

## 1. Do You Know What Happens When You Die?

Insights into Eternity

YouTube Video Link: <https://youtu.be/WeXKqJsMesY>

Eternity and the concept of life after death have gained popularity in recent years, extending beyond religious circles. Medical experts, scientists, filmmakers, poets, musicians, authors, and biblical scholars have written extensively on the subject. There is a universal fear of death and what comes after, accompanied by a universal hope that this world is not all there is.

Famous author and legal scholar R.W. Raymond once stated, “Life is eternal; love is immortal; death is merely a horizon; a horizon is simply the limit of our sight.” David Searls, an American journalist, remarked, “Viewing death as the end of life is akin to perceiving the horizon as the end of the ocean.”

Even those who do not claim to have faith still yearn for eternity. The hope and idea of an afterlife are essential to the human experience. One must ask: Are we wired this way, with this intuition, because deep down we realize we are not yet home? The Lord Jesus offers humanity hope when He boldly declares: **“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live even though they die”** (John 11:25).

Jesus lived His life in a profoundly different way. He challenged people to open their spiritual eyes and recognize the treasures of the life to come. If we could see clearly and know beyond any doubt that we are living this life in preparation for the next, it would dramatically change our choices in this life. We should reflect on these matters now while we have time to make a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us. This life lasts only an instant compared to Eternity, and as Stephen Hawking once said, “Eternity is a very long time, especially towards the end.” (There is no end to eternity).

Some concepts we explore in this series may be challenging to read as we will examine Jesus' teachings about hell and heaven. The Lord made numerous references to the afterlife, so understanding His teachings is crucial in preparation for the day we stand before Him. Many are hesitant to discuss these topics because we live in a culture dominated by materialism. For materialists, only what can be touched and seen is considered true, while anything that cannot be weighed, measured, felt, or seen is viewed with skepticism. Some may ask, how can we believe in what we cannot see?

### Near-Death Experiences

As I've mentioned before, I wasn't raised to believe in God, so I viewed death as simply the end of life and nothing more. God captured my attention when I was in my early 20s.

In 1976, as I prepared to travel overland across Europe, the Middle East, and Asia from England, I realized that I needed vaccinations for various diseases common in India and other countries I would soon visit. The doctor who administered the shots advised me not to drink alcohol for at least 24 hours. Later that night, I made a foolish mistake. (Please do not try this at home!) I disregarded the doctor's advice. Since becoming a disciple of Christ in 1977, I can confidently say

that I'm much wiser than I used to be, but during my teens and early 20s, my life was filled with poor choices. I was still heavily involved in smoking marijuana, so a night without substances to stimulate me felt like a dull evening out.

After seeing the doctor, I had already planned my evening; I was meeting my friends, who would send me off with a farewell drink at the pub before my trip. Before going out, because of the doctor's warning, I reminded myself not to drink. It was a wise decision, but instead, I thought a little hashish (a stronger form of marijuana) wouldn't hurt. It would have taken too long to smoke my hashish, so I ate it instead and then walked to the pub to meet my friends. When I arrived, my friends bought me a half-pint of beer. I reasoned that it was just half a pint; I thought a small amount wouldn't harm me. Besides, I didn't want to be rude to my friends.

I am sure my reasoning powers were affected by the hash I had eaten. As soon as I drank the beer, I felt unwell. I could not control what was happening inside me. The amount of hashish I had consumed, combined with the alcohol, seemed overwhelming for my system due to the vaccination shots I had earlier, and I began to recall the doctor's warning. I left the pub, knowing something terrible was occurring within me. I resolved that I needed to get home to my apartment. Somehow, I sensed that I was close to death.

I staggered into my apartment and collapsed onto the sofa when something strange happened that changed everything I had believed up until that moment. I left my body, hovered parallel to the ceiling on the other side of the room, and looked down at my physical form. This experience was neither a vision nor a dream but a reality. My body lay on the sofa, but I was not in it! I began crying out to God, pleading for mercy. Until that point, I had been a complete atheist with no relatives or friends who were Christians. I thought I didn't believe in God, but suddenly, I was praying as if there was no tomorrow and my future hung in the balance!

