

# Heaven & Hell

**What Does the Bible  
Really Teach?**

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# Introduction

Most religions and religious organizations, including most Christian denominations, teach that good people go to some sort of paradise, usually heaven, after they die. Heaven is usually characterized as a place of unsurpassable happiness—the ultimate paradise. It is commonly taught and believed that all who go there will live joyfully forever.

Yet, considering what a wonderful place it is supposed to be, it seems no one is in a hurry to go there.

Death, which according to most traditional beliefs is the gateway to heaven, is generally viewed as something to be avoided at all costs. Through medical science we usually do everything we can to prevent death as long as possible. If such a journey to heaven could be by means of some heavenly express, wouldn't we find that almost no one would want to buy a ticket? Wouldn't we find that most people would prefer the continuation of their present life here on earth to any immediate possibility of taking up residence in heaven? Our actions indicate this is the way most of us think.

## An eternity doing what?

Perhaps the reason for the reluctance to enter the hereafter through death is that no one has ever provided us with a truly compelling explanation as to what the righteous would do once they arrived in heaven. If we are to spend all eternity there, you would think God would tell us in the Bible what we should expect once we arrive. Will we spend our time plucking harps? Will we sit and simply gaze upon God? These are both popular concepts of heaven, but

most people can't imagine doing either for eternity. Eternity is, after all, a long time!

Maybe we should ask ourselves whether these common concepts come from the Bible. Many people who expect to go to heaven admit they can find little in the Scriptures about what they can expect once they get there. British historian and author Paul Johnson put it this way: "Heaven . . . lacks genuine incentive. Indeed, it lacks definition of any kind. It is the great hole in theology" (*The Quest for God*, 1996, p. 173). If heaven is the goal God has set for His servants, why has He revealed so little about it in His Word, the Bible?

There is an excellent reason we encounter a vacuum when we look in the Bible for what the "saved"—those who are spared some sort of eternal punishment—will do in heaven. The reason is simple: *The Bible does not say the righteous will receive heaven as their reward*. As we will see, the Bible reveals that God has something else in mind—something far different and far superior to most people's concepts about heaven.

## Troubling questions about hell

But heaven isn't the only problem we run into when we consider popular views of life after death. What about the unrighteous, those who don't measure up? What happens to them?

Many who profess Christianity believe the wicked will burn forever in hell. They claim to find this teaching in the Bible.

But we need to ask a simple question: Would a merciful God inflict excruciating pain and torment on human beings for millions and millions of years—throughout all eternity? Could the great Creator God of the universe be that unfeeling and uncaring? Even though "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23), the God of love, justice and mercy has no desire to see anyone, even the incorrigibly wicked, suffer in agony for all eternity.

The Bible indeed says that God "has appointed a day when He will judge the world in righteousness" (Acts 17:31). At that time those who have repented and accepted Christ as their Savior will be given eternal life. "There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name [than Jesus'] has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved" (Acts 4:12, Revised English Bible).

But what will happen in that day to the hapless people who were never fortunate enough even to be exposed to that name? Will they be cast shrieking into hell along with those who hate and despise God?

Only a minority of the earth's population lays claim to being Christian. Those who profess Christianity total only some 28 percent of the world's population. Vast numbers of the other 72 percent have never had the opportunity to genuinely repent and accept Christ simply because of *where* they live. Millions more through the centuries likewise never had the opportunity because of *when* they lived. Would it be just and right for God to subject them to the same punishment He will give to those who reject Him and make themselves His enemies?

These questions are neither trivial nor hypothetical. They affect the overwhelming majority of all people who have ever lived. When carried to their conclusions, the traditional answers have sobering implications about the character, nature and judgment of the very Being Christians claim to worship. We need to face these questions squarely and honestly. Isn't it about time we examined the truth of what the Bible teaches about heaven and hell?

Join us on a journey through the pages of history and your Bible. You may find the answers quite surprising!

## The Biblical Truth About the Immortal Soul

**T**raditional beliefs about heaven and hell are based on an underlying teaching—that everyone has an immortal soul that must go somewhere after his physical life ends.

This belief isn't unique to traditional Christianity. "All religions affirm that there is an aspect of the human person that lives on after the physical life has ended" (*World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, Andrew Wilson, editor, 1995, p. 225). In other words, in general all religions believe in some kind of immortal essence, a spirit that lives on separately after the physical body dies. Most professing Christians call this the immortal soul.

Failure to properly understand this subject is a fundamental reason for the prevalent beliefs regarding heaven and hell. If an immortal quality exists in a human being, it must depart from the body when the body dies. The typical views of heaven and hell have as their foundation the belief in the immortal soul that leaves the body at death.

What does the Bible say about the existence of an immortal soul? Does this belief have a foundation in Scripture?

Many are surprised to learn that the words "immortal" and "soul" appear together nowhere in the Bible. ". . . Theologians frankly admit that the expression 'immortal soul' is not in the Bible but confidently state that Scripture *assumes* the immortality of every soul" (*The Fire That Consumes*, Edward William Fudge, 1994, p. 22, emphasis added).

That such an important assumption should not be explicitly taught in

the Bible is surprising, considering how confidently theologians hold to this doctrine. If it isn't found in the Bible, where did the idea originate?

The *New Bible Dictionary* offers this background of the nonbiblical nature of the immortal-soul doctrine. "The Greeks thought of the body as a hindrance to true life and they looked for the time when the soul would be free from its shackles. They conceived of life after death in terms of the immortality of the soul . . ." (1996, p. 1010, "Resurrection").

According to this idea, the body goes to the grave at death and the soul continues to exist as a separate conscious entity.

Belief in a separate soul and body was popular in Greek society and was taught by one of their most famous philosophers. "The immortality of the soul was a principal doctrine of the Greek philosopher, Plato . . . In Plato's thinking, the soul . . . was self-moving and indivisible . . . It existed before the body which it inhabited, and which it would survive" (Fudge, p. 32).

### How the immortal-soul idea entered Christianity

When did the concept of the immortality of the soul enter the world of Christianity? The Old Testament does not teach it. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* explains: ". . . We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

The first-century Church did not hold to this belief, either. ". . . The doctrine is increasingly regarded as a post-apostolic innovation, not only unnecessary but positively harmful to proper biblical interpretation and understanding" (Fudge, p. 24).

If such an idea were not in place in the Church during the time of the apostles, how did it come to assume such an important place in Christian doctrine?

Several authorities recognize that the teachings of Plato and other Greek philosophers have profoundly influenced Christianity. Jeffrey Burton Russell states: ". . . The unbiblical idea of immortality did not die but even flourished, because theologians . . . admired Greek philosophy [and] found support there for the notion of the immortal

soul . . ." (*A History of Heaven*, 1997, p. 79).

The *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, in its article on death, states that "the 'departure' of the *nephesh* [soul] must be viewed as a figure of speech, for it does not continue to exist independently of the body, but dies with it . . . No biblical text authorizes the statement that the 'soul' is separated from the body at the moment of death" (1962, Vol. 1, p. 802, "Death").

Should we then accept a teaching that is nonbiblical? Many people take it for granted that their doctrines are based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the Bible. Yet Jesus said in a prayer to His Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). Does God give men the liberty to draw from the world's philosophers and incorporate their beliefs into biblical teaching?

God inspired the apostle Peter to write: "Knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:20-21). We must look to the words of Christ, the prophets and the apostles in the Holy Scriptures if we are to understand the truth about the doctrine of the immortality of the soul or any other religious teaching.

Let's dig into the Scriptures to see exactly what the Bible tells us about the soul.

### *Soul* in the Hebrew Scriptures

The Old Testament teaches that the soul dies. In Genesis 2:7 we find that when Adam was created he became a "living soul" (King James Version). In Genesis 9:12 the same Hebrew words are translated "living creature" and refer not to humans, but to every sort of animal *distinct* from man.

God told Adam and Eve, two "living souls," that they would "surely die" if they disobeyed Him (Genesis 2:17). God also told Adam that He had taken him from the dust of the earth and he would return to dust (Genesis 3:19).

In the Old Testament, man is referred to as a "soul" (Hebrew *nephesh*) more than 130 times. The term is also applied to sea creatures (Genesis 1:20-21), birds (verse 30) and land animals, including cattle and "creeping" creatures such as reptiles and insects (verse 24).

It follows, then, if we make an argument for man possessing an immortal soul, animals must also have an immortal soul, since the same Hebrew word is used of man and animal alike. Yet no biblical scholars would seriously make such claims for animals. The truth is, the term *soul* refers to any *living creature* (whether man or beast), not to some separate, living essence temporarily inhabiting the body.

Among the plainer statements in the Bible about what happens

## Does the Bible Teach That We Have an Immortal Soul?

Some believe that various scriptures support belief in an immortal soul. Let's consider some of these passages and understand what they really say.

### Matthew 10:28

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matthew 10:28).

Does Jesus teach in this verse that the soul is immortal? Not at all. If you look at this scripture closely you see that Jesus actually says that the soul *can* be destroyed.

Jesus is here warning about the judgment of God. He says not to fear those who can destroy only the physical human body (Greek *soma*), but fear Him (God) who is also able to destroy the soul (*psuche*).

Simply stated, Christ was showing that when one man kills another the resulting death is only temporary; God can raise anyone to life again either in

this life (see Matthew 9:23-25; 27:52; John 11:43-44; Acts 9:40-41; 20:9-11) or the life to come. We must revere God, who alone can obliterate all possibility of any later resurrection to life. When God destroys one in "hell," that person's destruction is permanent.

What is the "hell" spoken of in this verse? The Greek word used here is *gehenna*, which comes from the combination of two Hebrew words, *ge* and *hinnom*, meaning "valley of Hinnom." The term originally referred to a valley on the south side of Jerusalem in which pagan deities were worshiped.

Because of its reputation as an abominable place, it later became a garbage dump where refuse was burned. *Gehenna* became synonymous with "a place of burning"—a site used to dispose of useless things.

Only God can utterly destroy human existence *and* eliminate any hope of a resurrection. The Scriptures teach that God will burn up the wicked, turning them to ashes (Malachi 4:3).

to the soul at death are Ezekiel 18:4 and 18:20. Both passages clearly state that "the soul who sins *shall die*" (emphasis added throughout). Not only do these scriptures show that the soul dies, but the soul is identified as a *physical* being—not a separate spirit entity having an existence independent of its physical host.

The Scriptures tell us that the dead do not have consciousness. "For the living know that they will die; but the dead *know nothing* . . ." (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They are not conscious in some other state or place.

### 1 Thessalonians 5:23

Many are confused by an expression the apostle Paul uses in his letter to the Thessalonians: "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 5:23).

What does Paul mean by the phrase "spirit, soul, and body"?

