

What happens to the spirit or soul when people die?

1. What happens to Christians when they die? Examine Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8.

Just before Jesus was to die on the cross, He said to the thief dying next to Him, "... today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The term for "Paradise" is used twice in the New Testament (2 Cor 12:4; Rev 2:7) and it is in reference to heaven. Jesus explicitly tells the thief that when he dies, his soul will be with Him in heaven.

The apostle Paul looked forward to being with Jesus by saying, "... to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better" (Phil 1:23), and "... prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord" (2 Cor 5:8). Paul clearly understood that when death occurs, he would be in the presence of Jesus Christ. And with the knowledge of this outcome, Paul did not have any fear of death.

It should be noted that Paul never suggested or implied that he contemplated suicide. The commandment "you shall not murder" (Ex 20:13) includes the meaning that one cannot murder oneself.

At the moment of death, when the body ceases to function, the Christian's soul separates from the body and goes immediately into God's presence.

2. What happened to Old Testament Believers who died before Christ? Study Genesis 5:24; 2 Kings 2:11; Psalms 23:6.

Little is said about what happens to the souls of Believers who died before Christ; however, the biblical evidence indicates that Believers were brought into the presence of God immediately and consciously.

"Enoch walked with God; and he was not for God took him." (Gen 5:24)

"By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up;..." (Heb 11:5)

"And Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven." (2 Ki 2:11)

"And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with him." (Matt 17:3) Here Elijah is seen talking to Jesus.

"Surely goodness and lovingkindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." (Ps 23:6) David is speaking of himself.

"As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake." (Ps 17:15) This was a prayer of David when he dies.

3. What happens to non-Christians when they die? Examine Hebrews 9:27; Luke 16:24-26.

The biblical evidence indicates that judgment follows death.

"And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." (Heb 9:27)

What happens to the spirit or soul when people die? (page 2)

"But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation." (Rom 2:5-8)

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so 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)

In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the rich man finds himself in Hades (which is another term for Hell). And it appears to be a place of eternal conscious punishment for the wicked.

"And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.'" (Luke 16:24)

Also seen in Jesus' story is that once death occurs, there are no second chances for salvation.

"But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.'" (Luke 16:24-25)

A dead person can no longer sin; therefore, God's judgment will be based on the actions of the person while they were alive.

4. What happens to infants (or the mentally disabled) when they die? Study Psalms 22:10; 51:5; 58:3; Luke 1:15; Acts 2:39; 11:14; 16:31.

This issue poses a dilemma: does God condemn the infant before they are old enough to hear and believe the Gospel?

Part of this problem is with the initial premise that infants are innocent. Even before birth, children have a guilty standing before God (see the article "What is the Doctrine of Imputed Sin?") and inherit a sinful nature that gives them the tendency to sin, all of which causes God to view infants as sinners.

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." (Ps 51:5)

"The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth." (Ps 58:3)

Apart from the usual method of regeneration where one hears, understands and places his trust in the saving grace of Christ, the salvation of infants or mentally disabled is a mystery. Yet for those whom He saves by His unmerited grace, they must be saved on the basis of Jesus Christ and regenerated by the Holy Spirit within them. There are two biblical references of infant salvation:

The angel declares of John the Baptist: "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord; and he will drink no wine or liquor, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit while yet in his mother's womb." (Luke 1:15) In this instance, it appears that John the Baptist was saved before he was physically born!

This article is from: www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatHappensSpiritWhenPeopleDie.aspx

What happens to the spirit or soul when people die? (page 3)

David declares: "Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God from my mother's womb." (Ps 22:10)

In other instances (and not as a universal rule), there are biblical examples that imply that children of Believers (who may not have heard the Gospel) may be saved (Ps 103:17; Acts 2:39; 11:14; 16:31; 1 Cor 1:16; 7:14).

For children of non-Believers, who have not heard the Gospel, the Bible does not say.

Because there hasn't been any explicit explanation about the salvation of infants and mentally disabled, there have been several suggestions as to what God may do. One example is the concept of "age of accountability", in which the innocent, unaware of their personal responsibility for sinful acts, are accorded salvation until they can be responsible.

However this theology raises some problematic questions. What does this theology say about assurance? Does God rescind or take back the gift of salvation?

How does this reconcile with the Conquest when God commanded the Hebrews to completely annihilate the men, women and children of seven or eight Canaanite nations (Ex 23:20-23; 34:11-16; Deut 7:1-5; 20:16-18; Deut 2:34; 3:6)?

The Conquest was foretold by God and delayed until the Canaanite nations demonstrated their complete wickedness (Gen 15:16).

Moses reminded the nation of Israel why God was giving them the Land: it was because of the wickedness of its inhabitants and not the righteousness of Israel (Deut 9:5).

It must be emphasized that salvation for anyone is based on God's sovereign will and grace (Rom 9:14-18; Jon 4:11).

5. What happened to Jesus Christ when He died at the cross? Examine Luke 23:43-46.

Contrary to the Apostles' Creed (see the article "The confusion posed by the Apostles' Creed: Did Jesus descend into Hell?"), Jesus did not go to hell after His death.

One of the main biblical passages used to support the idea that Jesus descended down to hell after death is 1 Peter 3:18-20. However, when taken in context, this challenging passage does not provide convincing support for the idea that Jesus descended down to hell after death (see the article "When Jesus was crucified, did He go to Hell?").

In addition to the words that Jesus said to the thief on the cross, "... today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43), Jesus cries out, "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit" (Luke 23:46).

Jesus' own words indicate that His spirit was brought into the presence of God.

It appears that when death occurs, Jesus' soul, like those of Christians, was brought immediately into the presence of God.

What happens to the spirit or soul when people die? (page 4)

The very idea that at death the spirit or soul of Jesus Christ was brought immediately into the presence of God is significant.

When Christians die, their spirit will pass immediately into the presence of God, and their bodies will be buried.

When Jesus Christ returns, the Christian's spirit will be reunited with their perfect resurrected body to a new life.

There is no fear of death, for Jesus Himself has experienced what Christians will at the end of life. The way has been prepared and sanctified, and Christians can follow Him with confidence.

References:

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2. Grudem W, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan (1994).

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