I believed that when I died, I would cease to exist. However, my theology changed suddenly—I called out to a God I didn't know. I promised Him that if He let me live, I would dedicate my life to Him; I would do anything He asked. Life became precious, as I was uncertain where I would end up if this experience were final. Right after praying and making my promise to God, the experience ended, and I opened my eyes, finding myself back in my body, alive by the grace of God.

Have you ever had a near-death experience or had to say goodbye to someone close? How did this affect the way that you view life? Share your experience if you can, but feel free to pass. Be considerate of others in the amount of time you take to share.

You could also answer this question: Have you ever been in a situation where you feel you were spared from death, such as an accident or serious injury, and how did that impact your life?

My brush with death was a turning point in my life. Even though I had dedicated my life to Christ, I didn't fully understand what that meant, so I went back on my promise the next day. I didn't comprehend who God was or how to find Him. All I knew or believed at the time was that there was something beyond life on Earth and that existence wasn't limited to this body of flesh. I became fascinated with the concept of life after death, trying to understand what happens next. I remember

going to a spiritualist church but feeling unable to step inside and learn about their beliefs. It felt as though there was an invisible barrier at the door; each time I tried to enter, my heart raced, and I couldn't go in. God was very faithful in protecting me from spiritualism and the occult.

### **The Experience of Death**

While searching for understanding, I came across a book by a doctor who had brought some of his patients back from near-death experiences. The book is *Life After Life* by Raymond A. Moody, MD. During the 1970s, various new resuscitation instruments became widely available, allowing many more people to survive accidents that would typically be deadly. Some of his patients shared their experiences beyond death. Dr. Moody was so intrigued by what these patients recounted that he began speaking with other doctors and ultimately gathered a case file of over 150 individuals who died and were resuscitated. Many of their fascinating stories fill his book. There is a striking similarity in the accounts shared by these 150 people. From these similar narratives, he created a brief, theoretically "typical" picture of what someone experiences at the point of death:

A man is dying, and as he reaches the end of physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and simultaneously feels himself rushing through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside his own physical body but still in the immediate physical environment and sees his body from a distance as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unique vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a "body," but one of a very different nature and with very different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon, other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving, warm spirit of a kind he has never encountered before—a being of light—appears before him. This person asks him a nonverbal question to help him evaluate his life and helps him by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the significant events of his life. At some point, he approaches some barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. He sees, though, that he must go back to Earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point, he resists, for he is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, he somehow reunites with his physical body and life.

Later, he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. First, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also discovers that others scoff, so he stops telling others. Still, the experience profoundly affects his life, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.<sup>1</sup>

I do not know whether Raymond Moody was a Christian when he wrote his book or if he held other spiritual beliefs. He does not specify if all the individuals sharing these experiences were

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond A. Moody, *Life after Life*, Published by Harper SanFrancisco, Page 11.

people of faith. Some were, but there were other motivations for his book. It aimed purely to observe the experience of death from a scientific viewpoint.

Of course, we must regard books about the afterlife with suspicion because Jesus warned us that in the end times, many false prophets would appear (Matthew 24:11). For example, in 1992, Betty Eadie claimed to have had an out-of-body experience. In her book, *Embraced by the Light*, she asserts that she was told Eve did not fall into temptation but instead made a conscious choice to create the conditions necessary for progression to godhood. Additionally, there is the book *Heaven is for Real*, where Wesleyan pastor Todd Burpo recounts his three-year-old son Colton's journey to heaven and back. He wrote that God resembles Gabriel but is larger, has blue eyes, yellow hair, and enormous wings; that Jesus has sea-green-blue eyes, brown hair, no wings, but rides a rainbow-colored horse; and that the Holy Spirit is bluish but difficult to see. As Christians, we should not accept any claims as true if contrary to what we read in scripture.