By "spirit" (*pneuma*), Paul means the human mind, which gives us the ability to reason, create and analyze our existence. By "soul" (*psuche*), Paul means physical life and its consciousness. By "body" (*soma*), Paul means the flesh of a physical body. Paul wished for the whole person, including the mind, vitality of life and physical body, to be sanctified and blameless.

### Revelation 6:9-11

"When He opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, 'How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?'" (Revelation 6:9-10).

To understand this scripture we must remember the context. John was witnessing a vision while he was "in the spirit" (Revelation 4:2). Under inspiration he was seeing future events in symbol. The fifth seal is figurative of the great tribulation, a time of world turmoil preceding Christ's return. In the vision John sees under the altar the martyred believers who sacrificed their lives for their faith in God. These souls symbolically cry out, "Avenge our blood!" This can be compared to Abel's blood symbolically "crying out" to God from the ground (Genesis 4:10). Though neither souls nor blood can literally speak, these phrases figuratively demonstrate that a God of justice will not forget the evil deeds of mankind perpetrated against His followers.

This verse does not describe living souls that have gone to heaven. The Bible confirms that "no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven" (John 3:13). Even righteous King David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22), was described by Peter as being "dead and buried" (Acts 2:29), not alive in heaven or some other state or location.

## The New Testament teaching

The New Testament contains several statements that confirm that the wicked will die—permanently. In Matthew 7:13-14, in exhorting His disciples to choose the way that leads to life, Jesus states that the

# The History of the Immortal-Soul Teaching

Several times we have mentioned the words *immortal soul*, but the phrase is found nowhere in the Bible. Where did the idea of an immortal soul originate?

The concept of the soul's supposed immortality was first taught in ancient Egypt and Babylon. "The belief that the soul continues in existence after the dissolution of the body is . . . speculation . . . nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture . . . The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended" (*Jewish Encyclopedia*, 1941, Vol. VI, "Immortality of the Soul," pp. 564, 566).

Plato (428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher and student of Socrates, taught that the body and the immortal soul separate at death. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* comments on ancient Israel's view of the soul: ". . . We are influenced always more or less by the Greek, Platonic idea that the body dies, yet

the soul is immortal. Such an idea is utterly contrary to the Israelite consciousness and is nowhere found in the Old Testament" (1960, Vol. 2, p. 812, "Death").

Early Christianity was influenced by Greek philosophies even as the gospel of Christ was preached to the Greek and Roman world. By A.D. 200 the doctrine of the immortality of the soul became a controversy among those holding the Christian belief.

*The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* notes that Origen, an early and influential church theologian, was influenced by Greek thinkers: "Speculation about the soul in the subapostolic church was heavily influenced by Greek philosophy. This is seen in Origen's acceptance of Plato's doctrine of the preexistence of the soul as pure mind (*nous*) originally, which, by reason of its fall from God, cooled down to soul (*psyche*) when it lost its participation in the divine fire by looking earthward" (1992, p. 1037, "Soul").

Secular history reveals that the concept of the immortality of the soul is an ancient belief embraced by many pagan religions. But it is not a biblical or apostolic teaching.

end of those who do not choose life is *destruction*. He contrasts that path with the way of righteousness, telling us "narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

The apostle Paul also stated that the wicked will die. In Romans 6:20-21 he talks about those who were slaves of sin and says that for them "the end of those things is *death*." So those who are slaves of sin, who habitually commit sin, can *perish completely*.

Romans 6:23 is one of the best-known verses of the Bible. Yet many people either overlook what it plainly says or read into it an entirely different meaning. "For the wages of sin is *death*, but the *gift of God is eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This verse plainly tells us two crucial truths. First, the punishment of the wicked is *death*, not a life of eternal suffering in another place. Second, we do not *already have* eternal life. It is something God chooses to *give* us. We see from this verse that a fleshly human being has nothing about him that is immortal; God must *give* eternal life to us through our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. In 1 Timothy 6:16 Paul also tells us that *God alone* has immortality.

Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 6:8: "The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap *destruction*; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap *eternal life*" (New International Version). This tells us what happens to sinners. Eventually they will "reap destruction," but those who obey God will ultimately receive eternal life.

In Philippians 3:18 Paul speaks of those who are "enemies of the cross of Christ." Verse 19 says that their end is *destruction*, not eternal torment in another life after death.

Finally, in 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Paul emphatically declares that the wicked will come to a complete end: "These shall be punished with everlasting *destruction* from the presence of the Lord . . ."

So *is* man an immortal soul, or does he *have* an immortal soul? The Bible declares plainly that man is temporary, of the dust of the earth. There is no immortal quality about man at all—unless and until he receives it from God through a resurrection.

The Bible clearly states that man puts on immortality at the *resurrection* (1 Corinthians 15:50-54), not at the end of his physical life. Until that time man has no more permanence than animals.

# Will a Loving God Punish People Forever in Hell?

**T**ake this simple test. Or, on second thought, perhaps it's better if you just imagined it, since the test could prove quite painful.

Light a match, then hold your finger in its tiny flame for five seconds. What happens? You'll likely scream involuntarily and suffer misery for several days from a painful burn.

Perhaps you've seen a burn victim who was disfigured in some horrifying accident, his flesh gnarled and misshapen. Imagine walking into flames that would char and burn away your skin in the same way. What would that kind of agony feel like for a minute? For a year? For a *lifetime*?

Most people find the idea appalling almost beyond imagination. They would understandably be appalled that anyone might willingly torture another person in that way.

Why, then, are so many willing to accept the idea that the God they worship and hold in high esteem would willingly inflict such punishment not on just a few, but on a great multitude of people who die every single day? How can such a belief possibly square with the Bible's description of a God who is infinitely loving and merciful?

## Hell through the centuries

The traditional view of hell as a fiery cauldron of punishment has been taught for centuries. Perhaps the first to expound this view among Christians was Tertullian, who lived around A.D. 160-225.

In the third century Cyprian of Carthage also wrote: "The damned will burn for ever in hell. Devouring flames will be their eternal portion. Their torments will never have diminution or end" (Peter Toon, *Heaven and Hell: A Biblical and Theological Overview*, 1986, p. 163).

This view has been officially reiterated over the centuries. An edict from the Council of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) in 543 states: ". . . Whoever says that the punishment of demons and the wicked will not be eternal . . . let him be anathema" (D.P. Walker, *The Decline of Hell: Seventeenth-Century Discussions of Eternal Torment*, 1964, p. 21).

The Lateran church council in 1215 reaffirmed belief in everlasting punishment in these words: "The damned will go into everlasting punishment with the devil . . ." (Toon, p. 164). The Augsburg Confession of 1530 reads: "Christ will return . . . to give eternal life and everlasting joy to believers and the elect, but to condemn ungodly men and the devils to hell and eternal punishment" (Toon, p. 131).

Teachings on the subject of hell have by no means been consistent through the centuries. Beliefs about hell have varied widely, depending on which theologian's or church historian's ideas one reads. Generally speaking, the most common belief has been that hell is a place in which people are tortured, but never consumed, by ever-burning flames.

Hell's location has been a subject of much discussion. Some have held the idea that it was in the sun. For centuries the common view was that hell is inside the earth in a vast subterranean chamber.

The most comprehensive description of hell as a place, as man commonly views it, is found not in the Bible but in the 14th-century work *Divine Comedy*, written by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri. Dante described an imaginary journey through hell replete with its fiery sufferings.

The popular concept of hell is a mixture of small bits of Bible truth combined with pagan ideas and human imagination. As we will see, this has produced a grossly inaccurate portrayal of what happens to the wicked after death.

## Modern attitudes about hell

A more modern interpretation rejects the idea of physical torment

and asserts that the torture of hell is mental anguish caused by separation from God. A recent survey of modern attitudes revealed that 53 percent of Americans embrace this perspective (*U.S. News & World Report*, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 47).

Pope John Paul II “declared that hell is ‘not a punishment imposed externally by God’ but is the natural consequence of the unrepentant sinner’s choice to live apart from God” (ibid., p. 48). Still others have rejected the doctrine of hell outright and believe everyone will be saved.

Why is there so much diversity in the teachings about hell? The reason is that, like the belief in the immortality of the soul, common misconceptions of hell are rife with the ideas of men rather than the teachings of the Bible.

### **An angry God**

One of the most graphic descriptions of the torments of hell as conceived by men was given by the Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards in a 1741 sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”

He said: “The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrows made ready . . . [by] an angry God . . . It is nothing but His mere pleasure that keeps you from being this moment swallowed up in everlasting destruction! The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked: His wrath towards you burns like fire; He looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire . . .

“You are ten thousand times more abominable in His eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended Him . . . and yet it is nothing but His hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment . . .

“O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of God . . . You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.”

This human concept of hell was so terrible that the prospect of such a fate caused great anguish, fear and anxiety for many Puritans. “The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive

self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent” (Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 1993, p. 284).

The Puritans were not the only ones tormented by fear of hell. Many people have been terrorized by the thought of hell ever since this nonbiblical concept crept into religious teaching. Other ministers and teachers have, like Jonathan Edwards, used a similar approach to frighten people into belief and obedience.

One of the reasons this concept of hell survived is because theologians believed the teaching deterred people from evil. “It was thought that, if the fear of eternal punishment were removed, most people would behave without any moral restraint whatever and that society would collapse into an anarchical orgy” (Walker, p. 4).

### **Could a compassionate God torture forever?**

Is it possible to reconcile this view of a God who terrorizes people with the fear of eternal torment in hell with the compassionate and merciful God we meet in the Bible?

God is a God of love who does not want any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). He tells us to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). “He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (verse 45). Yet the traditional view of hell would have us believe that God vengefully punishes His enemies through all eternity.

The idea that God sentences people to eternal punishment is so repulsive that it has turned some away from belief in God and Christianity.

One such example is Charles Darwin. In his private autobiography he wrote: “Thus disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete . . . I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe . . . will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine” (Paul Martin, *The Healing Mind: The Vital Links Between Brain and Behavior, Immunity and Disease*, 1997, p. 327).

The problem is not that the Bible teaches this “damnable doctrine” but that men have misunderstood what the Bible says.

Other aspects of the traditional teaching of hell simply offend the senses. One such belief is that righteous people, who are saved, will

be able to witness the torments of the wicked. “. . . Part of the happiness of the blessed consists in contemplating the torments of the damned. This sight gives them joy because it is a manifestation of God’s justice and hatred of sin, but chiefly because it provides a contrast which heightens their awareness of their own bliss” (Walker, p. 29).

This scenario is especially revolting for several reasons. According to such twisted reasoning, parents would inevitably witness the suffering of their own children and vice versa. Husbands and wives would see unbelieving spouses tortured forever. Worst of all, the doctrine paints God as sadistic and cruel.

### More than one hell in the Bible

What is the truth about hell? What does the Bible teach? Many are

surprised to learn that the Bible speaks of *three* hells—but not in the sense that is widely believed. Let us see why there is so much confusion about hell.

