crusade Asia Limited, 1979, 1994).
2. Adapted and paraphrased from Raymond A. Moody, Jr., M.D., *Life After Life* (New York: Bantam, 1976), 21-22.
3. Carolyne Zinko, "When Stone saw the light, *San Francisco Chronicle,* November 28, 2002, The Features Page. The article relates Stone's description of her experience to NBC TV's Katie Couric.
4. Stanislav Grof, M. D., and Joan Halifax-Grof, "Psychedelics and the Experience of Death," in Toynbee, Koestler, and others, *Life After Death* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), 196.
5. Daniel Goleman, "Back from the Brink," *Psychology Today,* April 1977, p. 59.
6. Olaf Blanke, et al., "Stimulating illusory own-body perceptions," *Nature,* Vol. 419, 19 September 2002, p. 269.

7. Michael Grosso, “Some Varieties of Out-of-Body Experience,” *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research,* April, 1976, 185,186.
8. Grof and Halifax Grof, op. cit., pp. 193-195; Stanislav Grof, “Varieties of Transpersonal Experiences: Observations from LSD Psychotherapy,” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology,* 4:1, 1972, p. 67; Russell Noyes, Jr., M.D., and Roy Kletti, “Depersonalization in the Face of Life-Threatening Danger: An Interpretation,” *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying,* 7:2, 1976, p. 108.
9. Moody, *Life After Life,* p. 157.
10. Louis Jolyon West, M. D., “A Clinical and Theoretical Overview of Hallucinatory Phenomena” in R. K. Siegel and L.J. West (eds.), *Hallucinations: Behavior, Experience, and Theory* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1975), 292.
11. Sigmund Freud, “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), *Collected Papers,* Vol. 4, Basic Books, 1959; quoted in Russell Noyes, Jr., M.D., “The Experience of Dying,” *Psychiatry,* May 1972, p. 178.
12. Dr. Charles Tart in Robert A. Monroe, *Journeys Out of the Body* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 6,7.
13. Raymond A. Moody, Jr., *Reflections on Life After Life* (New York and Covington, Georgia: Bantam/Mockingbird, 1977), 19-21.
14. Ibid., 36.
15. Ibid., 36, 37.
16. See, for instance, Josh McDowell, *The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers), 1999.
17. See, for example, Jesus’ resurrection predictions in Luke 9:22 and 18:31-33; their fulfillment in Luke 24.
18. See for example Luke 23:42-43; Matthew 8:11; 2 Samuel 12:23; Matthew 17:1-8.
19. John 14:2-3; Philippians 1:23; John 17:3.
20. 1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV. See also Revelation 21:4; Hebrews 12:2.
21. 1 John 5:11 NASB.

22. Maurice Rawlings, M.D., *Beyond Death's Door* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1978), 19-20.
23. Revelation 20:11-15.
24. John 3:16.
25. John 5:24 NIV.
26. See, for example, McDowell, op. cit.
27. 2 Corinthians 11:14 NASB.
28. John 8:44 NASB.
29. "They Didn't Believe It," *The New York Times,* May 30, 1977, p. 16; Hal Bruno, "The Fire Next Time," *Newsweek,* June 13, 1977, pp. 24, 27.
30. John 11:25 NASB.

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"People in Hell Are Destroyed, Not Live Forever"

I am writing about your answer to the question "Are People in Hell Isolated and Alone?"

The bible clearly states that the wages of sin is DEATH not eternal life, be it in heaven or hell as you think. Consider these verses:

> *Malachi 4:3 plainly says the wicked shall be ashes under our feet. Is.1:28–"…and they that forsake the Lord shall be consumed." Is.66:17–"shall be consumed together, saith the Lord." Rev 20:9–"…and fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them." Rev 20:14,"And death and hell were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death."*

Doesn't say second life but second death. You should look up

some of the Greek and Hebrew words that have been translated into hell, that would make it more clear to you.

Thank you for your letter. You are correct in noting that the fate of unbelievers is one of heated debate these days, even among professing evangelicals. My own difficulty with the thesis of conditional immortality stems from passages like Matthew 25:46, Revelation 14:9-11 and Revelation 20:10. It is difficult for me to see how these passages can be consistent with the denial of eternal punishment.

For example, in Matthew 25:46 Jesus states: “And these will depart into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. The same Greek term, *aionion* (eternal), is used to describe both punishment and life.

Revelation 14:11 reads in part: “And the smoke from their torture will go up forever and ever, and those who worship the beast and his image will have no rest day or night.” What troubles me about this verse is the concluding phrase, “those who worship the beast and his image will have no rest day or night.” Again, these unfortunate people appear to be enduring eternal, conscious torment.

Finally, in Revelation 20:10 we read: “And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet are too, and they will be tormented there day and night forever and ever.” The beast and false prophet are both human beings. And yet, along with the devil, they will endure eternal punishment. Furthermore, Revelation 19:20 states, “Now the beast was seized, and along with him the false prophet who had performed the signs on his behalf; signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshiped his image. Both of them were thrown alive into the lake of fire burning with sulfur.” Please note that this takes place prior to the thousand year reign of Christ (Revelation 20:1-7). And yet, when the thousand years are over, the beast and false prophet

are still being tormented in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). This lake of fire is the same place where all unbelievers are thrown in Revelation 20:15.

It's true that this is called the "second death," but does the Bible equate "death" with "annihilation"? How do you read Ephesians 2:1-2? The Ephesians were formerly "dead." But does this mean that they didn't have personal, conscious existence? Wouldn't you agree that the Ephesians were spiritually dead (i.e. separated from the spiritual life of God)? And might this not also be what the Bible means by the "second death" (i.e. unremedied spiritual death results in eternal separation from God)? When the Bible speaks of death it does not mean "annihilation." Rather, it means "separation." Physical death is the "separation" of the spirit from the body (James 2:26). Spiritual death is the "separation" of a conscious, living person from God (Ephesians 2:1-2). And the second death is the "eternal separation" of an unredeemed person from God (Revelation 20:11-15).