I typically do not read these kinds of books because when I encounter descriptions in the Scriptures about people seeing the Lord Jesus beyond the veil, those who witness Him are awestruck and fall at His feet as if they are dead. This was the experience of John the Apostle in the Book of Revelation, chapter one, verse seventeen. I believe that the only book we can truly trust regarding eternal matters is the Bible. I will strive to teach you what is found in the Scriptures regarding these things.

### **Does the Bible Teach Soul Sleep?**

Some believe that when a believer in Christ dies, their soul sleeps and remains unconscious until Jesus comes for them at the Rapture of the Church. The Bible includes a few passages where Jesus refers to death for a Christian as "sleep." For instance, when Christ raised Lazarus from the dead, He deliberately waited two days before going to the tomb (John 11:6). The Jewish people had a tradition that a person's soul could linger around the body for up to three days after death. Jesus intentionally waited to demonstrate to the skeptics that He has authority over death. Lazarus was not sleeping in the tomb; he was dead. Here are the key sentences:

<sup>11</sup>After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up." <sup>12</sup>His disciples replied, "Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better." <sup>13</sup>Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep (John 11:11-13).

Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26).

The Lord Jesus also referred to death as sleep when Jairus' daughter died, and the Lord brought her back to life:

<sup>49</sup>While Jesus was still speaking, someone came from the house of Jairus, the synagogue ruler. "Your daughter is dead," he said. "Don't bother the teacher anymore." <sup>50</sup>Hearing this, Jesus said to Jairus, "Don't be afraid; just believe, and she will be healed." <sup>51</sup>When he arrived at the house of Jairus, he did not let anyone go in with him except Peter, John and

James, and the child's father and mother. <sup>52</sup>Meanwhile, all the people were wailing and mourning for her. "Stop wailing," Jesus said. "*She is not dead but asleep.*" <sup>53</sup>They laughed at him, knowing that she was dead. <sup>54</sup>But he took her by the hand and said, "My child, get up!" <sup>55</sup>*Her spirit returned*, and at once she stood up. Then Jesus told them to give her something to eat. <sup>56</sup>Her parents were astonished, but he ordered them not to tell anyone what had happened (Luke 8:49-56, Emphasis added).

What can we learn about death from this passage? What things stand out to you?

### What do the Scriptures Teach About Death?

The believer in Christ is never truly dead; he is simply separated from his body, a state that Jesus refers to as "sleep." When Jesus took the girl's hand and told her to rise, her spirit returned (v. 55). Where had the little girl been? Her body lay dead on the bed before the Lord and three of His disciples, but her spirit was elsewhere. Wouldn't you like to know what she experienced? According to the Lord Jesus, a person is considered dead only when he has not entered into a relationship with Christ (Ephesians 2:1, 5). In Scripture, spirit and soul are used interchangeably.

Let's examine another example from the Old Testament: in 1 Kings 17:17, a little boy stopped breathing (NIV translation). The original Hebrew text indicates that his soul ("nephesh") departed. In verse 22 of the same passage, the Word of God states that the boy's life returned to him after Elijah's prayer. The Hebrew word used is "nephesh," meaning that the boy's soul returned.

Scripture tells us that at this moment, in heaven, are the spirits of just men made perfect (Hebrews 12:23). Furthermore, it indicates that when Christ returns for His Church during the Rapture, "**God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him**" (1 Thessalonians 4:14). While their bodies remain in the grave, the unseen part of their nature—their spirit and soul—are with the Lord. We will examine this passage more closely at a later time.

When a man wanted to follow Christ but needed to attend his father's funeral first, Jesus said, "**Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead**" (Matthew 8:22). Dead people cannot arrange funerals; Christ was saying to allow the spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-2) to take care of their father's funeral. The most crucial task for disciples is to reach the dead, or those without a relationship with God, before they die. Let's illustrate this with an image we all understand:

When I get into my car, it is unresponsive until I turn on the ignition. It does nothing without me driving it. Similarly, the true self is a spirit and soul that "drives" the body and continues to exist beyond death. There is more to life than just this physical body. Verna Wright said, "At a funeral, we bury something, not someone; it is the house, not the tenant, that is lowered into the grave." Paul the Apostle wrote:

**Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands (2 Corinthians 5:1).**

A close friend of ours who lives in Israel, a devoted Christian woman named Christine, became pregnant several years ago. She miscarried and hemorrhaged on the floor of her home, dying in a

pool of blood. As her spirit left her body, she began to see the familiar faces of her deceased family and friends who had gone before her. A profound sense of peace filled her as they began singing, "Welcome home, Christine." There before her stood the Lord Jesus, welcoming her home. He told her that she could choose to stay there or return to complete the work that God had given her to accomplish.

