

4 WHAT REALLY HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:

- Is there life after death?
 - Is purgatory real?
 - What is hell like?
 - How could a good God send anybody to hell?
 - What is heaven like?
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THE ACHE OF MORTALITY

Sooner or later, it dawns on us that we are mortal. We realize that we are not going to live on earth forever, that the day will come when our lifeless flesh will lie cold in the grave. For some, this is not a pleasant thought. A famous comedian is said to have commented, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

We all wonder at times when death will take us. That is only natural. We speculate as to what might be the cause of our death—old age, an accident, disease, a natural disaster, violent crime, terrorism. We hope those we leave behind will be able to cope and handle the grief that is sure to come. We may wonder if we will have courage to face death with dignity. Not only do we ponder questions about death itself, but we long to have answers about life after death. What really happens after we leave this world?

The Anticipation of Annihilation

I asked a taxi driver in Madrid, Spain, once what he thought he could expect after death. He looked rather stoically at me, let out a laugh, and said, “Nothing, just a wooden suit.” Here was a man who had lost

faith in God and the eternal. Many people today, even those raised in religious homes and societies, dismiss any prospect of life beyond the grave. After all, modern science has endeavored to teach us that life sprung into being by pure chance, that no Creator was involved, that human beings are merely the product of a long evolutionary process.

This kind of thinking has serious implications. If true, then your life has no real meaning or purpose other than that which you or others attach to it. It also means that ultimately you are no more important than an animal or a plant or an insect. Furthermore, if there is no afterlife, you might as well seek to gratify your wants and desires now. In fact, you ought to always seek the maximum amount of pleasure in all you do—no matter how it may affect others. After all, if there is no all-knowing, all-powerful God, who will hold you accountable for your actions?

I've heard the story that once when a terrible plague came to ancient Athens, many people there began to commit horrible crimes and engage in every lustful pleasure they could imagine. Why? They believed they did not have much time left and would not have to pay any penalty.

If we believe utter annihilation awaits us, that can also lead to despair. People may ask, "What is the point of doing good or learning or serving or striving to achieve goals in life if in the end it means nothing but absolute obliteration?" If we just vanish someday only to be mourned briefly and then forgotten, it is foolish to pretend that our lives have ultimate significance.

The Malaise of Uncertainty

Many people do not rule out the possibility of life after death, but they hold no firm conviction as to what is going to happen once their earthly existence ceases. Most hope that if a place like hell exists, they will not end up there. A small minority are under the impression that hell, if it is real, is one big, long, raucous party. Someone once boasted to me, "Well, if there is a heaven and a hell, I'd much rather go to hell. After all, that's where all my friends are going to be!"

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Many expect that if a place like heaven exists, they will make it in. They assume that God is going to weigh their good and evil deeds on a celestial scale, and if their good deeds tip the scale, they will be allowed into heaven.

Still others think that they may come back to earth as a different person or some other kind of living creature. In other words, they hope to be recycled or reincarnated. But the bottom line is that they have no certainty about their eternal future.

The Pain of Purgatory

Many of us have been taught that when we sin, we store up punishment that someday will be exacted upon us in a temporary place of suffering called purgatory. Purgatory is viewed as a necessary intermediate state of suffering after death that cleanses us and makes us worthy of heaven.

Imagine a twelve-year-old boy cautiously tiptoeing into his parents' bedroom and removing emergency money that they keep in a small wooden box. The child wants to go to the local candy store in his neighborhood and purchase a few of his favorite treats. He does not think his parents will even miss the small amount of money he is taking. Sadly, this is not the first time he has done this.

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Now, the boy's mother, knowing her son's weakness for sweets and having noticed that small amounts of money have disappeared from the emergency money box without explanation, anticipates his actions. She hides in the closet and with great disappointment watches through a small opening as he takes some of her emergency money. While the youngster hastily stuffs the coins into his pants pocket, she quietly steps out and approaches him from behind. She calls out his name sternly, and he jumps a foot in the air.

The boy slowly turns to face his mother's disappointed and angry look and, with head hung low, makes a full confession. His mother senses his sincerity but feels duty-bound to lecture him on the dangers of stealing. He listens without protest and then says, "Please forgive me, Mom. I promise you that I won't do it again." Tears stream down his cheeks. However, she informs him that his actions require her to punish him, and she grounds him from watching television, playing video games, and having friends over for two weeks. The boy's shoulders slump—two weeks are an eternity to a twelve-year-old. Still, he believes the worst is over: He has been caught, lectured, punished, and forgiven.

But then comes something unexpected. His mother says, “Now, son, even though I have forgiven you, this matter is not over yet. When your father gets home from work, I will tell him what you have done. You can be sure that he will be very angry and will want to give you a hard spanking. Only then can we be assured that you have learned your lesson. Only then will we consider this issue settled!”

