



ETERNAL DESTINIES

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Is There Life After Death?

“Is there life after death?” That question has fascinated people in every generation, hasn’t it? If you wonder whether contemporary culture is any exception, all you need to do is remember the television show “Highway to Heaven” and the movie “Ghost.” Personally, I never watched the television show, and I never saw the movie. Why not? Because I know the answer to the question, “Is there life after death?” The Bible says, without hesitation, “Yes.”

We tend to collapse all of life after death into either “heaven” or “hell.” According to Scripture, though, life after death involves two stages. The first stage extends from death to the resurrection; the second stage begins with the resurrection and extends into eternity. Theologians call the first stage “the intermediate state.” The second stage is actually what we refer to as “heaven” and “hell.” Our focus in this study is on the first stage or “the intermediate state.” We’ll look at the second stage in two parts over the next two studies.

First, though, we must get some terms clear in our minds. The terms used for the intermediate state are “sheol” in the Old Testament (OT) and “hades” in the New Testament (NT). In the OT, *sheol* is used to refer to a person’s state after death, whether that person was righteous or wicked. In the NT, *hades* is used to refer to a wicked person’s state after death. The KJV tended to translate both words as “hell,” although in the OT, it sometimes used “grave” if the author was speaking about a righteous person. The NIV tends to translate both words as “grave.” The NASB tends simply to transliterate both words as “sheol” and “hades.” The term used in the NT for “heaven” is “ouranos”; the term used for “hell” in the NT is “gehenna.” Those words, however, are items for another study.

For this study, our focus is on the “intermediate state.” What does the Bible teach about it? **The Bible teaches that the intermediate state is a conscious existence which begins with death and ends with resurrection.**

The intermediate state begins with death. Four NT references help with this idea:

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:6-8)

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (Philippians 1:21-24)

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. (2 Timothy 4:6)

And I consider it right, as long as I am in this earthly dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my earthly dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you may be able to call these things to mind. (2 Peter 1:13-15)

These references make it clear that a change takes place at death. That change is called a “departure” and is compared to a “laying aside” of our bodies. The implication is that our spirits live on even as our bodies are laid in the ground (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:7). Death isn’t the end of life; it’s the beginning of a new stage of existence.

The intermediate state ends with resurrection. Three NT references help with this idea:

Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear shall live. For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself; and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man. Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs shall hear His voice, and shall come forth; those who did the good to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil to a resurrection of judgment. (John 5:25-29)

And I saw thrones, and they sat upon them, and judgment was given to them. And I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded because of

the testimony of Jesus and because of the word of God, and those who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received the mark upon their forehead and upon their hand; and they came to life and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. (Revelation 20:4-5)

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (Revelation. 20:13-14)

John 5:26 tells us that the dead will live again. Revelation 20:4-5 says that at least some of the righteous dead will come to life again at Jesus' second coming. Revelation 20:13-14 links "death and Hades" and makes it clear that the remainder of the dead will be raised at the end of the millennial kingdom.

Luke 16:19-31. The Bible actually says very little about the intermediate state itself, but one NT passage lets us develop some principles about it: Luke 16:19-31. Before we tackle the details, though, it's important to note two points. First, Luke 16:19-31 is a parable. That is, it uses comparison to make a point. It's a subset of figurative language, and therefore, we need to make certain that we don't try to make it do more than it's intended to do.

Second, every parable has a context, and that context helps determine the parable's central point. Here, the context is Luke 16:1-18, especially v.14. That context suggests that the central point of 16:19-31 is related to loving/serving money/temporal possessions. Nevertheless, it's fair to assume that Jesus' parable doesn't contradict reality, and for that reason, we can draw several principles about "Hades" (the intermediate state) from it.

Six principles from Luke 16:19-31 remind us that we should take steps now to make our future state sure.