This, at any rate, is why it's so difficult for me to embrace the doctrines of conditional immortality and annihilationism.

Hope this helps.

The Lord bless you,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

"I Am So Afraid—What If There

Is No Heaven?”

I am writing to you because I am very concerned and don’t know where to turn for help. I am a Christian and have always felt I had a great deal of faith. I lost my father, my mother and an older sister over the years – and my faith sustained me during those traumatic times.

Recently our 38 year old daughter died quite suddenly. I am just overwhelmed with grief – and I believe the medications given her caused her sudden death. She had kidney problems – but her doctor was aware of that, and the med he gave her should not have been given to her because of her kidney problems.

Now I seem to have lost my faith completely. I cry and want so much to know she is OK and that she is not sad and lonely as we are here without her. I have begun to question if there really is a Heaven? I read recently that Heaven is something Christians invented to take away their fear of death. Is this true? I also read a book called *Embraced by the Light* by Betty Eadie, and it really upset me. She claimed to have had an out of body experience where she went to Heaven, and then she wrote a whole book about what heaven is like – and the different levels there, and how one may stay at a lower level, or advance to a higher level.

I am so afraid – what if there is no Heaven? Or if there is, is my daughter sad and lonely because none of her family are there with her? I just don’t know anymore what to believe. I try to pray – but find no peace. I am so afraid.

Dear _____,

I am so very, very sorry to hear of your tremendous loss. You must be in such shock you don’t know how to “do life” at this point.

As a mother who has also lost a daughter, I want to encourage you in how the Lord comforted me. Most especially, I am comforted by the truth of Psalm 139:16–"All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be."

_____, your daughter didn't live one day less than God intended for her to live from before the foundations of the earth. It FEELS like a premature death to us who are left behind, but no one is more powerful than God, and HE is the one who determines the length of our days. So even though it is hugely painful and grievous, and even though it's tempting to blame the medications, she died on the day God knew she would die and planned for her to die. Not a day sooner, and not a day later.

Secondly, Jesus said He came from heaven (John 6:51). It is a real place. If there is no heaven, then Jesus lied. If Jesus lied, then he was not the holy Son of God, and His death was meaningless. If His death was meaningless, then none of us have any hope. But our hope is REAL and TRUE! He died to make it possible for us to be united with God and reunited with our believing loved ones.

Paul said that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:6,8). If your daughter trusted Christ, she is immersed in a living sea of light and love and glory, worshiping the Lord Jesus and enjoying the freedom that comes from being released from this fallen, decaying world. When she "graduated" from your womb to your arms, did you ever worry that she was lonely for the comfort of the dark, warm place inside you? I bet not! <smile> She was in a far, far better place when she was born. When people are in heaven, it's like graduating from the womb to our mother's arms only way, WAY better. Being with the Lord is so much better than this earth that we can't even begin to imagine it, any more than the pre-born infant can imagine what it's like to be nestled in her mother's arms, to look in her eyes, to see a glorious sunset,

to listen to a symphony. To eat ice cream! To love and love back. . . all those things cannot be imagined in the womb, but they await the baby, just as the joys of heaven await us if we have trusted Christ as our Savior.

I want to suggest to you that you read Joni Eareckson Tada's wonderful book *Heaven*, because it will make you much more familiar with heaven and it will greatly comfort your heart. Unlike Betty Eadie's book *Embraced by the Light*, Joni's book is TRUE and based completely on the Bible.

I pray you will know the warmth of God's comfort in growing measure as you grieve the loss of your daughter. One of the things that makes heaven so real to me is knowing that my daughter and my parents are there. I pray the realness of heaven will grow for you as well.

In His grip,

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

"What About Those Who Cannot Believe?"

There were small children on the planes that were crashed in the 9-11 attacks on America. What happens to a baby or young child who dies? Do they go to heaven or hell?

When a young child dies, the bereaved parents will often ask, "Where is my baby now? Will my child go to heaven? The Bible does not give us a definitive answer to these questions; however, several statements seem to indicate that heaven is the destiny of those who can't believe.

The critical issue is what God will do in His justice to those who were not able, because of age or mental inability, to respond to His revelation. If they are saved, how are they saved and on what basis are they saved? Wouldn't the logic that says a child is saved say the same for an adult? In order to answer these questions, let us look at a few basic biblical principles.

First, God is loving (1 John 4:16), good (Nah. 1:7), just (Zeph. 3:5), compassionate, and gracious (Psalm 103:8). He "wants all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) and does not want "anyone to perish" (2 Peter 3:9). Therefore, it is inconceivable that God would damn an innocent child who is incapable of belief.

When we use the word innocent in this context we are not implying that the one who cannot believe is free from sin. The Bible clearly teaches that even infants inherit a sinful nature (Psalm 51:5; Rom. 5:12, 18-19). Their salvation comes not from being innocent from sin but rather from their ignorance of God's revelation.

Second, Christ's death on the cross for our sins was for all of us unless we refuse to accept it. God gives us the ability to decide. This means that we can either accept or reject God's love for us.