In the same way, the doctrine of purgatory tells us that we must pay for our sins after death before God considers us worthy to experience the full joys of heaven. In my opinion, the doctrine of purgatory questions the genuineness of God’s offer of complete forgiveness to sinners now. The Bible says, “If we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil” (1 John 1:9). If purgatory exists, it really does no good to argue with God or plead innocence or even remind God of the fact that we already asked to be forgiven and did penance.

Some reasons offered for the reality of such a place are as follows: (1) whoever comes into God’s presence must be perfectly pure; (2) some people die with faults for which no true repentance is possible or without having fully paid for their sin in this life; (3) it would be unfair to let certain people who lived worse than others into heaven without exacting some kind of punishment for their sins; (4) the belief that God must punish sins after death is ancient, found in the beliefs even of the Jews and pagans long before the advent of Christianity.

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However, when considering the issue of purgatory, we must ask ourselves if it accurately represents the teaching of the Bible. I have good news for those of you who might be concerned about spending an inordinate amount of time in purgatory. Not one verse in the Gospels or any other part of the New Testament refers to purgatory. It is a teaching invented by humans, not given by God.

ONLY TWO POSSIBILITIES EXIST

The Holy Scriptures refer to only two possibilities for people after death: heaven or hell. The truth is that no one goes to a temporary place

of torment to be made ready for eternal bliss. God has determined that the choices you and I make here and now during our earthly lives establish where we will spend eternity.

Let me first discuss the biblical teaching on hell. This is going to be tough for some of you to read. Probably no other matter causes more outrage among non-Christians than the biblical teaching about hell, but in just a few pages, I will also be sharing about heaven. I assure you that the good news about heaven far outweighs the bad news about hell.

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The Heartbreak of Hell

Jesus talks about hell a lot in the Gospels. In fact, no one ever drew a more vivid and realistic picture of hell than the Son of God. He emphatically warned people about its existence. One of the most dramatic statements Jesus ever made is found in Luke 12:4-5: “To you, my friends, I say: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. I will tell you whom to fear; fear him who, after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, he is the one to fear.”

Jesus made it clear that hell is not a symbol or metaphor but a very real place where people are conscious and aware. If you have a Bible, take a moment right now to read Luke 16:19-31. In this excerpt from Luke, Jesus describes a wealthy and selfish man who dies and finds himself in hell. I want you to notice several important things:

- First, the rich man in hell knew exactly where he was. He was conscious, tormented, and very much aware of his surroundings.
- Second, the rich man in hell had memory of his life on earth. People would like to be able to forget many things they think, say, do, or experience while alive on earth. The passage of time and senility help to diminish pangs of guilt. Yet God keeps excellent records, and in hell there is excellent recall. Every foul word, every rebellious act, every unclean thought will remind the sinner of why he or she is there.
- Third, the rich man in hell discovered there was no escape from his suffering. He wanted relief from the fire, but none was offered.
- Fourth, the rich man in hell wanted to warn his brothers who were still alive on earth about this place of anguish. He begged for

Lazarus, a poor but righteous beggar who made it into paradise, to be returned to earth and warn his five brothers to turn from their wicked ways lest they join him in hell. The request was denied because once we leave this world our fate is sealed forever.

Jesus pictured hell as a place of suffering where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth (Matthew 13:41-43). Hell is also described as a place of darkness and loneliness never reached by God's light and love (Matthew 8:12). Perhaps the greatest torment of hell is not the pain, the darkness, or the loneliness but the knowledge that heaven is lost, that there is no possibility of salvation. I am reminded of a line in Dante's *Inferno* that describes a sign over the gates of hell. The sign reads, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter in." Hell's inhabitants must groan in despair, realizing there is no escape. They are beyond God's mercy. They are lost forever.

How Could a Good God Send People to Hell?

We have to deal with the age-old question: "How could a good God send people to hell?" Is it not true that God is love? That is undeniable, for the Bible tells us so. However, God is also holy and just. The same Bible which teaches that God loves sinful people so deeply that He sent Christ to die for them also teaches that God must deal with all who cleave to sin and refuse His gift of salvation. (We will talk specifically about this in the next chapter.) The idea that God is ambivalent about sin or unwilling to punish the unrepentant is not scriptural and has led many to ignore the reality and dangers of judgment and hell.

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Let me put it another way. Hell teaches us that there is ultimate justice in the universe. Evildoers who refuse to turn to God for forgiveness will be held accountable for their actions. Would God be just and perfect if He did not eventually deal with unrepentant sinners? Would God still be praiseworthy if He made no distinction between the wicked and the righteous? I do not think so. You could say the fact that God has committed himself to judge the world and even made a place of eternal separation for unbelieving and unrepentant sinners is proof that God is a perfect and just Being. Let me add one more thing that you need to understand: hell is completely avoidable! As you continue to read, you will learn about the alternative to hell.