First, *our future state might differ drastically from our present circumstances* (v.22-23). Part of the impact of this parable is the radical reversal of circumstances the two men experience. The rich man enjoyed "good things" during his earthly life but agony after death; Lazarus experienced "bad things" during his earthly life but comfort after death. Jesus isn't teaching that every person who is well off in this life will *necessarily* experience agony after death, or that every person who is poor and/or oppressed will *necessarily* find himself in a place of comfort after death. The Jews believed that riches were an indication of God's blessing which was bestowed for righteousness and, conversely, that poverty and sickness were an indication of God's judgment for sin. Jesus' parable destroys that understanding. Whether your circumstances are good or bad in this life, you won't take them with you.

Second, *our future state is a conscious existence* (v.24). The rich man was self-aware. He could see; he could feel; he could reason -- he was conscious. This verse destroys the idea of “soul sleep” — the doctrine held by some that advocates that at death we slip into an unconscious state without thoughts or feelings until the day of resurrection. Those verses which talk about believers “falling asleep” (e.g., 1 Thessalonians. 4:13-15) are metaphorical, not literal. Our future state is a conscious existence.

Third, *our future state is based on the attitudes and actions of our present life* (v. 25a). Why did the rich man end up where he did? He ended up where he did because, while he was alive, his entire focus was on dressing well and living splendidly. He chose to lay up treasures for himself on earth rather than in heaven (cf. Matthew 6:19-24). The attitudes and actions of his earthly life had a direct impact on his future state.

Fourth, *the future state is not the same for everyone* (v.25b). The contrast is stark: “ ... but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.” The rich man experienced one existence; Lazarus experienced another. This statement destroys the doctrine of purgatory — the teaching that everyone is assigned a place in Hades until each has paid for the sins of this life. Lazarus bypassed Hades entirely. The future state is not the same for everyone.

Fifth, *our future state is fixed at death* (v. 26). Abraham’s words to the rich man make that fact clear. Between the two existences a “great chasm” is fixed, and there is no moving from one to the other. There are no second chances. Once you die, your future is set.

Sixth, *Scripture provides adequate evidence for making eternal decisions in this life* (v. 27-31). The rich man asks that someone “from the dead” be sent to his family members in order to help them avoid the torment he is experiencing. Abraham’s answer makes it clear that the teaching of Scripture is adequate to permit people to avoid the torment. It might not tell us everything we *want* to know, but it tells us everything we *need* to know in order to make decisions about our eternal destiny.

These principles remind us that we should take steps now to make our future state sure. There *is* life after death, and you *will* be conscious to experience it. Whatever your present circumstances are, you “can’t take them with you.” There is a state you *will* want to experience and a state you *won’t* want to experience. Which state you experience is based on decisions you make now and is fixed forever at death. There are *no* second chances.

In a sense, the intermediate state is a “waiting room” in which you await the second stage of life after death. It’s like being in the waiting room of an airport terminal waiting for the final boarding call. What you need to remember, though, is that once you’re in the waiting room, you can’t change it! I don’t know about you, but I want to get into the heavenward-bound waiting room. In order to get into that particular waiting room, you need the right ticket. How do you secure that ticket? In John 3:36, Jesus says, “He who believes in the Son has eternal life, but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

You have a ticket whether you realize it or not. What destination is stamped on your ticket? If you have the rich man's ticket, it's not too late to make an exchange. If you have the poor man's ticket, then Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:54-58 are true for you:

Then will come about the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

What Does the Bible Teach About Hell?

The doctrine of hell raises all sorts of questions. For example, does God's love leave room for eternal punishment? Is it fair to sentence to eternal punishment those who die without hearing about Jesus? How can a holy God permit the eternal existence of sin and/or sinners? What about the passages which teach that God will reconcile all things to Himself?

Could it be that the traditional view of hell is simply an outmoded doctrine based on a Greek view of the immortality of the soul — a view which slipped into the Church in the second or third century? Is the traditional view of Hell — to use Clark Pinnock's words — “morally intolerable?” Does it do an injustice to God's character? Is it a figment of the theological imagination?

What does the Bible teach about hell? We'll answer that question by addressing three specific concerns people have raised: (1) Is hell necessary? (2) Is hell final? (3) Is hell eternal?

Is hell necessary?