In the original Hebrew and Greek languages in which the Bible was written, four words are translated “hell” in English. The four words convey three different meanings.

The Hebrew word *sheol*, used in the Old Testament, has the same meaning as *hades*, one of the Greek words translated “hell” in the New Testament.

The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* explains the meaning of both words: “The Greek word Hades . . . is sometimes, but misleadingly, translated ‘hell’ in English versions of the N[ew] T[estament]. It refers to the place of the dead . . . The old Hebrew concept of the place of the dead, most often called Sheol . . . is usually translated as Hades, and

## Misunderstood Scriptures

The idea that hell is an ever-flaming place of torment results partially from a misunderstanding of Revelation 14:9-10: “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark . . . he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb.”

Notice that verse 8 gives the time setting of this verse. It concerns the impending fall of a modern “Babylon” which will be destroyed at Christ’s return.

Matthew 25:31 tells us that Christ, at His return, will be accompanied by all the holy angels. At that time He will destroy the idolatrous system called Babylon, and those who have become a part of the system will come under the wrath of God.

This scripture does not say that

these people are being tormented in hell. It states that the smoke of their torment ascends forever (verse 11). As smoke rises it blends with the surrounding air, becoming further and further diluted. David wrote in Psalm 37:20 that “the wicked shall *perish* [not be tortured forever in hell] . . . Into smoke they shall *vanish away*.”

This verse says nothing about punishing people eternally in hell. The Bible’s clear teaching about the punishment for the wicked is much different, as shown elsewhere in this booklet.

Those who insist that the Bible teaches eternal punishment by fire should ask whether such a belief is consistent with what the Bible teaches us about God. For example, how could God justly deal with those who have lived and died without having ever received an opportunity to be

saved? This would include the millions who died as babies as well as the billions of unbelievers or idolaters who lived and died never knowing God or His Son. Regrettably, the vast majority of all those who have ever lived fall into this category.

Some theologians reason around this difficulty by assuming that those who never had the opportunity to know God or hear the name of Jesus Christ will be given a sort of free pass. They reason that, because their state of ignorance is because of circumstances beyond their control, God will allow them into heaven regardless of their lack of repentance. If true, this raises the troubling possibility that missionary efforts to such areas could be the cause of people who do not accept their teachings being lost!

Quandaries such as this have painted many theologians and other Christians into a corner. Accordingly, some have challenged the traditional

concept of a hell of eternal torment through the centuries. “. . . In every generation people keep questioning the orthodox belief in everlasting conscious torment” (*Four Views on Hell*, edited by William Crockett, 1996, p. 140).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, church councils through the ages have upheld the doctrine. Firmly rooted in traditional Christian belief, it is an idea that will not go away. “A new *U.S. News* poll shows that more Americans believe in hell today than did in the 1950s or even 10 years ago” (*U.S. News & World Report*, Jan. 31, 2000, p. 46).

The prospect of hell will continue to haunt people. As *U.S. News* reported: “Hell’s powerful images will no doubt continue to loom over humanity, as they have for more than 2,000 years, as a grim and ominous reminder of the reality of evil and its consequences” (*ibid.*).

the Greek term was naturally and commonly used by Jews writing in Greek” (1992, Vol. 3, p. 14, “Hades, Hell”).

Both *sheol* and *hades* refer to the grave. A comparison of an Old Testament and a New Testament scripture confirm this. Psalm 16:10 says, “For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.” In Acts 2:27 the apostle Peter quotes this verse and shows that it is a reference to Christ. Here the Greek word *hades* is substituted for the Hebrew *sheol*.

Where did Christ go when He died? He went to the grave. His body was placed in a tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. The two passages, in Psalms and Acts, tell us Jesus’ flesh did not decay in the grave because God resurrected Him.

The majority of scriptures that use the term *hell* are simply talking about the grave, the place where everyone, whether good or evil, goes at death. The Hebrew word *sheol* is used in the Old Testament 65 times. In the King James Version it is translated “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times and “pit” three times.

The Greek *hades* is used 11 times in the New Testament. In the King James translation in all instances but one the term *hades* is translated “hell.” The one exception is 1 Corinthians 15:55, where it is translated “grave.” In the New King James Version, the translators simply used the original Greek word *hades* in all 11 instances.

## Two other Greek words

Two other Greek words are translated “hell” in the New Testament. One of these is *tartaroo*, used only once in the Bible (2 Peter 2:4), where it refers to the place where the fallen angels, or demons, are restrained awaiting their judgment. The *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* explains that *tartaroo* means “to confine in tartaros” and that “Tartaros was the Greek name for the mythological abyss where rebellious gods were confined” (Lawrence Richards, 1985, “Heaven and Hell”).

Peter used this reference to contemporary mythology to show that the sinning angels were “delivered . . . into chains of darkness, to be reserved for judgment.” Fallen angels are in a condition or place of restraint awaiting their ultimate judgment for their rebellion against God and destructive influence on humanity. *Tartaroo* applies only

to demons. Nowhere does it refer to a fiery hell in which people are punished after death.

The third Greek word used in the Bible and translated “hell” is *gehenna*. This *does* refer to a fiery punishment for the wicked—but *not* in the manner portrayed in the hell of men’s imagination.

*Gehenna* refers to a valley just outside Jerusalem. The word is derived from the Hebrew *Ge-Hinnom*, the valley of Hinnom (Joshua 18:16). At the time of Jesus this valley was what we might call the city dump—the place where garbage, trash and refuse were thrown and consumed in the fires that constantly burned there. The carcasses of dead animals—and the bodies of despised criminals—were also cast into Gehenna to be burned. Jesus used this particular location and what took place there to help us understand the fate the wicked and unrepentant will suffer in the future.

## Are there immortal worms in hell?

In Mark 9:47-48 Jesus specifically referred to *Gehenna* and what took place there. But, without a proper historical understanding, many people draw erroneous conclusions.

Notice His words: “It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell [*gehenna*] fire—where ‘their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.’” Any inhabitant of Jerusalem would have immediately understood what Jesus meant, since Gehenna—the Valley of Hinnom—was just outside the city walls to the south.

Without this understanding, people commonly hold several misconceptions about this verse. Some believe the “worm” is a reference to pangs of conscience that condemned people suffer in hell. “‘The worm that dieth not’ was nearly always interpreted figuratively, as meaning the stings of envy and regret” (Walker, p. 61). Many believe that the phrase “the fire is not quenched” is a reference to ever-burning fires that torture the damned.

This scripture has been notoriously interpreted out of context. Notice that the phrase “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” appears in quotation marks. Jesus was quoting from Isaiah 66:24. A proper understanding of this verse begins there.

The context in Isaiah refers to a time when, God says, “all flesh

## Lazarus and the Rich Man: Proof of Heaven and Hell?

Jesus gave a parable:

"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

"So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

"But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham said to him, 'They have

Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

"And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

"But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead'" (Luke 16:19-31).

When we look at this account in light of other scriptures and in its historical context, it becomes apparent that this is an allegory, a familiar story of the age that Jesus used to point out a spiritual lesson to those who knew the law but did not keep it. It was never intended to be understood literally.

*The Victor Bible Background Commentary, New Testament*, in discussing this passage, explains that Jesus used contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife to point out a spiritual lesson:

"Not only was Hades thought to be divided into two compartments, popular belief held that conversations could be held between persons in Gan Eden [the abode of the righteous] and Gehinnom [the abode of the unrighteous]. Jewish writings also picture the first as a verdant land with sweet waters welling up from numerous springs, while Gehinnom is not only a parched land, but the waters of the river that separated it from Gan Eden recede whenever the desperately thirsty wicked kneel and try to drink.

". . . In Christ's story God was the

beggar's only source of help, for the rich man was certainly not going to do a single thing for him! . . . It is important to see this parable of Jesus as a continuation of His conflict with the Pharisees over riches. Christ had said, 'You cannot serve God and Money' (16:13). When the Pharisees sneered, Jesus responded, 'What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight' (16:15).

"There's no doubt that the Pharisees remained unconvinced . . . And so Christ told a story intended to underline the importance of what He had just said.

"During this life the wealthy man would surely have been featured on the 1980s TV program, 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.' The cameras would have focused on his marble mansion with its decorative wrought iron gates . . . and the fabulous feasts he held for his important friends.

"As the TV equipment was taken into the rich man's home, a camera-man might have stumbled over the dying beggar, destitute and abandoned just outside the rich man's house . . . Surely he was beneath the notice of the homeowner, who never gave a thought to the starving man just outside, though all Lazarus yearned for was just a crumb from the overlaid tables . . .

"But then, Jesus says, both men died. And suddenly their situations are reversed! Lazarus is by 'Abraham's side,' a phrase which pictures him reclining in the place of honor at a banquet that symbolizes eternal blessedness. But the rich man finds himself in torment, separated from

the place of blessing by a 'great chasm' (16:26). Even though he begs for just one drop of water, Abraham sadly shakes his head. No relief is possible—or appropriate!

". . . The rich man had received his good things, and had used them selfishly for his benefit alone . . . This rich man's indifference to Lazarus showed how far his heart was from God and how far his path had strayed from God's ways. They were his riches, and he would use them only for himself . . .

"And so Jesus' first point is driven home. You Pharisees simply cannot love God and Money. Love for Money is detestable to God, for you will surely be driven to make choices in life which are hateful to Him . . .

"But Jesus does not stop here. He portrays the rich man as appealing to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, who live as selfishly as he did. Again Abraham refuses. They have 'Moses and the Prophets' (16:31), that is, the Scriptures. If they do not heed the Scriptures they will not respond should one come back from the dead . . .

"In essence then Christ makes a stunning charge: the hardness and unwillingness of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law to Jesus' words reflect a hardness to the Word of God itself, which these men pretend to honor . . .

"This entire chapter calls us to realize that if we take this reality seriously, it will affect the way we view and use money, and the way we respond to the poor and the oppressed" (Lawrence Richards, QuickVerse software, 1992-1998).

shall come to worship before Me” (verse 23). It is a time when the wicked will be no more. What happened to them? In verse 24 we read that people “will go out and *look upon the dead bodies* of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind” (NIV).

Notice that in this verse Jesus noted that the bodies affected by the worms are *dead*. These are not living people writhing in fire. When Jesus returns He will fight those who resist Him (Revelation 19:11-15). Those who are slain in the battle will not be buried; their bodies will be left on the ground, where scavenging birds and maggots will consume their flesh.

According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (1980), the original Hebrew word translated “worm” in Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:47-48 means “worm, maggot, [or] larvae.”

Neither Isaiah nor Christ was talking about immortal worms. The vermin of which they spoke—maggots—do not die because they turn into flies. The flies then lay eggs that hatch into more maggots (the larvae of flies), perpetuating the cycle.