But what about those who are unable to accept or reject God? We must first realize that everyone (including those who cannot believe) is lost (Luke 19:10), perishing (John 3:16), condemned (John 3:18), and under God's wrath (John 3:36). We must also realize that Christ's death on the cross paid the debt of sin for us. His death appeases God's wrath (Rom. 5:9), and this provision is available to all unless they reject it. As Robert Lightner says in *Heaven for Those Who Can't Believe*, "Since rejection of the Savior is the final reason why men go to Hell, those who do not reject Him because they are not able to make a conscious decision enter Heaven on the basis of the

finished work of Christ." [Robert P. Lightener, *Heaven for Those Who Can't Believe* (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1977), 20.]

Third, there are examples in the Bible that seem to support the notion that children who die are bound for heaven. In 2 Samuel 12:22-23 David learned of the death of this son by Bathsheba. In this relationship with Bathsheba David broke four of the Ten Commandments: he coveted, he stole, he committed adultery, and he committed murder. As punishment, his child was to die. However, when he learned that the child had died, he took heart that his son was in heaven. He said, "I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

In Luke 18:16-17, Jesus used children as an object lesson for the kind of faith that leads to eternal life. He taught that the kingdom of God belongs to such as they (Luke 18:16) and that each believer must accept the kingdom of God as a little child (Luke 18:17). He further taught that God was "not willing that any of these little ones should be lost" (Matt. 18:14).

Fourth, there are no biblical references that even hint that children will be in hell. While there are many references to adults in hell, there are none to children. This is admittedly an argument from silence. But in other passages in which the context might warrant such a reference, none is found. Consider, for example, the accounts of the death of mankind in the Flood (Gen. 7:21-23), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25), the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt (Exod. 12:29-30), the destruction of the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:3), and the slaying of the little boys in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:16).

The character of God is such that He would not damn to hell those who cannot believe. Further, Christ's death on the cross paid the debt of man's sin and is available to all unless they reject it. We can declare with some certainty that those who

cannot believe go to heaven when they die.

Kerby Anderson
Probe Ministries

“I Struggle with Doubts”

Hello there – I have a question that I hope you can help me with. I am 38 years old and I have recently lost my second parent to cancer – and I am going through a time where I guess you could say I am re-evaluating my belief system. I was raised in the Presbyterian Church and currently attend _____ here in Houston. What I struggle with is occasional doubts lately and I find it really scary. I believe in God without question but I have trouble sometimes comprehending the resurrection and life after death……I want to believe and have a stronger faith that’s for sure!! The thing that bothers me is someone told me that doubts were blasphemy and that by having doubts you are calling God a liar and that I might not have ever truly been saved. Needless to say that has petrified me, however others have mentioned that doubts are normal…… I went through confirmation with the Presbyterian Church when I was 12 and hope that I am saved. I would really appreciate your thoughts on this!!!! You honor me by sharing your heart with me. Thank you.

Let me cast my vote with those who have assured you that doubts are normal. God understands that as puny-minded humans who are trying to relate to a God we cannot see, touch, or hear, we’re going to face areas we don’t understand! Often, what we experience is confusion, but some people label it doubt.

I think doubt is more in-your-face unbelief. “I know You’re

there, God, but I question Your goodness to me so I'm going to do things my own way and pretend like You're not there." The way that Satan encouraged Eve to doubt God's goodness in the garden of Eden.

There is a difference between being overcome by doubts and struggling with comprehending really huge mysteries like the resurrection. God understands, especially at a time like this when you're grieving. (I am so very, very sorry, to hear about your parents' deaths. This is my first Mother's Day without my mother, who died a few months ago. It's hard, isn't it?)

Since you have internet access, you can get some very interesting information about the resurrection and life after death that will help strengthen and establish your faith in those areas. You can start reading at the Probe Ministries site (www.probe.org) and look in the "Apologetics: Reasons to Believe" section. Leadership University (Leaderu.com) also has some dynamite articles.

Concerning the statement that doubts are blasphemy. Well, no, they're not the same thing. People like you who are concerned that it is, are never guilty of it! Blasphemy is hard-hearted insult against God. I'm sorry that someone has burdened you with the false guilt of "calling God a liar." Now that would be pretty blasphemous, but simply experiencing some questions is usually an issue of not being sure of something. And that's a far cry from saying "God, You're a blankety-blank liar."

Truly saved people have doubts all the time. That's the first step to wrestling with individual issues of faith, and studying them to come out with a stronger faith on the other end. God isn't threatened by our doubts and questions. When we go to Him in simple faith, asking Him to help us understand truth and help us see things as they really are, He truly does answer. It may take a while, but He takes those requests seriously.

You said you were confirmed when you were 12 and you hope that you are saved. I am so glad you put it so bluntly, because I am delighted to be able to give you some very clear direction on this!

Quick question: what were you confirmed IN? Were you confirmed that yes, indeed, you were a Presbyterian, the way we confirm flight reservations? Or were you confirmed in your faith because at some point before that, as you were growing up, you made a deliberate choice to put your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

He told Nicodemus that we must be born again. Just like when we were born the first time, that's a specific event at a specific point in time. In order to pass over from death to life, there must be a specific point at which we choose God over our own way, where we realize that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and we receive His gift of forgiveness and eternal life by saying "thank You!"

So my question to you is, was there a specific point at which you were born again? Being baptized as an infant doesn't do it, because that's not a decision that a disciple makes; it's more of a statement of our parents' intent to raise us in the ways of God. It's possible to go along, learning the catechism questions and having a lot of religious head knowledge ABOUT God, without ever embracing Him as our personal Lord and Savior. Have you done that?

If you have, YOU ARE SAVED FOREVER. If you haven't, then you aren't saved but you can be as soon as you choose to. I know several people who just weren't sure of a specific time and place when they chose to put their trust in Christ, so they chose right then and there and said to God, "God, I am a sinner and I need you. Thank You for sending Jesus to die on the cross in my place, and then raising Him from the dead three days later. I believe Jesus is Your Son, and I trust Him to save me from my sins and take me to heaven when I die."