At that moment, she heard her husband's voice behind her; he had just entered the room where her body lay. He checked her pulse and realized that Christine was already gone. In heartfelt anguish, he cried out to the Lord, asking Him to bring her back. Christine told me that she did not remember choosing to return, but at that moment, she found herself back in her body. She opened her eyes and told her husband not to fear but to take her to the hospital. Once they arrived at the hospital, the nurses and doctors gave her a blood transfusion, amazed that she wasn't dead given the amount of blood she had lost. The Lord graciously intervened and granted her more years to fulfill her mission in Israel. She has witnessed many miracles there in Jerusalem as she ministers to the Jewish and Arabic residents. Psalm 116:15 says:

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints (Psalm 116:15, NIV).

Precious (important and no light matter) in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints (His loving ones) (Psalm 116:15, Amplified Bible).

Why would God be glad at the death of His people, those who have entrusted their lives to him?

How could God be glad at our death if all that happens is that we fall asleep? If we are unconscious at the moment of departure, why did Jesus say the following words to the thief on the cross? "I tell you the truth; today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). He didn't say, "At the end of the age, after a good sleep, you will be with me in Paradise." Jesus was teaching that the man would be very much alive and in Paradise with the Lord before the end of the day.

### **Is There An Intermediate Place, A Purgatory?**

Why would the Bible remain completely silent about a place between heaven and hell called Purgatory? According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, Purgatory is defined as "a place or condition of temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God's grace, are not entirely free from venial faults or have not fully paid the satisfaction due for their transgressions." In summary, within Catholic theology, Purgatory serves as a place where a Christian's soul goes after death to be purified of sins that were not fully addressed during life. Does this doctrine of Purgatory align with the Bible? No, it does not. Jesus died to atone for all of our sins (Romans 5:8). The prophet Isaiah wrote:

But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5).

Christ suffered for our sins so we could be delivered from the penalty of separation from God. To suggest that we must also suffer for our sins implies that Jesus' suffering was inadequate. To claim

that we must atone for our sins through cleansing in Purgatory denies the sufficiency of Jesus' atoning sacrifice (1 John 2:2). The belief that we must suffer for our sins after death contradicts everything the Bible teaches about salvation.

By one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy (Hebrews 10:14).

### **Sometimes, People Glimpse Two Worlds as they Depart.**

Sometimes, as people pass away, their spirits drift between Earth and Heaven, allowing them to see both worlds. A few hours before Dwight L. Moody, the evangelist, died, he caught a glimpse of the glory that awaited him. Awakening from sleep, he said:

"Earth recedes, heaven opens before me. If this is death, it is sweet! There is no valley here. God is calling me, and I must go!" His son, standing by his bedside, replied, "No, no, father, you are dreaming." "No," Mr. Moody said, "I am not dreaming; I have been within the gates; I have seen the children's faces." A short time passed, and then, following what seemed to the family to be the death struggle, he spoke again: "This is my triumph; this is my coronation day! It is glorious!"

Some might argue that Moody was dreaming, but Scripture also recounts the story of one who witnessed both worlds at the moment of death. We are referring to Stephen. The passage below occurs just after he has shared the Gospel with some individuals who were persecuting Christians:

<sup>54</sup>When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him. <sup>55</sup>But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. <sup>56</sup>"Look," he said, "***I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.***" <sup>57</sup>At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, <sup>58</sup>dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. <sup>59</sup>While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." <sup>60</sup>Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he fell ***asleep*** (Acts 7:54-60, Emphasis added).