This background information helps us better understand Christ’s words. In that time, when the bodies of dead animals or executed criminals were cast into the burning trash heap of Gehenna, those bodies would be destroyed by maggots, by the fires that were kept constantly burning there, or a combination of both. Historically a body that was not buried, but was subjected to burning, was viewed as accursed (Joshua 6:18; 7:11, 25).

What did Jesus mean in Mark 9:48 when He said, “. . . The fire is not quenched”? With the preceding background we can understand. He means simply that the fire will burn until the bodies of the wicked are consumed. This expression, used several times in Scripture, refers to fire that consumes entirely (Ezekiel 20:47). An unquenched fire is one that has not been extinguished. It *burns itself out* when it consumes everything and has no more combustible material to keep it going.

### When are the wicked punished?

But, we might ask, *when* does this punishment take place?

As we saw earlier, Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah, who wrote of a time *after* the Messiah establishes His reign on earth. Only then would all humanity “come and bow down” before Him (Isaiah

## Are Some Tortured Forever in a Lake of Fire?

“The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet are. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever” (Revelation 20:10).

Does this verse say that the beast and false prophet will be tormented for eternity?

The beast and false prophet are human beings. While alive they will be cast into the lake of fire. “Then the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who worked signs in his presence, by which he deceived those who received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped his image. These two were cast alive into the lake of fire burning with brimstone” (Revelation 19:20).

We see from Malachi 4:1-3 that any human being thrown into the lake of fire will be destroyed by being burned to ashes. He will perish. His punishment will be eternal. But he will not be tormented for eternity.

Notice in the King James and the New King James translations of Revelation 20:10 that the word *are* is italicized. The use of italics indicates that the word *are* was not in the original manuscripts from which the translation was made; it was added by the translators to make the verse more

readable because the verb was left unexpressed in the Greek text. The correct verb should be “were cast,” the plural expression of “was cast” used earlier in the same sentence. The verse would then properly indicate that the devil is to be cast into the lake of fire that had already consumed and destroyed the beast and false prophet. The translators incorrectly inserted the word *are* into the English text because of their preconceived concept of an immortal soul.

Satan, a spirit being, will indeed suffer torment long after the wicked are burned to ashes. The evil angels—demons—will share with Satan his torment (Matthew 25:41). The beast and false prophet will have ceased to exist more than 1,000 years earlier.

The Bible indicates that Satan has set his will against God and His plan, and has led millions of other angels into a similar rebellion and opposition to God. Only God in His sovereign wisdom is able to determine a just judgment for these wicked spirits. The details of that judgment are not fully spelled out in the Bible, but we can and should have faith that it will be just, true, righteous and fair. What is made clear in the Bible is the eternal judgment God has in mind for His human creation.

## Will the Wicked's Torment Last Forever?

“He shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night, who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name” (Revelation 14:10-11).

At first glance this may seem to confirm the traditional idea of a seething, sulfurous hellfire, mercilessly and eternally tormenting helpless immortal souls. But, if we don't already hold to a preconceived mental picture of hell, we can quickly grasp that this passage describes a quite different circumstance.

First, notice the setting for this passage. From the context we see that the events it describes aren't in hell or the afterlife at all, but rather *on earth* amid the earth-shaking events and disasters occurring immediately before or at Christ's return. This warning describes the punishment that will befall all of earth's inhabitants “who worship the beast and his image, and whoever receives the mark of his name.”

Chapter 13 describes this “beast”—an end-time dictatorial superpower opposed to God—and its mark. Those who accept this mark show that their allegiance is to this powerful system rather than God, and in chapter 14 God reveals the consequences of that choice—warning of the terrifying punishments that will precede Christ's

return (see verses 14-20 and the following two chapters).

Notice also in this passage that the *smoke* from these terrifying events ascends forever—it does not say that the people's *actual torment* continues forever. The smoke is no doubt associated with God's wrath poured out on earth as described in chapter 16—which includes widespread destruction, great heat, warfare and a massive earthquake. All these events will generate massive fires and a huge amount of smoke.

The properties of smoke are such that it “ascends forever”—meaning that nothing will prevent or stop it. Being a column of heated gas containing tiny, suspended particles, it rises, expands and eventually dissipates. The Greek word translated “forever” does not always mean eternity or infinity. It can simply refer to something that will not be stopped, that will continue as long as conditions allow. This passage is simply describing fires associated with this devastation that burn as long as they have fuel to consume, after which they simply burn out.

The reference in Revelation 14:11 to the wicked receiving “no rest day or night” speaks of those who continue to worship the beast and his image during this time. They will be in constant terror and fear for their lives, and thus aren't able to find a moment's rest during this terrifying time of God's anger.

66:24, NIV). Only then would this prophecy be fulfilled.

Jesus used a common site of trash disposal in His day—the burning garbage dump in the Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem's walls—to illustrate the *ultimate fate* of the wicked in what the Scriptures call a lake of fire. Just as the refuse of the city was consumed by maggots and fire, so will the wicked be burned up—consumed—by a future Gehenna-like fire more than 1,000 years after Christ returns (Revelation 20:7-9, 12-15).

Peter explains that at this time “the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be *burned up*” (2 Peter 3:10). The implication is that the surface of the earth will become a molten mass, obliterating any evidence of human wickedness.

What will happen after that? The apostle John writes: “Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea” (Revelation 21:1). The entire earth will be transformed into a suitable abode for the righteous who will, by that time, have inherited eternal life.

### The destruction of soul and body in hell

Another place where Jesus spoke of *gehenna* fire is Matthew 10:28: “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*gehenna*]” (Matthew 10:28).

We should notice that Jesus did not speak of people suffering everlasting torment. He said that God can *destroy—annihilate*—both the body and soul in Gehenna.

Jesus here explains that, when one man kills another, the resulting death is only temporary because God can raise the victim to life again. But, when God destroys one in hell (*gehenna*), the resulting death is eternal. There is no resurrection from this fate, which the Bible calls “the second death.” The Bible explains that unrepentant sinners are cast into the lake of fire, or *Gehenna*, at the end of the age. “But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death” (Revelation 21:8).

## Does the Bible Speak of Hellfire That Lasts Forever?

A scripture that many assume proves the wicked are to be eternally tortured in hellfire is Matthew 25:41. But does it? Let's take a closer look.

First, notice the setting, which is when Jesus "comes in His glory" (verses 31-32). We are told that He separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep represent the righteous (verses 34-40). At His return He sets the sheep at His right hand. The goats in this instance represent sinners. The goats are appointed to assemble on Jesus' left hand. He then consigns the goats to "the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matthew 25:41).

The word *everlasting* is translated from the Greek word *aionios*. The key to understanding this verse is knowing *what* will occur everlastingly. Does it refer to a fire that tortures without end, or does it have another meaning?

In Matthew 25:46 Jesus spoke in a single sentence of everlasting (*aionios*) punishment and of life eternal (*aionios*). Since the righteous will be given eternal, or everlasting, life, many theologians believe the punishment for the wicked must last as long as the life given to the righteous. But this cannot be reconciled with the statement that those cast into the lake of fire perish; they are killed. As we have seen, they suffer death—the second death (Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8).

A plain and simple meaning of

Matthew 25:46 that reconciles with the rest of the Bible is that the wicked are cast into a fire that annihilates them, renders them forever extinct. The resulting punishment of being cast into the *aionios* fire is a *one-time* event. It is a permanent punishment, the results of which will remain forever—that is, eternal death. It is not an ongoing punishment that continues forever.

The wicked will never live again. They will be completely destroyed. The fire brings eternal *punishment* and not a constant, unending *punishing*. This is the only explanation that accords with the rest of the Scriptures.

An additional point needs to be made regarding *aionios*. Genesis 19 describes God's destruction of two cities, Sodom and Gomorrah, for their wickedness: "Then the LORD rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah" (Genesis 19:24). They were utterly destroyed—consumed by fire.

In the New Testament, the book of Jude describes these cities as "suffering the vengeance of eternal [*aionios*] fire" (verse 7). Yet it is obvious that the fires that destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah are not still burning. In the case of these cities and in the case of the wicked, who are consigned to *aionios* fire, the fire burns and completely destroys. But the eternal aspect of the fire is its everlasting effect, not how long it literally burns.

As we discussed earlier, the wicked will be destroyed. They will not live for eternity in another place or state of everlasting anguish. They will reap their destruction in the lake of fire at the end of the age. They will be consumed virtually instantaneously by the heat of the fire and will never live again.

### The wicked burned to ashes

Another passage that graphically illustrates the utter destruction of the wicked is to be found in the book of Malachi. "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall *burn them up*," says the LORD of hosts, 'that will leave them neither root nor branch'" (Malachi 4:1).

The time setting is the end, when God will bring retribution on the wicked for their rebellious, reprehensible ways. To those who surrender to God and live in obedience to Him, God says: "'You shall trample the wicked, for *they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet* on the day that I do this,' says the LORD of hosts" (verse 3).

God, speaking through the prophet Malachi, makes clear the ultimate fate of the wicked. They are to be uprooted like a nonproductive tree, leaving not so much as a root or twig. They will be consumed by the flames of the lake of fire, leaving only ashes.

The Bible does teach that the wicked will be punished by fire—but *not* the mythical hell of men's imagination. God is a God of mercy and love. Those who willfully and willingly reject His way of life, characterized by obedience to His law of love (Romans 13:10), will die, not suffer forever. They will be consumed by fire and forgotten. They will not be tortured for all eternity, nor will God grant His priceless gift of eternal life to those who persist in rebellion against Him.

Even the final death of the incorrigibly wicked in a lake of fire is an act of justice and mercy on God's part. To allow them to continue to live on in unrepentant, eternal rebellion would cause themselves and others only great sorrow and anguish. God will not grant them eternal life, neither will He torture them for all eternity. The encouraging truth of the Bible shows that God is indeed a Being of great mercy, wisdom and righteous judgment. As Psalm 19:9 tells us: "The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether."

# Is Heaven God's Reward for the Righteous?

**I**s the reward of the righteous an eternity in heaven? It seems 78 percent of Americans believe it is (*National Review*, Nov. 9, 1998). Through the centuries this has been the hope taught by traditional Christianity.

What would going to heaven be like? What would we do when we got there? How does the Bible describe heaven?

Beliefs about heaven as the reward of the saved have varied considerably through the centuries. Traditional pictures of heaven typically show an entrance with a rainbow arching over it, often marked by a bridge of gold or glass. St. Peter is usually represented as the doorkeeper. The inhabitants are shown accompanied by angels, or they may appear as angels themselves, having apparently sprouted a pair of wings.

Another common view in the popular consciousness has the inhabitants walking among the clouds plucking harps. The decor of heaven often features jewels, stars, candles and trumpets.

These ideas may represent views of the classical heaven as envisioned by artists, but men have had other ideas about what they think heaven may be like. Theologians and philosophers have adapted their concepts through the centuries, influenced by the society around them.