Happiness in Heaven

We should not be embarrassed to talk about heaven. Some inform us that belief in a place called heaven is a form of “escapism” and that we should be concerned more with trying to make the world a better place now than with escaping someday to heaven. The truth is that we should be very interested in making the world kinder, more generous, friendlier, and more helpful. We applaud all the efforts to make planet earth a better place to live. But eventually we will depart from this life. Is it not better to know you are headed for heaven rather than for perdition?

The Bible offers Christians wonderful promises that God has prepared an amazing and wonderful home for us called heaven. I like what C. S. Lewis, a medieval literature professor and author of the now famous *Chronicles of Narnia*, said: “We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning Heaven. . . . But either there is ‘pie in the sky’ or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric. If there is, then this truth, like any other, must be faced, whether it is useful at political meetings or no.”¹

In other words, even if skeptics scoff and laugh at our talk of heaven as some sort of fantasy dreamland, if the Bible says it is real, then we must believe it. Catholic dogma is accurate in telling us that heaven is a place and condition of perfect bliss where people fortunate enough to be there enjoy the immediate vision of God and the perfect love of God.

In Heaven We Will Be with the Lord

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Being in heaven will not be boring. You will not eternally float around on clouds playing a harp. It is a real place with angels, people, and dwellings. However, the greatest thing about heaven is finally seeing the Lord and enjoying unbroken communion with Him. Jesus referred to heaven as His Father’s house, saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house there are many places to live in; otherwise I would have told you.

I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am” (John 14:1-4).

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 149.

Troubles Will Be Over

We will find that all our troubles are over in heaven. During our earthly days, we face many kinds of temptations, sickness, battles, challenges, farewells, and pain. Life is full of surprises that aggravate and distress us. Friend, the Bible's marvelous sneak preview of life in heaven is in full contrast to our uneasy existence in this world. The apostle John writes that heaven's citizens "will never hunger or thirst again; sun and scorching wind will never plague them, because the Lamb (Jesus) who is at the heart of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 7:16-17).

Reaping Rewards

There will also be rewards for God's children in heaven. Jesus declared, "Look, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me, to repay everyone as their deeds deserve" (Revelation 22:12). Some imagine that it is utterly selfish to hope that God will reward us for faithfulness, godly living, or obedience. To illustrate, a woman found a friendly little dog at her doorstep one day with the morning newspaper in its mouth. She said, "Delighted with this unexpected 'delivery service,' I fed him some treats. The following morning I was horrified to see the same dog sitting in front of our door, wagging his tail, surrounded by eight newspapers."² Some would suggest that we who look forward to Christ's rewards are little better than that small but ambitious canine, that we are mere mercenaries, selfishly seeking something in return for serving God. I beg to differ.

The truth is that God himself wants to motivate us and encourage us with the promise of reward. He knows that our world is full of difficulty and that our lives are tested here in many ways. The apostle Paul writes with great honesty, "If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). However, I am sure that experiencing even one day of heaven's goodness will repay all of our sorrow and sufferings.

We truly have something to look forward to. As Paul writes, "let us never slacken in doing good; for if we do not give up, we shall have our harvest in due time" (Galatians 6:9).

² Marion Gilbert, *Reader's Digest*, February 1994, 12.

A Family Reunion

In heaven Christians are reunited with all other true followers of Christ. In essence, everyone in heaven is part of one big, happy family. In chapter 1 of this book, we discussed how most people dream of enjoying an enduring relationship with someone, of forming a family. A healthy family shares dreams, possessions, memories, smiles, and gladness. Someone has said that a family is “a shelter from the storm, a friendly port when the waves of life become too wild. No person is ever alone who is a member of a family.”

We do not lose our identities or personalities in heaven. We will recognize each other. We will be relieved to know that never again will we experience any painful partings. As God’s family we will enjoy His presence and blessings for endless eons. There will be great joy and contentment, and nothing will ever diminish it—not sin (it will be gone forever), not infirmity (we will no longer be confined to a mortal body), not sorrow (God will wipe away every tear), not worry (everything we need will be provided without end).

Much more can be said about heaven, but I think you get the idea. It is one place you do not want to miss. Heaven is where God wants you to go when your earthly life has run its course. He has also provided the way for you to join His family. Here is news that may surprise you: you cannot work your way into heaven by simply trying to be good. God has a different plan, and that is what we will discuss in the next chapter.

Questions for individual or group study:

1. *Do you remember when you realized that you are mortal? Does the thought of death trouble you?*
2. *Where do you think you will spend eternity?*
3. *Is the Catholic teaching about purgatory acceptable in your opinion?*
4. *Does the biblical teaching about hell trouble you? Do believe in such a place?*
5. *What do you feel is the best thing about heaven?*