Then they KNEW they had trusted Christ and had passed over from death to life.

1 John 5:11-13 says,

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.
12 He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.
13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.

I love the part in verse 13 that says, “you may KNOW that you have eternal life.” When someone showed that to me not long after I trusted Christ as a college sophomore, that was the point at which I knew for sure that I was saved—because the Bible said I could know! That was very cool for me, since I was raised just hoping that everything would be okay when I died but I couldn’t ever know. Now I KNOW!!!

Let me know what you think about all this, OK?

The Lord bless you and keep you.

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

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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Answering the Big Questions of Life

Sue Bohlin presents a Naturalistic, a Pantheistic, and a Christian perspective on the five major questions all of us should ask about life. Knowing the answers to these questions in critical to living a meaningful, fulfilling life on this earth. She concludes by demonstrating that only a Christian worldview provides consistent answers to all of these questions.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

One of the most important aspects of Probe's "Mind Games" conference is teaching students to recognize the three major world views—Naturalism, Pantheism, and Theism—and the impact they have both on the surrounding culture as well as on the ideas the students will face at the university. Because we come from an unapologetically Christian worldview, I will be presenting the ideas of Christian theism, even though Judaism and Islam are both theistic as well.

In this essay I'll be examining five of the biggest questions of life, and how each of the worldviews answers them:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you explain human nature?
- What happens to a person at death?
- How do you determine right and wrong?
- How do you know that you know?{1}

Why Is There Something Rather than

Nothing?

The most basic question of life may well be, **Why is there something rather than nothing?** Why am I here? Why is anything here at all?

Even Maria Von Trapp in the movie *The Sound of Music* knew the answer to this one. When she and the Captain are singing their love to each other in the gazebo, she croons, "Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could."

But naturalism, the belief that says there is no reality beyond the physical universe, offers two answers to this basic question. Until a few years ago, the hopeful wish of naturalism was that matter is eternal: the universe has always existed, and always will. There's no point to asking "why" because the universe simply *is*. End of discussion. Unfortunately for naturalism, the evidence that has come from our studies of astronomy makes it clear that the universe is unwinding, in a sense, and at one point it was tightly wound up. The evidence says that at some point in the past there *was* a beginning, and matter is most definitely not eternal. That's a major problem for a naturalist, who believes that everything that now is, came from nothing. First there was nothing, then there was something, but nothing caused the something to come into existence. Huh?

Pantheism is the belief that everything is part of one great "oneness." It comes from two Greek words, *pan* meaning "everything," and *theos* meaning "God." Pantheism says that all is one, all is god, and therefore we are one with the universe; we are god. We are part of that impersonal divinity that makes up the universe. In answering the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing,** pantheism says that everything had an impersonal beginning. The universe itself has an intelligence that brought itself into being. The "something" that exists is simply how energy expresses itself. If you've seen the *Star Wars* movies, you've seen the ideas of

pantheism depicted in that impersonal energy field, “The Force.” Since the beginning of the universe had an impersonal origin, the question of “why” gets sidestepped. Like naturalism, pantheism basically says, “We don’t have a good answer to that question, so we won’t think about it.”

Christian Theism is the belief that God is a personal, transcendent Creator of the universe—and of us. This worldview showed up on a T-shirt I saw recently:

“There are two things in life you can be sure of.

1. There is a God.
2. You are not Him.”

Christian Theism answers the question, **Why is there something rather than nothing,** by confidently asserting that first there was God and nothing else, then He created the universe by simply speaking it into existence. The Bible’s opening sentence is an answer to this most basic of questions: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”

How Do You Explain Human Nature?

Another one of the big questions of life is, **How do you explain human nature?** Why do human beings act the way we do? What it really boils down to is, Why am I so good and you’re so bad?

During World War II, a young Jewish teenager kept a journal during the years she and her family hid from the Nazis in a secret apartment in a house in Amsterdam. Anne Frank’s diary poignantly explored the way she tried to decide if people were basically good or basically evil. Acts of kindness and blessing seemed to indicate people were basically good; but then the next day, Anne would learn of yet another barbarous act of depravity and torture, and she would think that perhaps

people were basically bad after all. After reading her diary, I remember carrying on the quest for an answer in my own mind, and not finding it until I trusted Christ and learned what His Word had to say about it.

Naturalism says that humans are nothing more than evolved social animals. There is nothing that truly separates us from the other animals, so all our behavior can be explained in terms of doing what helps us to survive and reproduce. Your only purpose in life, naturalism says, is to make babies. And failing that, to help those who share your genes to make babies. Kind of makes you want to jump out of bed in the morning, doesn't it?

Another answer from naturalism is that we are born as blank slates, and we become whatever is written on those slates. You might mix in some genetic factors, in which case human nature is nothing more than a product of our genes and our environment.

Pantheism explains human nature by saying we're all a part of god, but our problem is that we forget we're god. We just need to be re- educated and start living like the god we are. Our human nature will be enhanced by attaining what pantheists call "cosmic consciousness." According to New Age thought, the problem with humans is that we suffer from a collective form of metaphysical amnesia. We just need to wake up and remember we're god. When people are bad, (which is one result of forgetting you're god), pantheism says that they'll pay for it in the next life when they are reincarnated as something less spiritually evolved than their present life. I had a Buddhist friend who refused to kill insects in her house because she said they had been bad in their previous lives and had to come back as bugs, and it wasn't her place to prematurely mess up their karma.

