

**What happens
when I die?**



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Death is not something that we naturally want to talk or even think about. This is rather foolish since...

...**death will come to us all**. Every one of us will die one day. It is something we cannot avoid, no matter how much we try. Death is the ultimate statistic – 1 out of 1 dies.

...**death only happens once**. In sporting events, or scientific experiments, or engineering projects there come moments when it is crucial that a particular action is performed in a particular way in a precise sequence – fail and the project is doomed. Therefore athletes train and engineers and practice time and time again, so they can get it right when they need to. But for death, there is no simulator; there is no dry-run; there is no practice. We need to get it right first time! We need to put the thought in **now** so we are ready for it.

And so we ask: “**What happens when I die?**”

Four common ideas are:

1. Annihilation

Death is the end of everything! There is nothing beyond the grave! You die and that's it!

- It's pretty depressing really! It questions the validity & worth & significance of our lives...
- It's also morally dangerous as it offers no accountability for what we do. It can become an excuse for “anything goes” since I will not be held to account when I die!
- It is also contrary to what most people instinctively think – we seem to know there is something more than this existence.

2. Universalism

Everyone goes to heaven – the place of eternal bliss, paradise, nirvana etc. But again there are problems with this view:

- Would you want to spend eternity with Hitler, or with the boy/girl who bullied you at school...?
- And what about “justice” – where does that fit it? How will those who seem to get away with so much be held to account?

This view is therefore often modified – there are certain minimum requirements for entry into “heaven” – usually that one has lived a good enough life.

3. Reincarnation

Literally this means: “to be made flesh again.” One comes back to earth in another form depending on the life previously led – a bad life results in a lesser form of life in the next and vice versa. Shirley MacLaine put it this way:

“Reincarnation is like show business – you just keep doing it until you get it right!”

4. Agnosticism

We don’t know! *“A last great leap in the dark!”* as Thomas Hobbs (an English philosopher) described it. So, there’s no point worrying about it too much.

What is interesting is that there is no evidence cited for the first three of these ideas – they are just ideas put forward – and the fourth is a resigned “ignorance is bliss”. What we **need** is someone with knowledge of the grave to tell us what goes on, how to get ready for it.

Jesus Christ is one person who can help us with our questions about death because:

- He has died (historical fact), and has returned from the grave (also historic fact). He is able to tell us what death is all about...
- The same Bible that tells us about death and resurrection of Jesus also tells us the Jesus is eternal God – the one who predates everything, the one who knows all things.

The teaching of Jesus concerning death, as recorded in the scriptures, is therefore to be listened to. Jesus’ words reject our already mentioned 4 notions of death:

The Bible states that people have innate value and worth because they are made in God’s image... and as such think eternal thoughts. Annihilation is thus denied in the Bible.

“God created man in his image...” Genesis 1:27

“[God] has put eternity into man’s heart...” Ecclesiastes 3:11

Jesus taught the most about death & judgement & hell. Note how he talks about 2 destinies of men – eternal life and destruction. Universalism is thus denied in the Bible.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it...” Matthew 7:13-14

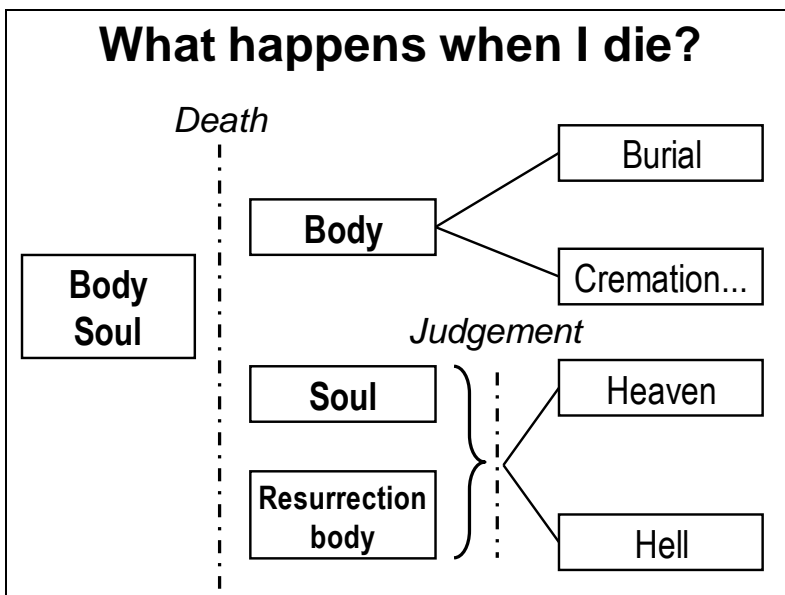
Death is, in the Bible, seen as a once only activity. Reincarnation is thus also denied.