“Monks and friars, depending on whether they felt more at home in the countryside or in the city, preached a heaven defined primarily in terms of environment” (Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: A History*, 1988, p. 108).

In other words, religious teachers, depending on their own experiences and preferences, have foreseen an urban paradise or something more rural. “Heaven became a city . . . or the visionary experience of celestial castles. Accounts of the other world resonate with descriptions of golden streets, jewelled buildings, and richly dressed residents” (ibid.).

Men of the Renaissance era envisioned a spicier paradise. “In its boldest form, the new theology envisioned heaven as a place of erotic human love in the bucolic setting of a comfortable natural landscape” (ibid., p. 112).

## An eternity in heaven doing what?

The relationship the heavenly inhabitants might have with God has been debated. A modern author describes the interaction with God this way: “There the saints shall eternally, without interruption, feast their eyes upon Him, and be ever viewing His glorious perfections” (John MacArthur, *The Glory of Heaven*, 1996, p. 221).

Others believe that, if this is all they are to do forever, heaven may prove to be a boring place. As one writer put it, the prayer of many could be: “Please God, don’t take me to heaven yet . . . I haven’t even been to Hawaii!” (MacArthur, p. 49).

The modern Christian concepts of heaven present a diverse landscape. Another writer said: “I have a theory that heaven will offer faithful Christians whatever they sacrificed on earth for Jesus’ sake. My mountain-climbing friend who intentionally lives in a slum area of Chicago will have Yosemite Valleys all to himself. A missionary doctor in the parched land of Sudan will have her own private rain forest to explore” (Philip Yancey, “What’s a Heaven For?,” *Christianity Today*, Oct. 26, 1998).

For many the most important aspect of heaven is the opportunity to see their loved ones again. “By far the most persuasive element of the modern heaven for many contemporary Christians is the hope of meeting the family again. Countless ‘in memoriam’ sections of newspapers throughout Europe and America reflect the belief that families parted by death will be reunited” (MacDannell and Lang, p. 309).

God does have a plan that will reunite loved ones, as we will see. But the popular ideas of heaven fall far short of capturing the majesty and purpose of God’s plan.

## Do people go to heaven at death?

The popular belief is that a good person goes to heaven immediately when he dies. But for the traditional Christian things aren't quite that simple. According to this view, the body goes to the grave, but the soul ascends to heaven.

The Westminster Confession of Faith, written in the 17th century, states, in part: "The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, (which never die nor sleep,) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies."

But does this concept agree with the Bible? Do the Scriptures state that righteous people go to heaven when they die?

## Pre-Christian Belief of an Afterlife in Heaven

The idea that "souls" go to heaven upon death long predates Christianity. A brief look at ancient history reveals that the people of Babylon and Egypt, as well as subjects of other ancient kingdoms, held similar beliefs.

According to *This Believing World*, by Lewis Brown, the Egyptian god Osiris was supposedly killed and reputed to be resurrected and taken to heaven: "Osiris came to life again. He was miraculously resurrected from death and taken up to heaven; and there in heaven, so the myth declared, he lived on eternally" (1946, p. 83).

Brown explains: "The Egyptians reasoned that if it was the fate of the god Osiris to be resurrected after death, then a way could be found to

make it the fate of man, too . . . The bliss of immortality that had formerly been reserved only for kings was then promised to all men . . . The heavenly existence of the dead was carried on in the realm of Osiris, and it was described in considerable detail by the Egyptian theologians. It was believed that on death the soul of a man set out at once to reach a Judgment Hall on high . . . and stood before the celestial throne of Osiris, the Judge. There it gave account of itself to Osiris and his forty-two associate gods" (p. 84).

If the soul could satisfy the gods, "the soul was straightway gathered into the fold of Osiris. But if it could not, if it was found wanting when

David, the king of Israel and author of many of the Psalms, whom God called "a man after My own heart" (Acts 13:22), did *not* go to heaven at his death. The apostle Peter, speaking under God's inspiration, stated: "Men and brethren, let me speak freely to you of the patriarch David, that he is both dead and buried, and his tomb is with us to this day" (Acts 2:29). He then added that "David *did not* ascend into the heavens" (verse 34).

David is included in Hebrews 11:32 among those who died in faith, and in verse 39 David is one of those of whom it is said: "And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, *did not receive the promise.*"

Jesus, speaking about 1,000 years after David's death, said: "*No one has ascended to heaven* but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man . . ." (John 3:13). This means that Abraham,

weighed in the heavenly balances, then it was cast into a hell, to be rent to shreds of the 'Devouress.' For only the righteous souls, only the guiltless, were thought to be deserving of life everlasting" (pp. 86-87).

Brown continues: "Mankind everywhere, in Mexico and Iceland, in Zululand and China, makes more or less the same wild guesses in its convulsive effort to solve the riddle of existence. And that is why we find this complex idea of a slain and resurrected god common in many parts of the world.

"In very early times that idea flourished not alone among the Babylonians and Egyptians, but also among the barbaric tribes in and around Greece . . . These mysteries [came] down from Thrace or across the sea from Egypt and Asia Minor . . . They declared that for every man, no matter how poor or vicious, there was a place in heaven. All one had to do

was to be 'initiated' into the secrets of the cult . . . then salvation was assured him, and no excess of vice and moral turpitude could close the gates of paradise in his face. He was saved forevermore" (pp. 96-99).

Man has always wanted to live without ever dying. This world and all it offers has never satisfied humanity. For centuries mankind has searched for security and happiness in the hope of going to heaven upon death. Regrettably, he has embraced beliefs that he cannot prove to be true.

God alone knows the answers to the mysteries of life and death and reveals them in His Word, the Holy Bible. Contrary to what many think, God does not promise us we will go to heaven when we die. Instead, Jesus says those who overcome will reign with Him in the coming Kingdom of God to be established on earth at His return (Revelation 3:21; 5:10; 11:15).

## Paul's Desire to 'Depart and Be With Christ'

The apostle Paul dedicated his life to preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). In the process he was subjected to persecution, beatings and several periods of imprisonment. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians he was enduring a period of house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that the Roman government had authority to put prisoners to death. Paul knew what the future might hold for him, whether it be execution on the one hand or his release on the other.

In Philippians 1:23-24 he wrote of the two possible outcomes: "For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you."

Many have assumed from Paul's words here that he believed that at the moment of his death he would join Christ in heaven. However, this is not the case.

Paul knew that if he were executed he would go to the grave, and there his remains would lie until the time of his resurrection. Paul knew that, since the dead have no thought processes whatsoever, in his next waking moment he would be with the returning Messiah, Jesus, joining Him along with the other saints at the time of the resurrection.

Paul wrote of this resurrection at Christ's return to the church in Thessalonica: "For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Paul knew that it would be only at a time yet in the future when he would be resurrected to be with Christ. He knew that at that time he and God's other faithful servants would receive the gift of eternal life in the Kingdom.

Later, when he knew he was indeed condemned to be executed (2 Timothy 4:6-7), he wrote of this coming time. "From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me *on that day*, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (verse 8, New Revised Standard Version). Paul knew his reward would come "on that day"—the day of "His appearing"—rather than at the moment of his death.

The interval from Paul's last thought as a human being to the time of his seeing Christ in the resurrection will seem instantaneous, since the Bible shows that the dead know nothing (Ecclesiastes 9:5). This is why Paul wrote as he did in his letter to the Philippians.

Moses, David, the prophets and all other righteous men and women who lived before Christ's first coming *did not go to heaven*. They were buried in the grave as David was.

The view that a person's soul goes to heaven at death—though held by many in good faith—cannot be found in the Bible. It results from a misunderstanding of the Scriptures and confusion over what the Bible *does* teach about the resurrection.

### Why a resurrection?

Theologians widely acknowledge that the Bible speaks of a resurrection, even if they're not sure what it means or when it takes place. The most common view is that at the resurrection the body rises to be reunited with the soul in heaven. But, as we pointed out earlier, the concept of the immortality of the soul—the soul as existing as something apart from the body—is not biblical. It takes its origins from the Greek philosophers rather than the writers of the Bible.

We might pose this question: If it were true that at the resurrection the body is to rise to be united with the soul in heaven, why would God do things this way? What purpose would the resurrection serve? Why keep the body in the grave? If the righteous go immediately to heaven at death, why wouldn't God send the complete being—soul and body—to heaven simultaneously, instead of keeping soul and body apart through the ages? Or why even have a resurrection? If the soul goes immediately to heaven, why bother with bringing bodies back to life?

The inescapable fact is that, according to popular teaching about heaven, there is no logical reason for the resurrection.

Why is there confusion about how the resurrection fits with the traditional view of heaven? Perhaps it is because support for the idea of going to heaven at death is not found in the Bible.

### What is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Many people believe they will go to heaven because Jesus spoke repeatedly of the Kingdom of Heaven. In Matthew 5:3 He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Three other verses in Matthew 5 refer to the faithful entering the kingdom of heaven. The phrase *Kingdom of Heaven* appears in the book of Matthew a total of 32 times.

## Did Elijah Go to Heaven?

A biblical event many cite to support belief that the righteous go to heaven when they die involves the prophet Elijah. Elijah was a prophet of God in the ninth century B.C. The Bible states that "Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11). But does this contradict the testimony of John's Gospel, which stated some 900 years after Elijah's time that "no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man"? (John 3:13).

How can we explain this seeming biblical discrepancy? A closer look shows that the two passages can be reconciled easily enough.

Careful study shows three "heavens" actually discussed in the Bible. One is God's dwelling place—the place of His throne—and the heaven where the resurrected Jesus is today. Speaking of Christ, who is our High Priest, the Bible says: "We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens" (Hebrews 8:1). Heaven is specifically called God's dwelling place (Deuteronomy 26:15).

Another heaven discussed in the Bible is what we call outer space. It is the domain of the moon, planets, comets, asteroids, sun and stars. David spoke of this when he reflected on the awesomeness of God's creative handiwork, which he described as "Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars which You have ordained" (Psalm 8:3).

Many scriptures mention "the stars of heaven" (Genesis 26:4; Deuteronomy 1:10; 28:62; Isaiah 13:10).

Yet another heaven is the envelope of air that surrounds our planet, consisting of oxygen and other gases. This heaven—earth's atmosphere—is mentioned in such passages as Genesis 7:11-12, which describes the great flood of Noah's day: ". . . The windows of heaven were opened. And the rain was on the earth forty days and forty nights." The Bible also speaks of "the birds of heaven," those that fly overhead (Job 35:11; Jeremiah 16:4).

To determine which heaven is meant in a Bible passage, we must carefully consider the context. It was into the lower reaches of this third kind of heaven—the earth's atmosphere—that Elijah was taken. Let us notice the proof.