Can we truly believe that after seeing Jesus standing to receive him, Stephen, the man of God, fell into an unconscious sleep? God is not a God of those who are asleep! We are separated from our bodies at the grave, but each of us lives beyond death. Scripture teaches us that eternity begins for everyone at the moment of departure. Isn't that what Jesus said about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?

<sup>26</sup>Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? <sup>27</sup>He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken! (Mark 12:26-27).

Paul the Apostle wrote, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord" (2 Corinthians 5:8). He also expressed to the church at Philippi his desire to die and be with Christ.

<sup>22</sup>If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! <sup>23</sup>I am torn between the two: **I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;** <sup>24</sup>but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Philippians 1:22-24).

Paul did not expect to be unconscious in sleep when he died; he fully anticipated being very much alive. He calls it better by far! The word "depart" in verse 23 above is translated from the Greek term that means to loosen an anchor. A.T. Robertson translates it as "To weigh anchor and set out to sea." If Paul had been preparing himself to sleep for two thousand years, I don't see how that could be considered "better by far."

Victor Hugo once wrote: "When I go down to the grave, I can say, like so many others, 'I have finished my work,' but I cannot say that I have finished my life. My day's work will begin the next morning. My tomb is not a blind alley; it is a thoroughfare. It closes in the twilight to open in the dawn."

Ruth Graham Bell, in her book *Legacy of a Pack Rat*, tells this verified story of the grandmother of Pastor Humphrey Armistead of Montreat, North Carolina:

The room was quiet and semi-darkened. The elderly lady lying against the pillows listened as her son, Robert, talked of the family, her friends, and other things of interest to her. She looked forward to his daily visits. Madison, where he lived, was not far from Nashville, and Robert spent as much time as he could with his mother, knowing that each visit might be his last as ill as she was. As he talked, his eyes took in every detail of her loved face, every line -- and there were more lines than curves now -- the white hair, the tired, still loving eyes. When the time came to leave, he kissed her gently on the forehead, assuring her of his return the next day. Arriving at his home in Madison, he found Robin, his seventeen-year-old, ill with a strange fever. The next few days, his time was wholly taken up between his son and his mother. He did not tell his mother of Robin's illness. He was her oldest grandson- the pride and joy of her life. Then, suddenly, Robin was gone. His death shocked the whole community as well as his family. The entire thing happened so quickly, and seventeen was too young to die.

As soon as the funeral was over, Mr. Armistead hurried to his mother's bedside, praying nothing in his manner would betray the fact that he had just buried his firstborn. It would be more than his mother could take in her condition. The doctor was in the room as he entered. His mother was lying with her eyes closed. "She's in a coma," the doctor said gently. He knew something of the strain this man had been under, his faithful visits to his mother, the death of his son, the funeral from which he had just come. The doctor put his hand on Mr. Armistead's shoulder in wordless sympathy. "Just sit beside her," he said, "she might come to..." and he left them together. Mr. Armistead's heart was heavy as he sat in the gathering twilight. He lit the lamp on the bedside table, and the shadows receded. Soon, she opened her eyes and, smiling in recognition, put her hand on her son's knee. "Bob..." she said his name lovingly -- and drifted into a coma again. Quietly, Mr. Armistead sat on, his hand over hers, his eyes never leaving her face. After a while, there was a slight



movement on the pillow. His mother's eyes were open, and there was a far-off look in them as if she saw beyond the room. A glimpse of wonder passed over her face. "I see Jesus," she exclaimed, adding, "Why, there's Father, and there's Mother." And then, "And there's Robby! I didn't know Robby had died." Her hand patted her son's knee gently. "Poor Bob..." she said softly and was gone.

How could she know that Robby had died if she hadn't seen him? She saw him while leaving the tent of this earthly body. For a believer in Christ, death is Graduation Day!

When they arrive at the gates of death, GOD welcomes those who love him (Psalm 116:15, The Message Translation).

Prayer: Lord, help us live our lives each day with the understanding that we will one day see You. Help us use the time You have given us to prepare for Eternity. Grant us the vision to recognize what truly matters as we navigate this life in anticipation of the future. Amen.

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