“He who goes down to the grave does not return...” Job 7:9

And as for **Agnosticism**... well the Bible does tell us what happens when we die. We cannot remain agnostic on the matter.

What does the Bible tell us about death?

It might be simplified to look something like:



In life a person has a body and a soul. At death these separate. In medical terms “death” might be defined differently: when the brain ceases to function or when the heart stops or... These refer to the end of the physical body. For our purposes here, death is when the soul and body separate. (See John 19:30 or James 2:26)

Our bodies then receive a dignified end ritual such as burial or cremation.

At death our soul is reunited with a resurrection body – one that is recognisable as our earthly body (Jesus was easily identifiable), but also different – better and perfectly functioning (I, for example, won't need contact lenses in eternity!)

In this new body we face judgement. Hebrews 9:27 puts it this way: "...man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement..." There are 2 destinations/outcomes of this judgement:

- Eternal peace with God in heaven. Well Revelation 21:1-4 gives us a glimpse as to what this existence will be like: no pain, tears, crying, pain, mourning, war...
- Eternal punishment – where there will be "weeping, wailing & gnashing of teeth" to use a common Biblical image. It will be a place of unimaginable eternal torment.

We therefore need to ask: "**How will I die** (so I can prepare for it)?"

There are 2 ways to think about this question:

- The wrong way is to contemplate the mode or manner of our death: "Will I die as a result of terrorism, disease, old-age, or will I be run over by bus...?" Ultimately these things are incidental.
- The right way to ask the question must surely be in the light of our eternal destiny... how, **in what state**, ought I to die in order to enter heaven? Listen to the words of Jesus Christ:

Once more Jesus said to them, "I am going away, and you will look for me, and you will die in your sin. Where I go, you cannot come." This made the Jews ask, "Will he kill himself? Is that why he says, 'Where I go, you cannot come'?" But Jesus continued, "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

John 8:21-24

Three times in these verses Jesus says the same thing to those who rejected his message. He says that they would "die in their sins".

But what does that mean?

Those who die “in their sins”, die:

- Impoverished – like the pharaohs, unable to take earthly wealth with them!
- Condemned, found guilty for their sin – John 3
- Burdened with guilt – shame over what they’ve done in life
- Alone
- Terrified of the unknown... of judgement

And the opposite – dying “in Christ” – what does it mean? John Wesley put it nicely: *“God’s people die well!”*

- With great riches in heaven
- Knowing that the penalty for their sin has been paid in full by Jesus
- Free of guilt and shame
- Not alone, but with the angels taking them to heaven and Jesus himself there to greet them as they arrive. See: Luke 16:22, Matthew 25:23.
- At peace, looking forward to death, with nothing to fear for they know where they are going. See: Philippians 1:21

Psalm 23 is a favourite of many people... Embedded within it are these glorious words:

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they
comfort me.”*

Those who are trusting Jesus for their salvation need not fear death. They do not need to fear judgement because they know all that Jesus has done for them. They die at peace “in Christ”.

I wonder, are you ready to die?

This booklet began life as a sermon, part of a series preached in autumn 2011 tackling big questions have about God, faith and life.
We hope you find it helpful.

The original sermon can be listened to on the church website:

www.allhallows-church.org.uk

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