God had earlier told Elijah that he was to anoint a man named Elisha as his successor (1 Kings 19:16). Later, as Elijah and Elisha walked together, Elijah said to Elisha, "What may I do for you, before I am taken away from you?" (2 Kings 2:9). This led to a discussion of God's gifts to Elisha that would allow him to fill Elijah's role.

"Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven" (verse 11). Elijah

was now gone. The former followers and students of Elijah now knew to look to Elisha as their new leader. "Now when the sons of the prophets who were from Jericho saw him, they said, 'The spirit of Elijah rests on Elisha'" (2 Kings 2:15).

Many Bible scholars and other readers assume that Elijah at that point was made immortal and taken to the heaven where God resides. This was not the case. The sons of the prophets knew otherwise. They knew the whirlwind had simply removed Elijah to another location on earth. They exclaimed to Elisha: "Look now, there are fifty strong men with your servants. Please let them go and search for your master, lest perhaps the Spirit of the LORD has taken him up and cast him upon some mountain or into some valley" (2 Kings 2:16).

The disciples were concerned for Elijah's safety, so they sent out a party of 50 men to search for him. The 50 searched for three days but did not find him (2 Kings 2:17).

Another passage proves conclusively Elijah did not go to heaven. The Bible records that Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram, the king of Judah, several years after he was removed in the whirlwind.

Notice the sequence of events recorded for us in the Bible. Elijah's last recorded and dated act occurred during the reign of the Israelite king Ahaziah when Elijah told the king he would die for his sins (2 Kings 1:3, 17). Ahaziah's reign lasted only about a year ca. 850 B.C.

Elijah's removal and replacement by Elisha is then recorded in the next

chapter, 2 Kings 2. The story continues with incidents from Elisha's life, including an encounter with Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (2 Kings 3:11-14). Several years later Jehoram, son of Jehoshaphat, succeeded his father as king of Judah ca. 845 B.C. (2 Kings 8:16).

Jehoram proved to be a wicked king, leading the nation of Judah in rebellion against God's commandments. A few years into Jehoram's reign, and several years after Elijah's removal, Elijah wrote a letter to Jehoram warning him of dire consequences because of his sins. This letter is recorded in 2 Chronicles 21:12-15.

This letter proves the prophet was still alive and on earth some years after he was removed by the whirlwind and replaced by Elisha. God had chosen Elisha to succeed Elijah as His prophet, so He bodily removed Elijah to another place, where he continued to live for at least several more years—as his letter to Jehoram demonstrates.

The Bible tells us nothing more about Elijah after he wrote the letter. But he eventually died, since Hebrews 9:27 tells us "it is appointed for men to die once." Elijah, like the other prophets and righteous men of the Old Testament, died in faith, not having received the eternal life God had promised (Hebrews 11:39, NIV).

As these passages show, a careful reading of the Scriptures shows that Elijah's miraculous removal in a fiery chariot involved transporting him to another location in the area, not to eternal life in heaven.

## Are There Saved Human Beings in Heaven?

“After these things I heard a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Alleluia! Salvation and glory and honor and power to the Lord our God!’” (Revelation 19:1).

Who are the great multitude? Are the voices praising God those of saved human beings now living in heaven? Have any human beings ever ascended to heaven?

The popular teaching is that when Christians die they immediately go to heaven, where they take up residence in their permanent abode.

But can we find such a teaching in the Bible?

Notice John 3:13: “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man [Jesus Christ] who is in heaven.”

This scripture makes two points significant to our discussion here. First, these are Jesus’ own words. If anyone had gone to heaven, Jesus would know about it.

Second, John recorded these words many years after Jesus died and ascended to heaven—still affirming that no one other than Jesus had gone to heaven.

Whose voices, then, did John hear when he recorded in the book of Revelation what he heard and saw? He refers to voices many places in the book. Let’s notice two such examples. First: “The four living creatures, each having six wings, were

full of eyes around and within. And they do not rest day or night, saying: ‘Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!’” (Revelation 4:8).

Second: “Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to Him who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: ‘You are Worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created!’” (verses 9-11).

The Bible shows us that many thousands of angels appear before God’s throne, and they speak with loud voices. “Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice: ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:11-12).

We have seen that the Scriptures show no human—besides Jesus the Messiah—has ever entered heaven. The voices referred to in Revelation 19, then, are those of angelic beings who surround God’s throne.

However, note that Matthew is the *only* biblical writer who uses the term *kingdom of heaven*. Other Bible writers use the term *Kingdom of God*. For example, Luke, in recording the same event described above, records Jesus’ words as: “Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). The terms are interchangeable. The term *Kingdom of God* is used 69 times in the New Testament, mostly in the Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

As we will see, Jesus did not tell His disciples they should expect to go to heaven. He spoke instead of a kingdom *originating* from God in heaven that is to be established *on the earth* at His second coming. Notice Jesus’ explanation that He would come to join His followers *on earth at His return* rather than have them ascend to heaven to be with Him where He currently resides.

After Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, He spent 40 days teaching His disciples, instructing them about the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). After this He joined His Father in heaven. Let us notice the instruction His disciples received after He rose into the sky.

“Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, *will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven*’” (Acts 1:9-11).

Jesus spoke repeatedly of His return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth (Matthew 25:31-34; Luke 21:27-31). He will return to earth and establish His Kingdom *here*—not in heaven. In what is commonly called the Lord’s Prayer, He instructs His followers to pray to their heavenly Father, “*Your kingdom come*” (Matthew 6:10; Luke 11:2). That kingdom is the true goal of every Christian (Matthew 6:33); we are to pray for its arrival.

In Luke 19:12 Jesus spoke of Himself in a parable, comparing Himself to “a certain nobleman [who] went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return.” The “far country” is His Father’s dwelling place, which is in heaven. Jesus will bring the Kingdom of God to earth at His return.

Matthew sometimes refers to it as the “kingdom of heaven”

because it is a kingdom of heavenly, divine origins. Notice also that it is called the kingdom *of* heaven and never referred to as a kingdom *in* heaven. (To better understand what the Scriptures teach about the Kingdom of God, be sure to request your free copy of the booklet *The Gospel of the Kingdom*.)

### Christ's Kingdom established on earth

One Old Testament prophecy is specific about Jesus' return, telling us exactly where He will arrive back on earth to establish His

Kingdom. "And in that day His feet will stand on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east . . . And the LORD shall be King over all the earth" (Zechariah 14:4, 9).

The incident we read about in the book of Acts that describes Jesus' ascension tells us that it was on the Mount of Olives that He last talked with His disciples, and it was from the same mountain that He rose into the clouds in their sight. He will return to the same mountain to begin His reign in the Kingdom of God.

In Matthew 5:5 Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall

## The Thief on the Cross

As Christ hung dying, He told a convicted criminal being crucified with Him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Many people think Jesus assured the man he would go to heaven with Him that very day. But is this really what He said?

Let's first ask, Where is the paradise of which Christ spoke? The word translated "paradise" is used only two other times in the New Testament. In both cases it refers to the place of God's presence.

In 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 Paul describes a vision in which he "was caught up into Paradise" (verse 4). Paul says this paradise was in "the third heaven" (verse 2)—the dwelling place of God.

Jesus tells us that "the tree of life" is located "in the midst of the Paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7). Revelation 22:2 explains that the tree of life is to be in the New Jerusalem. God will come from heaven to dwell in this New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:2-3)

after the resurrections mentioned in Revelation 20. Only at that time will men dwell with God in this paradise. Putting together these scriptures, we can see that the paradise Christ mentioned, in which men will dwell with God, is to be *at a future time*.

How do we know this was Christ's meaning?

We know because the Bible clearly says Jesus *did not* ascend to paradise on that day He died! He went to the grave. "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Notice what Christ told Mary soon after He had been resurrected: "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father . . ." (John 20:17). A full three days after His death, Jesus Himself clearly said that He had not yet ascended to heaven!

Jesus lay in the grave for three

days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). The Scriptures nowhere say that His body was buried but His soul went elsewhere. Jesus died and was buried. He went only to the grave. Therefore the dying criminal *could not* have joined Jesus in paradise that day, because *He was not even there*.

If Jesus were not telling the man he would be in paradise on that day, what was Christ telling him?

The repentant robber had come to his senses while being crucified alongside Jesus (Luke 23:39-41). He said to Christ, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (verse 42).

The thief, like anyone facing imminent death, sought comfort and assurance. Jesus provided it.

His reply, "Assuredly I say to you today" was "a common Hebrew idiom . . . which is constantly used for very solemn emphasis" (The Companion Bible, 1990, Appendix 173, p. 192).

Much of the misunderstanding that arises from Christ's statement comes about because the Bible originally included no punctuation. It wasn't until many centuries later that the punctuation marks that we see

in our English versions were inserted. When commas were added, Jesus' meaning was distorted and this Hebrew figure of speech obscured.

Jesus never said nor implied that the dying man would be in paradise on that very day. Christ was encouraging him by solemnly assuring him that a time would come, in God's future kingdom on earth, when the man would be resurrected and would see Jesus again. Christ could make this statement because He could see the man's repentant attitude and recognition of Jesus as the Messiah.

We should remember that, when Jesus' accusers and guards brought Him before Pontius Pilate, He told His captor, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). In this plain statement He confirmed that His domain, His realm, His government—the paradise of God—belonged to the age to come. God's Kingdom will be revealed at Christ's second coming.

This dramatic event can be properly understood only when we comprehend the time frame of God's plan of salvation and the promised resurrections described in the Bible.

inherit *the earth*.” This verse and many others describe the saints ruling *on earth* in God’s Kingdom. For example, Revelation 5:10, speaking of the resurrected saints, says: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and *they will reign on the earth*” (NIV).

The reward of the saints is eternal life in the Kingdom of God. This will be given to them when Christ returns, but, as we have seen, Jesus will reign with them on the earth rather than in heaven.

## Was Enoch Taken to Heaven?

Some people believe Genesis 5:24 and Hebrews 11:5 declare that God took Enoch to heaven. But is that what these verses say?

Genesis 5:24 tells us that “Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.” Hebrews 11:5 adds: “By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, ‘and was not found, because God had taken him’; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.”

Neither scripture tells us how or where God took him, only that He did. Did God take Enoch to heaven? Clearly not, because Jesus Himself said that “no one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man . . .”

Further, Hebrews 11 lists many faithful men and women of the Bible (including Enoch) but concludes that “all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, *did not receive the promise . . .*” (verse 39). Obviously, then, Enoch neither ascended to heaven nor received the promised eternal life.

So what did happen to Enoch? Genesis 5:23 makes it clear that

Enoch ultimately did die: “*So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years.*” He lived 365 years and no more. He isn’t still alive and walking with God. The expression “all the days” is used of eight other people in this same chapter—all of whom obviously died.

Hebrews 11:5 tells us Enoch was “taken away.” In Acts 7:15-16 the same Greek word refers to the remains of the patriarch Jacob being “carried” from Egypt (where he had died) to Shechem, where he was later buried.