The Christian worldview gives the most satisfying answer to the question, **How do you explain human nature?** The Bible

teaches that God created us to be His image-bearers, which makes us distinct from the entire rest of creation. But when Adam and Eve chose to rebel in disobedience, their fall into sin distorted and marred the sacred Image. The fact that we are created in God's image explains the noble, creative, positive things we can do; the fact that we are sinners who love to disobey and rebel against God's rightful place as King of our lives explains our wicked, destructive, negative behavior. It makes sense that this biblical view of human nature reveals the reasons why mankind is capable of producing both Mother Teresa and the holocaust.

What Happens after Death?

In the movie *Flatliners,* medical students took turns stopping each other's hearts to give them a chance to experience what happens after death. After a few minutes, they resuscitated the metaphysical traveller who told the others what he or she saw. The reason for pursuing such a dangerous experiment was explained by the med student who thought it up in the first place: "**What happens after death?** Mankind deserves an answer. Philosophy failed; religion failed. Now it's up to the physical sciences."

Well, maybe religion failed, but the Lord Jesus didn't. But first, let's address how naturalism answers this question.

Because this worldview says that there is nothing outside of space, time and energy, naturalism insists that death brings the extinction of personality and the disorganization of matter. Things just stop living and start decomposing. Or, as my brother said when he was in his atheist phase, "When you die, you're like a dog by the side of the road. You're dead, and that's it." To the naturalist, there is no life after death. The body recycles back to the earth and the mental and emotional energies that comprised the person disintegrate forever.

Pantheism teaches reincarnation, the belief that all of life is an endless cycle of birth and death. After death, each person is reborn as someone, or something, else. Your reincarnated persona in the next life depends on how you live during this one. This is the concept of karma, which is the law of cause and effect in life. If you make evil or foolish choices, you will have to work off that bad karma by being reborn as something like a rat or a cow. If you're really bad, you might come back as a termite. But if you're good, you'll come back as someone who can be wonderful and powerful. New Age followers sometimes undergo something they call "past lives therapy," which regresses them back beyond this life, beyond birth, and into previous lives. I think it's interesting that people always seem to have been someone glamorous like Cleopatra and never someone like a garbage collector or an executioner!

Christian Theism handles the question, **What happens to a person at death**, with such a plain, no-nonsense answer that people have been stumbling over it for millenia. Death is a gateway that either whisks a person to eternal bliss with God or takes him straight to a horrible place of eternal separation from God. What determines whether one goes to heaven or hell is the way we respond to the light God gives us concerning His Son, Jesus Christ. When we confess that we are sinners in need of mercy we don't deserve, and trust the Lord Jesus to save us from not only our sin but the wrath that sin brings to us, He comes to live inside us and take us to heaven to be with Him forever when we die. When we remain in rebellion against God, either actively disobeying Him or passively ignoring Him, the consequences of our sin remain on us and God allows us to keep them for all eternity—but separated from Him and all life and hope. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31). But it is a delightful thing to fall into the arms of the Lover of your soul, Who has gone on ahead to prepare a place for you! Which will you choose?

How Do You Determine Right and Wrong?

One of the big questions in life is, How do you determine right and wrong? Steven Covey, author of *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, appeared on the Oprah Winfrey show one day. He asked the studio audience to close their eyes and point north. When they opened their eyes, there were several hundred arms pointing in wildly different directions. Then Mr. Covey pulled out a compass and said, "*This* is how we know which way is north. You can't know from within yourself." He used a powerful object lesson to illustrate the way Christian theism answers this big question in life.

Naturalism says that there is no absolute outside of ourselves. There is no final authority because space, time and energy are all that is. There is no such thing as right and wrong because there is no right- and wrong-giver. So naturalism tries to deal with the question of ethics by providing several unsatisfying answers. One is the belief that there is no free choice, that all our behaviors and beliefs are driven by our genes. We are just as determined in our behavior as the smallest animals or insects. Another is the belief that moral values are determined from what is; the way things are is the way they ought to be. If you are being abused by your husband, that's the way things are, so that's the way they ought to be. Even worse is the concept of arbitrary ethics: might makes right. Bullies get to decide the way things ought to be because they're stronger and meaner than everybody else. That's what happens in totalitarian regimes; the people with the power decide what's right and what's wrong.

Pantheism says that there is no such thing as ultimate right and wrong because everything is part of a great undifferentiated whole where right and wrong, good and evil, are all part of the oneness of the universe. Remember "Star Wars"? The Force was both good and evil at the same time.

Pantheism denies one of the basic rules of philosophy, which is that two opposite things cannot both be true at the same time. Because Pantheism denies that there are absolutes, things which are true all the time, it holds that all right and wrong is relative. Right and wrong are determined by cultures and situations. So murdering one's unborn baby might be right for one person and wrong for another.

Theism says that there is such a thing as absolute truth, and absolute right and wrong. We can know this because this information has come to us from a transcendent source outside of ourselves and outside of our world. Christian Theism says that the God who created us has also communicated certain truths to us. He communicated generally, through His creation, and He communicated specifically and understandably through His Word, the Bible. We call this revelation. Christian Theism says that absolute truth is rooted in God Himself, who is an Absolute; He is Truth. As Creator, He has the right to tell us the difference between right and wrong, and He has taken great care to communicate this to us.

That's why Steven Covey's illustration was so powerful. When he pulled out a compass, he showed that we need a transcendent source of information, something outside ourselves and which is fixed and constant, to show us the moral equivalent of "North." We are creatures created to be dependent on our Creator for the information we need to live life right. God has given us a compass in revelation.

How Do You Know That You Know?

This question generally doesn't come up around the cafeteria lunch table at work, and even the most inquisitive toddler usually won't ask it, but it's an important question nonetheless: How do you know that you know?