The Scriptures simply do not reveal all the details of what happened to Enoch. They do record, however, that Elijah, in a similar manner, was physically removed by a whirlwind and fiery chariot only to die later (see “Did Elijah Go to Heaven?” p. 34). Also, God instructed Moses to go to the top of Mount Nebo to die—apparently alone (Deuteronomy 32:48-50). Then God buried his body where it would not be found (Deuteronomy 34:5-6), possibly to prevent the grave site from being made into an idolatrous shrine. Something similar might have happened to Enoch.

# The Resurrection: God’s Promise of Life After Death

“If a man dies, shall he live again?” (Job 14:14). This question has intrigued the minds of men from ancient times to our day.

In the Bible God inspired the patriarch Job not only to pose this important question but to give us the answer. Responding to God, Job said: “All the days of my hard service I will wait, *till my change comes*. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands” (Job 14:14-15).

Job affirmed that the dead will live again through a resurrection.

Other passages in the Old Testament also affirm the resurrection. Daniel 12:2, for example, prophesies of a time yet future when “many of those *who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake . . .*”

But the way to eternal life was not fully understood in those days. It remained for Christ to come and fully reveal the truth. Jesus said: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25).

It is through Christ that we can experience our own resurrection from the dead. “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22).

The teaching of the good news of the resurrection—that man can escape the power of the grave—set Christianity apart from other

first-century religions and philosophies. Among Jewish sects the concept of a resurrection was a subject of controversy. Some dogmatically denied that the dead would rise, and others said that they would (Acts 23:8).

The world in which Jesus lived, besides being Jewish, was heavily influenced by the culture of the two empires—Greek and Roman—that had successively dominated the region for several centuries. The Greek and Roman religions held little hope for the dead.

“The old Greek belief, and its Roman counterpart, held that once the body was dead the disembodied soul lived in a miserable twilight existence . . . Sadness, silence and hopelessness seemed to brood over the life after death . . . Death was to men of those days the ultimate disaster” (J.B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator’s Testimony*, 1967, pp. 40-41).

The *New Bible Dictionary* affirms the dreary outlook of the day and tells us that the resurrection of Christ gave men more than a glimmer of hope. “The most startling characteristic of the first Christian preaching is its emphasis on the resurrection. The first preachers were sure that Christ had risen, and sure, in consequence, that believers would in due course rise also. This set them off from all the other teachers of the ancient world . . . Nothing is more characteristic of even the best thought of the day than its hopelessness in the face of death. Clearly the resurrection is of the very first importance for the Christian faith” (*New Bible Dictionary*, 1996, p. 1010, “Resurrection”).

### A truth that launched the Church

It was the riveting truth of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah that launched the New Testament Church. Preaching on the day of the Church’s founding, as recorded in Acts 2, the apostle Peter thundered the good news:

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a Man attested by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs which God did through Him in your midst, as you yourselves also know—Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; *whom God raised up*, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it” (Acts 2:22-24).

The news of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth traveled like a shock wave through the land. Jesus’ disciples were galvanized into action and began to preach with zeal. What had been regarded as a band of renegade Jews soon grew into the thriving Church.

In its early days the Church grew by thousands (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The young Church spread hope—hope of eternal life through the resurrection. The disciples taught under God’s inspiration that all who accept Jesus as their personal Savior, repent, are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit will be resurrected (compare Acts 2:38 and Romans 8:11).

The resurrection that the disciples expected was not some sort of substandard half-life such as the Greeks and Romans believed lay beyond the grave. The disciples were called to “take hold of the life that is *truly* life” (1 Timothy 6:19, NIV).

Jesus had told them before He was crucified, “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19). Jesus had also shared with His disciples His intention for all of mankind: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The abundant life of which Christ spoke reaches its full realization in the resurrection from the dead.

### The resurrection gives meaning to life

The first-century world held numerous conflicting ideas about life after death. Pagan philosophies had clouded the understanding of most people.

Our situation is similar. In the Western world a significant number of people believe nothing lies beyond the grave. Atheism and agnosticism have left their marks. The world needs to hear and understand the original resurrection message of Christ and the apostles.

Many people, like those of the ancient world, are anxious about the matter of death. The truth of the resurrection proclaimed by God’s Word can counter the anxiety and hopelessness inherent in any approach that excludes God.

Speaking of the return of Christ and the accompanying resurrection of the faithful, Paul encouraged believers to “comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:18). The truth of the resurrection provides comfort for our natural anxiety about death.

## The resurrection: historical fact

Why should we believe in a resurrection from the dead? We should take heart because the resurrection is a biblically and historically confirmed *fact*.

After being executed and entombed, Jesus' body disappeared, and even His enemies who wanted to refute His resurrection could not explain away the empty tomb. Jesus' resurrection was confirmed by many witnesses—including on one occasion 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6). Peter, speaking on behalf of all the apostles, proudly proclaimed,

“... We are His *witnesses* to these things”—to the fact that “the God of our fathers raised up Jesus” (Acts 5:30-32).

Years later Paul similarly documented that “God raised Him from the dead [and] He was seen for many days by those who came up with Him from Galilee to Jerusalem, who are witnesses to the people” (Acts 13:30-31). The apostles and other members of the early Church gave their lives as willing martyrs for this truth.

## Every man in his own order

These facts are known and understood by many Bible readers.

# Christ and Biblical Writers Compare Death to Sleep

What happens to a person when he dies? The Bible compares death to a state of sleep. It is not a normal “sleep,” of course. It is a sleep in which there is no thought, brain activity or life whatsoever. Passages throughout the Bible show this to be the case.

For example, Job spoke of the state of the dead on more than one occasion. “Why did I not die at birth? Why did I not perish when I came from the womb? . . . For now I would have lain still and been quiet, I would have been asleep; then I would have been at rest . . . There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest” (Job 3:11, 13, 17).

Many centuries later the biblical account of the death of Lazarus, a friend of Jesus, illustrates death to be a sleeplike state. “Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany” (John 11:1). Jesus decided to go to him, but, so He could perform a miracle

to strengthen His disciples' faith, He waited until Lazarus died.

Before going to Bethany, Jesus discussed the condition of Lazarus with His disciples. He told them Lazarus was asleep and that He was going to awaken him (John 11:11-14). The disciples responded that sleep was good because it would help him get well (verse 12). Jesus then plainly told them, “Lazarus is dead” (verse 14). Notice that Jesus stated emphatically that Lazarus was dead, but at the same time He described death as a condition like sleep.

When the time came for Jesus to act, “He cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus come forth!’ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes . . . Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go!’” (verses 43-44).

Lazarus had not gone to heaven or hell. He had been entombed, where he “slept” until Jesus called

him out of the grave.

God performed a special miracle by resurrecting Lazarus from the dead, but everyone enters a figurative state of sleep at death. The dead are unconscious. The common belief is that at death the body goes to the grave and the soul remains conscious and goes either to heaven or hell. Yet, as we have seen, this belief is not biblical.

In another reference that describes the state of the dead, Paul refers to the righteous dead who will be resurrected to meet Christ in the air as being “asleep.”

“For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who *are asleep*. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord” (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

So those who are in their graves will be resurrected, rising to meet the returning Messiah along with those in Christ who are yet alive. They all will be caught up in the air to meet Christ in the first resurrection. They will then return to the earth to reign with Him in the Kingdom of God.

That the dead are figuratively in a state of sleep, awaiting the resurrection, “was the prevalent opinion until as late as the 5th century” (*The Decline of Hell*, p. 35). The change away from the biblical teaching occurred several centuries after Christ. The plain teaching of the Bible is that the dead are unconscious, waiting in the grave. They are, as Jesus and Paul put it, sleeping. They will not awake until the resurrection.

Eventually all will arise—some to eternal life in the first resurrection and others to physical life in another resurrection 1,000 years later. As Jesus said, the hour is coming “in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth” (John 5:28-29). This is the comforting and encouraging truth revealed in the Scriptures.

What is not so clear to many is that the Bible describes *more than one* resurrection. The writings of the apostles Paul and John both confirm this truth. In 1 Corinthians 15:22-23, Paul wrote: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But *each one in his own order*: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.”

The reference to firstfruits indicates that *other* fruits are to follow. Paul specified that God has set an order in His plan by which He will bring up everyone in a resurrection. Not everyone will be resurrected *at the same time*.

Those who believe that people go to heaven or hell at death have been troubled at the indications they see in Scripture that comparatively few will be saved. They frequently base this assumption on such passages as Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.”

In these verses Jesus explains what happens in “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), in which God is not calling everyone to be converted *now*. We read in Revelation 12:9 that Satan “deceives the whole world.” John wrote, “We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19).

Mankind as a whole is deceived—*for the time being*. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44). Jesus plainly indicated here that only certain ones will be in that resurrection—those who are specifically called by God. The Bible teaches that in this particular age—the age preceding the return of Christ—God is calling only a small portion of mankind to enter and partake of His Kingdom.

### The first resurrection

The resurrection of those who are called now—the ones Paul referred to as firstfruits—is further described in the 20th chapter of Revelation.

Let’s notice how John describes that resurrection of the firstfruits: “I saw thrones on which were seated those who had been given authority to judge. And I saw the souls of those who had been

beheaded because of their testimony for Jesus and because of the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or his image and had not received his mark on their foreheads or their hands. *They came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.* (The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.) *This is the first resurrection*” (Revelation 20:4-5, NIV).

Notice that some are resurrected at the beginning of the 1,000-year reign of Christ—at “the first resurrection.” The use of the term *first* shows that at least one more resurrection must follow.

### Another resurrection

That same verse explains, “The *rest* of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were ended.” There is another resurrection *after* the first, and in this resurrection *others* will have the opportunity to receive salvation. They will be called to understand God’s truth and His plan during a period sometimes referred to as the “great white throne” judgment (verse 11).

This time of judgment is further described in verse 12: “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.”

Those resurrected in this group have never completely understood the truth of God. Consider that the majority of all people who have ever lived have never heard God’s truth. Rather than such people being condemned to eternal suffering in a fiery hell, the truth of the Bible is much more comforting and encouraging. God will extend the opportunity for eternal life to everyone—to a relatively few in this age but to billions of people in the coming second resurrection.

Judgment is much more than a final decision to reward or condemn. Judgment is a *process* that takes place over time before a final decision is rendered. Those brought to a temporary, physical life again in this resurrection (see Ezekiel 37:1-14) will, for the *first* time, have their minds opened to the truth of God’s plan. They will have the opportunity to decide whether they will accept and follow God’s instruction or not. After coming to see the truth, they will be judged according to their response to their new understanding. Many will

accept that truth, repent and receive God's gift of eternal life.

### Past generations resurrected together

Jesus spoke of this time when He said even the sinners of the long-destroyed city of Sodom would have the opportunity to repent in a future judgment. As He sent His disciples out on a mission to preach the gospel (Matthew 10:9-14), He told them that some they would encounter would reject their message. Of these Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city" (verse 15).

That there is room for tolerance in that day toward Sodom and Gomorrah shows they will have opportunity to repent and enter God's Kingdom. This is because, when they formerly lived, they either never had opportunity to know God or His way or never fully understood what they heard. The time for their calling and judgment is *yet future*. This is not a *second* chance for salvation. This will be their *first* chance—their first opportunity to act on a clear understanding of God's truth.

In a similar example, Jesus said the long-dead people of the ancient Assyrian city of Nineveh and the biblical "queen of the South" from Solomon's time would rise alongside those from Christ's generation. The people from those generations had lived and died many centuries earlier, never having understood the true God or His plan to offer eternal life through His Son Jesus the Messiah.

That God will offer salvation to all who lived and died in all ages without ever really knowing Him shows His great mercy toward all people. God does not show partiality (Romans 2:11). He calls all at the time that is appropriate for them, and all eventually will be given the same wonderful opportunity to receive His gift of salvation.

### Evidence of a third resurrection

Other scriptures indicate that a third group will be resurrected just before the final destruction of the wicked in the lake of fire.

Jesus explained that some would deliberately and knowingly despise the spiritual revelations that God would open their minds to understand. These, He said, will not be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:31-32).

Yet "*all* who are in the graves will hear [Christ's] voice and come

forth . . ." (John 5:28). Even those who will not be forgiven are to be resurrected from the dead.

This group will include *only* those who have deliberately rejected God's way of life even after they have been "once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit" (Hebrews 6:4-6). These few are people who were once forgiven and converted but later chose to reject the Holy Spirit and priceless knowledge God gave to them.

Because they "trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace," for them "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:26-29).

God has revealed that the ultimate fate of the incorrigibly wicked is to be burned up. "For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up," says the LORD of hosts, "That will leave them neither root nor branch" (Malachi 4:1).

Therefore destruction in the lake of fire (Revelation 20:13-14) must include those few who stubbornly refused to repent of their own self-willed rebellion in spite of all the opportunities God made available to them.

When all this is finished we read: "Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death" (verse 14). The judgment of God is complete. Those who are saved will never again have to fear death.

# Your Awesome Future

**I**n light of these biblical truths, where does that leave us? As we have seen, the beliefs of people about the nature of heaven and hell have ranged over a broad—and confusing—spectrum. But there is one thing on which we all should agree: *We shall all die*. Indeed, “the living know that they will die” (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

The prospect of death has hung over the heads of mankind as long as men have existed. When people are gripped by the fear of death, they are enslaved in a cruel and unforgiving bondage.

*The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* summarizes how the truth of the resurrection, personified in the resurrection of Christ, transformed the outlook of many: “In the first century this [fear of death] was very real. The philosophers urged people to be calm in the face of death, and some of them managed to do so. But to most people this brought no relief. Fear was widespread, as the hopeless tone of the inscriptions on tombs clearly illustrates. But one of the many wonderful things about the Christian gospel is that it delivers men and women from this fear . . . They are saved with a sure hope of life eternal, a life whose best lies beyond the grave” (Leon Morris, 1981, Vol. 12, p. 29).

The Bible reveals that the best that man can experience lies beyond the grave. It shows us that converted Christians will inherit eternal life at the resurrection and that death will never again lay a claim on them.

“So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

The life to come will be vastly superior to this present temporary existence. It will be a life abounding in both purpose and pleasure.

“In your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore,” wrote David (Psalm 16:11). Let us catch a glimpse of what awaits those who receive eternal life through the resurrection.

## What will we be like?

We can know in general terms what we will be like in the resurrection because the Bible tells us we will be like the resurrected Jesus. “The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven . . . And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man” (1 Corinthians 15:47, 49).

We learn that in the resurrection we will take on the same image, or likeness, that Christ has. Paul tells us that true Christians will “share the likeness of his Son,” who is “the eldest among a large family of brothers” (Romans 8:29, REB). Did you catch that? We will be Jesus’ brothers and share His likeness. Though Christ has eternally existed and we have not, we will be elevated to a plane so high that we are called *children of God* and *brothers of Jesus Christ*.

The apostle John confirms these same two truths, that we will be children of God with the same glorified form as Jesus Christ. “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us,” he writes, “that we should be called *children of God*” (1 John 3:1). And in 1 John 3:2 he tells us, “we know that when He is revealed, *we shall be like Him*, for we shall see Him as He is.”

We will possess a glory that is so great as to be compared to the glory of Christ (Romans 8:16-18), though we will never equal Him. He is the one Son of God who has always existed, superior to all but the Father.

## The glory of Christ

What is the glory of Christ like? During His physical ministry on earth, He gave three of His disciples a preview of His appearance in this glorified spiritual state. “He was transfigured . . . His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light” (Matthew 17:2).

Years later, at the writing of the book of Revelation, John saw a vision of the resurrected, glorified Christ. Notice how John describes His awesome appearance: “His hair was as white as snow-white wool, and his eyes flamed like fire; his feet were like burnished bronze refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of a mighty torrent . . . His face shone like the sun in full strength” (Revelation 1:14-15, REB).

This language describes Christ, the glorified Son of God, as a being of great brilliance. We, too, will share that dazzling appearance.

After His resurrection Jesus had the ability to take on the appearance that He had when He existed in the flesh. Early on the morning after He rose from the garden tomb, Mary Magdalene visited His grave. When she saw the tomb was empty, she began to weep (John 20:11).

Then “Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?’ She, supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him, ‘Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away’” (verses 15-16). Jesus appeared to Mary as a normal human being rather than in His radiant state. She mistook Him for the gardener, possibly because it still may have been dark at the time (see verse 1).

On another occasion Jesus appeared from nowhere inside a closed room where His disciples were meeting. “And after eight days His disciples were again inside . . . Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, ‘Peace to you!’” (John 20:26). After His resurrection Jesus was able to pass through solid barriers—such as the walls of a building or the stone enclosure of His tomb.

Like Jesus, when we are changed to spirit we will not be limited by the laws that govern physical things. With the ability to simply materialize, we will not be subject to the speed restrictions that physical objects are. As part of this change we will not need to eat to survive, but apparently will have the option of eating for pleasure and fellowship if we choose. In two of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances He shared a meal with His disciples (Luke 24:28-30; John 21:9-15).

Those to whom God gives eternal life in the resurrection will forever possess these supernatural characteristics. Notice the description of the resurrection in the book of Daniel: “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise *will shine like the brightness of the heavens*, and those who lead many to righteousness, *like the stars for ever and ever*” (Daniel 12:2-3, NIV).

### What will we do as spirit beings?

As spirit beings in God’s family we will live and work at the highest possible level and environment. Jesus said, “And this is eternal life, that

they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). We will spend eternity with God in His environment—the world of spirit and all power. We will not sit idle in our new life. We will be positively occupied. Jesus said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17).

When Christ returns to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, those in the first resurrection will serve as judges (Revelation 20:4) and priests (verse 6) and will “reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). We will not go to heaven to live passively and idly.

Jesus will return to a world that has largely destroyed itself by living in opposition to the commands of its Creator. He will teach people to obey God’s laws. He will begin a massive reeducation process to help people unlearn their old ways of doing things and for the first time learn to do things God’s way.

Notice Isaiah’s prophecy of this future rule of Jesus as Messiah and King over the earth: “Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the LORD’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, ‘Come and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

“He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:2-4).

At that time Christ will teach all people who have not known God’s way. He will be assisted by all who are changed into glorified sons of God in the resurrection at His return (Luke 20:36).

If we enter that new life we will be endowed with unlimited energy. As members of God’s family we will be empowered by God’s Spirit. As Isaiah describes it: “The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary” (Isaiah 40:28).

### A change for the better

Speaking of the event that will change our mortal bodies, Paul wrote: “The sun has a splendour of its own, the moon another

splendour, and the stars yet another; and one star differs from another in brightness. So it is with the resurrection of the dead: what is sown as a perishable thing *is raised imperishable*. Sown in humiliation, *it is raised in glory*; sown in weakness, *it is raised in power*; sown a physical body, *it is raised a spiritual body*” (1 Corinthians 15:41-44, REB).

God will give us bodies that will never tire nor grow ill—and minds having the kind of supernatural abilities He has. Reigning with Christ (Revelation 2:26; 3:21), we will help bring about worldwide peace. We will assist in spreading the knowledge of God to the most distant lands in a reeducation process that will span the globe. “They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

Those changed at Christ’s return will include all who are alive in Christ at His return and the dead who were called, repented and lived in faithful obedience to God. It will include all of the faithful of Hebrews 11 who “died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13).

Those who died in faith include Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (verses 17-21). The promise they have not yet received is the promise of the Kingdom of God. As Jesus said, “. . . I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 8:11). Remember that the Kingdom of Heaven is synonymous with the Kingdom of God, which Christ will establish on earth at His return.

## Responding to God’s invitation

You can be among the many who arise from all parts of the world in the resurrection to be with Christ in His Kingdom—if you respond to God’s invitation. God is issuing that call through the preaching of the gospel, which includes the information you are reading now.

That calling is not being offered to everyone in this age. Jesus told His disciples that the understanding of God’s truth is not yet available to many: “. . . It has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:11).

The Bible speaks in several places about God’s “elect” people. They are called to understand these things now, in this present age,

but the rest—the vast majority—will not be called until later.

Most of Israel, God’s people spoken of extensively in the Old Testament, were not called to understand the Kingdom of God during their lifetimes. Their hearts were hardened, their minds blinded. But the opportunity for most of them will come in the second resurrection. “Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Romans 11:7).

Yet, as Paul explains in this same chapter, the time is coming when “all Israel will be saved, as it is written: ‘The Deliverer will come out of Zion, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob’” (verse 26). God’s calling is carried out according to His timetable. When all is said and done, His plan is entirely fair to everyone.

Peter explains that those who now become a part of His Church are chosen in this age to receive salvation in the first resurrection. Peter says of them, “. . . You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

The good news is that God eventually will offer eternal life to everyone who repents. He desires that everyone enter His Kingdom. He wants to share this opportunity for eternal life with everyone (2 Peter 3:9).

In a final, breathtaking view of what God has in store for those who serve Him, the apostle John was inspired to write this glimpse of the future in Revelation, the last book of the Bible: “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away . . . He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son” (Revelation 21:4, 7).

The future God has planned for us is fantastic beyond belief! It is far superior to the fanciful heaven of men’s imagination. God will share the real future with all who repent and turn from their sins. As for those who willfully refuse to repent, they will not suffer forever in hell. They will simply cease to be. But this need not happen to you.

You may share in the eternal Kingdom of God if you heed the words spoken by Jesus when He began His ministry: “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. *Repent and believe the good news!*” (Mark 1:15, NIV).

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