There's a great scene in the movie *Terminator 2* where the young boy that the cyborg terminator has been sent to protect,

is threatened by a couple of hoodlums. The terminator is about to blow one away when the young boy cries out, “You can’t do that!” The terminator—Arnold Schwarzenegger—asks, “Why not?” “You just can’t go around killing people!” the boy protests. “Why not?” “Take my word for it,” the boy says. “You just can’t.” He knew that it was wrong to kill another human being, but he didn’t know how he knew. There are a lot of people in our culture like that!

Naturalism, believing that there is nothing beyond space, time and energy, would answer the question by pointing to the human mind. Rational thought—iguring things out deductively—is one prime way we gain knowledge. Human reason is a good enough method to find out what we need to know. The mind is the center of our source of knowledge. Another way to knowledge is by accumulating hard scientific data of observable and measurable experience. This view says that the source of our knowledge is found in the senses. We know what we can perceive through what we can measure. Since naturalism denies any supernaturalism (anything above or outside of the natural world), what the human mind can reason and measure is the only standard for gaining knowledge.

Pantheism would agree with this assessment of how we know that we know. Followers of pantheism tend to put a lot of value on personal experience. The rash of near- and after-death experiences in the past few years, for example, are extremely important to New Agers. These experiences usually validate the preconceptions of pantheistic thought, which denies absolutes such as the Christian tenet that Jesus is the only way to God. The experiences of past- lives therapy have persuaded even some Christians to believe in reincarnation, even though the Bible explicitly denies that doctrine, because personal experience is often considered the most valid way to know reality.

Christian Theism says that while human reason and perception are legitimate ways to gain knowledge, we cannot depend on

these methods alone because they're not enough. Some information needs to be given to us from outside the system. An outside Revealer provides information we can't get any other way. Revelation—revealed truth from the One who knows everything—is another, not only legitimate but necessary way to know some important things. Revelation is how we know what happened when the earth, the universe and man were created. Revelation is how we know what God wants us to do and be. Revelation is how we can know how the world will end and what heaven is like. Revelation in the form of the Lord Jesus Christ is the only way we can experience "God with skin on."

Naturalism's answers are inadequate, depressing, and wrong; pantheism's answers are slippery, don't square with reality, and wrong; but Christian theism—the Christian worldview—is full of hope, consistent with reality, and it resonates in our souls that it's very, very right.

Notes

1. These questions are taken from James W. Sire's book *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, Ill.:InterVarsity Press), 1977.

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The Truth About Heaven

Rick Rood analyzes the teaching of the Bible about heaven, as well as the practical effects of the Christian belief in heaven.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What images come to mind when you think of Heaven? Do you think of a mode of life that is exciting and fulfilling? Or do the words of the epitaph of one dear soul come nearer to hitting the mark?

> *Weep not for me, friend, tho' death do us sever, I am going to do nothing forever and ever.{1}*

Does Heaven awaken for you a sense of anticipation, or does it evoke visions of monotonous and boring inactivity?

What is Heaven really like? Is Heaven even something we should spend much time thinking about? Or should we relegate thoughts of Heaven to the dusty corners of our mind, lest we render ourselves of little earthly good?

In this essay we want to focus on what the Bible teaches about Heaven, and how these teachings should impact the way we live. We will note some of the foundational truths about Heaven revealed in Scripture.

We know first of all that Heaven is the spiritual realm in which the glory of God's presence is manifest, and in which dwell the angels of God, and all believers who have departed this world (Heb. 12:22-24). The few glimpses of Heaven given in Scripture reveal a pervading sense of the holiness of God (Isa. 6; Rev. 4-5), which had an alarming and overwhelming impact on those who were granted such visions (Isa. 6; Dan. 7:9-28). Isaiah, when he saw the Lord sitting on His throne, said, "Woe is me . . . for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

We are also informed that it is a place which human words are inadequate to fully describe. Ezekiel could only describe what the glory of Heaven was "like" or "resembles" (Ezek. 1). In reporting on his apparent visit to heaven, the apostle Paul said that he "heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak" (2 Cor. 12:4). What he saw was not only

impermissible but impossible to describe in human terms! Heaven is certainly among those things he described elsewhere as “things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered into the heart of man” (1 Cor. 2:9)! No wonder Paul says in another place that we shall be “astonished” when we see the Lord at His coming in glory (2 Thess. 1:10)!

Third, we know that for those who belong to Christ, Heaven is their immediate destination after death. To the thief on the cross, Jesus said, “Today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Paul said that “to be absent from the body (is to be) at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8), and that should he depart this world, he would “be with Christ” (Phil. 1:23).

Many wonder if in Heaven we will still be subject to time. But there is really no reason to believe we will not be. To be infinite in relation to time is an attribute only God can possess. We know that Scripture speaks of “months” in Heaven (Rev. 22:2) and even “ages” to come (Eph. 2:7). Certainly also, the music which will be sung in Heaven requires a temporal mode of existence. It seems apparent also that in Heaven we will be cognizant, to some degree, of what is transpiring on earth. When Moses and Elijah met the Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration, it’s recorded that they discussed Jesus’ coming return to glory (Luke 9:30-31). And during the coming tribulation period we are told that the saints in Heaven will be anxiously awaiting the completion of God’s purposes on earth (Rev. 6:10-11). Until His kingdom comes, even in Heaven the question will be asked, “How long, O Lord?” (as these saints are recorded as imploring).

Oswald Sanders said: “God has not told us all we’d like to know, but He has told us all we need to know” about Heaven {2}. So, let’s look closer now at more of what the Bible does tell us about existence in heaven.

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Spiritual Changes!

Mark Twain once sarcastically asserted that in Heaven, for twelve hours every day we will all sing one hymn over and over again.{3} Hardly an inviting thought! The Bible, however, paints a much different picture of what life in Heaven will be like. Consider just a few of Heaven's most significant characteristics.

First, we know that our transition to heaven will result in a change in our spiritual nature. Paul spoke of "the hope of righteousness" for which we wait (Gal. 5:5); the expectation of being made wholly righteous. In Romans chapter 7 he spoke of being released from the internal struggle against indwelling sin, through being set free from our mortal body (Rom. 7:23-24). John said that when Jesus appears, "we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). Even now, we are told that as we behold "the glory of the Lord" we are gradually transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18). One day we will see Him "just as He is." And when we do, there will be something about our vision of Him that will purify our hearts from all sin and bond us eternally to Him! One result of this transformation will be the perfecting of our relationships with one another. On earth, even among the most mature of us, our relationships are hindered by barriers created by fear, pride, jealousy, and shame. But the Bible says that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). When we fully apprehend the perfect love which God has for us, and are cleansed from the sin that presently indwells us, our relationships with one another will finally be what God intended them to be.

Second, in Heaven our comprehension of the nature of God will be greatly expanded. The apostle Paul says that "though now we see through a glass darkly," then we shall "see face to face" and "shall know fully, as we are known" (1 Cor. 13:12). It is

this knowledge I am convinced that will move us to spontaneously join the heavenly chorus in singing hymns of praise to Almighty God. From the few glimpses of heavenly worship we are granted in Scripture, we learn that our praise of God will focus both on who He is—the eternal, holy, almighty God (cf. Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8)—and on what He has done (Rev. 4:11; 5:9-14). If our worship of God is muted now, it is at least partially because we do not yet fully comprehend the greatness of His glory and the awesomeness of His creative and redemptive work. But in Heaven we will gain much clearer insight into the wisdom of God displayed in the intricacies of His creation, and of His marvelous purposes manifest in His redeeming work. Some have wondered how we could be happy in heaven knowing that some of God's creatures are enduring His eternal judgment. It seems apparent, however, that in Heaven we will gain a much clearer perspective on the justice of God (cf. Rev. 18:20; 19:1-4). Perhaps the most perfect happiness of Heaven is impossible apart from some element of sorrow over the eternal loss of those who have rejected God's grace. No doubt, however, many of the mysteries of life and of God's ways in our individual lives will be more clearly understood, prompting us to join in His praise.

Finally, there is every reason to believe that there will be opportunity for growth in Heaven . . . not growth toward perfection, but growth in perfection. As a man, Jesus was indeed perfect. Yet Scripture tells us that He "grew in wisdom, in stature, and in favor with God and man." Scripture also tells us that one of the three virtues that will abide forever is hope (1 Cor. 13:13). And what is hope but the expectation of better and better things yet to come . . . the prospect of all for whom Heaven is our eternal home!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Physical Changes!

George Bernard Shaw one said, "Heaven, as conventionally

conceived, is a place so inane, so dull, so useless, so miserable, that nobody has ever ventured to describe a whole day in heaven, though plenty of people have described a day at the seashore" {4}. The interesting thing about Shaw's statement is that he was right . . . at least when it comes to Heaven as it is "conventionally conceived!"{5} But the Bible informs us that the life that awaits us is not only "better" than anything we could ever dream of here, or even "much better," but according to the apostle Paul, "very much better" (Phil. 1:23)! Now we want to continue our consideration of some of these "very much better" things that await us in Heaven.

First, once God's purposes for life on earth are through, our physical bodies will be resurrected to a new order of life. Philippians 3:20 tells us that the Lord Jesus himself will "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Phil. 3:21). In 1 Corinthians 15, the relationship between our present mortal body and our future resurrection body is likened to that between a seed and the plant that comes to be when it is sown in the ground and "dies" (1 Cor. 15:35-38). When a plant rises from the soil, it brings into actuality all the potential that was packed in the seed from which it grew. When our bodies are transformed, they will possess in actuality all that we can now only dream of being capable of. Not only will our bodies be freed from illness and aging, but our capacities will be immensely expanded and transformed! Paul describes it as a body that is "spiritual, honorable, imperishable, and powerful!"

The second "very much better" thing that will await us is the creation of a new heaven and earth in which we shall live with Christ forever. Jesus referred to this transformation of the creation as "the regeneration" (Matt. 19:28) the same term used to describe the new birth of a believer. Paul described it as the time when it will be "set free from its slavery to corruption" (Rom. 8:21). In the Revelation we are told that in

the new creation there will be “no more sorrow, pain or death” (Rev. 21:4). And in Isaiah’s prophecy we read that the glories of the new creation will be so marvelous that “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Isa. 65:17)! Not only will the sufferings of this present life fade in comparison to the glory of this new world order (Rom. 8:18), but even the most wonderful of life’s experiences will be so overshadowed by our new life that they will barely survive in our memory! When the apostle John was given a vision of life in the new creation, he was so overwhelmed that he had to be reminded to record what he was witnessing (Rev. 21:5), and to be assured twice that what he was beholding would really come to pass (Rev. 21:5; 22:6)!

And how will we occupy our time in this new order of life? The Scriptures tell us that in addition to engaging in united worship of God, we will serve (Rev. 22:3) and reign with Christ (Rev. 20:6; 22:5). The domain over which we will reign will no doubt encompass all of creation, for we’re told that for Christ “all things have been created” (Col. 1:16), and that with Him we will inherit “all these things” (Rev. 21:7)! Though in many respects there will be a certain continuity between our present and future life, many tasks and occupations of the present order will no longer be needed. The enterprises in which we will engage will be totally creative and productive far more fulfilling and exciting than anything we know on earth today!

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? The Prospect of Heavenly Reward

So far in our discussion on Heaven we have noted aspects of our heavenly experience that will be true for all of us who will ultimately make it our home.

We want to focus now on the fact that there are some things about Heaven that will not be equally enjoyed by all.

Jesus on more than one occasion stated that not all who enter Heaven will enjoy its blessings to the same degree. Not that there will be any judgment or punishment for those who are heavenbound. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). But Jesus did say that in His kingdom “many who are first shall be last, and the last first” (cf. Matt. 19:30).

The apostle John stated that it was possible for believers to enter Christ’s presence “with confidence,” or “to shrink away from Him in shame” (1 John 2:28). Peter wrote that it was possible for us to enter Heaven triumphantly, or in a “stumbling” fashion (2 Pet. 1:10-11). The apostle Paul said that we can either be “rewarded,” or “suffer loss”; that it is possible to be “saved, yet so as through fire” (1 Cor. 3:13-15). Perhaps the “fire” referred to here is a reference to the searching gaze of the glorified Christ, whose eyes John described as “a flame of fire” (Rev. 1:14). “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad” (2 Cor. 5:10). The word for “bad” in this case refers not merely to what is “evil” but to what from God’s perspective is “worthless.” Not only will our “works” be evaluated, but also the very motives of our heart (1 Cor. 4:5). The Scriptures tell us that praise will come from God to every believer (1 Cor. 4:5), but for some there will be more, and for others less.

What is the nature of the reward that may be won or lost? Many passages speak of our heavenly reward in terms of the responsibility with which we will be entrusted by God when we reign with Christ in the new heaven and new earth. In Jesus’ parable of the talents, He spoke of rewarding those who had been faithful by putting them “in charge of many things” in His kingdom (Matt. 25:21 23). In another place He spoke of putting some of us in places of authority over cities in His kingdom (Luke 19:17,19). To those who had stood by Him in His

earthly trials, Jesus promised to place them “on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” in His future kingdom, as well as to seat them at His side at His table (Luke 22:28-30)! Not only would they be worthy of being entrusted with greater responsibility, but also capable of enjoying the closest fellowship with Christ!

In many passages heavenly rewards are likened to the “crowns” worn by victors in athletic contests. Whether literal or metaphorical, these crowns represent different aspects of our heavenly reward. The “crown of life” is promised to those who persevere under trial (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10), the “crown of righteousness” to those who long for Christ’s return (2 Tim. 4:8), an “incorruptible crown” to those who exercise self control (1 Cor. 9:25), the “crown of rejoicing” to those who lead others to Christ (1 Thess. 2:19), and the “crown of glory” to those who serve unselfishly as spiritual leaders (1 Pet. 5:2-4).

The most important fact about our heavenly rewards is that they are based not on our position or ability, but on our faithfulness. Time and again Jesus told His followers that “he who is faithful in a little thing, will be faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10; 19:17).

What Difference Does Heaven Make?

Before we conclude, we want to think about just a few of the ways in which our life on earth should be impacted by what we believe about Heaven.

First, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the disappointments and sufferings of this life. D. A. Carson was right when he wrote: “There is nothing in Scripture to encourage us to think we should always be free from the vicissitudes that plague a dying world” {6}. But one thing the hope of Heaven can do is help us to put the “dark side” of life in perspective. Paul wrote: “For I consider that the

sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). The glory to come will be immeasurably greater than the depth of any sorrow we may know today!

But Scripture also tells us that our present sufferings actually play a role in preparing us for that glory to come! As the apostle put it: "For momentary, light affliction is producing in us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor. 4:17). The very qualities and virtues that will fit us for Heaven are today being woven into our soul through the many afflictions of our present life . . . freeing us from the bonds of self-indulgence, creating in us a heart of compassion for others, and prodding us to draw ever closer to the One whose presence we shall enjoy for eternity to come.

Second, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on the true nature of success. On every side we hear the message that the "good life" consists in the accumulation of material possessions, the acquisition of power, or the enjoyment of sensual pleasure. Scripture does encourage us to enjoy the many good things of life with which we may be blessed (1 Tim. 6:17); but the hope of Heaven should remind us that this world and all that is in it is passing away, that its glory is for only a season (1 John 2:15 17), that we truly are "strangers and aliens" in this world (1 Pet. 2:11).

That's why it exhorts us to set our minds and hearts on Heaven and to seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-3). God is urging us to turn aside from what in His eyes are "trivial pursuits" that end only in emptiness, and to devote ourselves to those ambitions that will yield fruit that will accompany us into the next world. When Jesus said to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness," He was encouraging us to make these things our highest priority in life.

Finally, the hope of Heaven transforms our perspective on death. The Scriptures nowhere teach that as believers we are

immune from or should deny the reality of the sorrow that death can bring. But in Christ, we share in His victory over death! We grieve, but we grieve not as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), rather as those who are certain of our reunion with loved ones who have gone before, of receiving a glorious body that will never weaken or decay, of entering a wonderful new life beyond our fondest dreams, and of forever being with the Lord!

At the end of his beloved "Narnia Tales" C. S. Lewis describes the events that transpire as the characters in his story enter Heaven: "(T)he things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."{7}

Notes

1. Gilmore, John. *Probing Heaven: Key Questions on the Hereafter*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1989, p. 175.

2. Sanders, J. Oswald. *Heaven Better By Far*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1993, p. 10.

3. Sanders, p. 19.

4. Stedman, Ray C. *God's Final Word: Understanding Revelation*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1991, p. 334.

5. Stedman, 334.

6. Carson, D. A. *How Long, O Lord?* Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1990, p. 250.

7. Lewis, C. S. *The Last Battle*. New York: Macmillan, 1970, pp. 183-184.

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