Richard John Neuhaus, a Roman Catholic theologian, has said, “Hell exists, but no one is in it.” Neuhaus is representative of theologians who believe that hell is unnecessary because God will ultimately save everyone. On what basis do they reach their conclusion?

First, they argue, God is love and desires that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Second, God is sovereign and does what He intends (Isaiah 46:11b). If He desires that none should perish, then none *will* perish. Third, they point to passages which state that God will reconcile everything and everyone to Himself (Colossians 1:19-20). This position is called **universalism** or **restorationism**. Is it an accurate reflection of what the Bible teaches on hell? Is hell necessary?

It is true that the Bible teaches that God is love. It also teaches that He is holy and expects holiness from His creatures (cf. Lev. 19:2). Both attributes must be acknowledged, and neither can be held to override the other.

It is true that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign. It also teaches that He cannot act contrary to His own nature (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13). God's holy nature dictates that He must judge sin, not overlook it.

Finally, the Bible teaches repeatedly (a) that there are two destinies, one for the righteous and one for the wicked (cf. Romans 2:5-11), and (b) that evildoers have no kingdom inheritance (cf. Ephesians 5:5), and (c) that not everyone will enter heaven (cf. Matthew 7:21-23).

Is hell necessary? Absolutely! Hell is necessary because God is holy, cannot act contrary to His own holy nature, and must judge sin.

Is hell final?

Donald Bloesch, the missiologist, has written, "We do not wish to build fences around God's grace . . . and we do not preclude the possibility that some in hell might finally be translated into heaven." Bloesch is representative of theologians who believe that some individuals, originally sentenced to hell, will have the opportunity to repent once they are there. On what basis do they reach their conclusion?

First, they focus on God as a god of grace who desires that none should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Second, they argue that salvation is possible only for those men and women who have heard the gospel (Romans 10:14), but not all have heard. It would, therefore, be unfair to condemn them according to a standard of which they were not aware. Third, Jesus' preaching to the "spirits in prison" (1 Peter 3:18-20) demonstrates that God provides a second chance after death for those who have never heard the gospel. This position is called **post-mortem conversion**. Is it an accurate reflection of what the Bible teaches on hell? Is hell final?

The Bible teaches that our future destiny is based on decisions we make in this life. That principle was one we drew from Luke 16:19-31. Jesus makes the same point in his parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21). The farmer in that parable chose to build barns and to make plans for how he would enjoy all the goods he would be able to accumulate. God rebukes him for not making decisions which would benefit him after his death.

The Bible teaches that apart from faith in Christ during this life, men and women "die in [their] sins" (John 8:24). They are condemned on the basis of their response to the light which has been given them (cf. Rom 1:18-25). The example of Cornelius is a clear demonstration that if a person responds positively to the light he/she has been given, God will go to great lengths to make certain that the message of the gospel reaches him/her (cf. Acts 10:1-48).

The Bible teaches that a person's eternal destiny is fixed at death. That was also one of the principles we drew from Luke 16:19-31. A great chasm is fixed between the "waiting rooms" of the intermediate state. There is no crossing over after death. There are no second chances.

Is hell final? Absolutely! Hell is final because our future destiny is fixed at death, is based on decisions we make in this life, and hinges on a conscious decision about Jesus Christ made in this life.

Is hell eternal?

John Stott — yes, *that* John Stott — has stated, "I believe that the ultimate annihilation of the wicked should be . . . accepted as a legitimate, biblically founded alternative to their eternal, conscious torment." Stott is representative of theologians who believe that hell is only temporary because God will, ultimately, blot sin and sinners out of existence. On what basis do they reach their conclusion?

First, they suggest that the image of "eternal fire" points to destruction rather than to torment. Fire consumes, they argue. So it must, logically, consume those assigned to it. Second, a just God would not inflict infinite punishment for sins committed by finite human beings. Third, the eternal existence of the wicked in hell contradicts God's final victory over evil. How can God be victorious over evil, if evil continues to exist? This position is called **annihilationism**. Is it an accurate reflection of what the Bible teaches on hell. Is hell eternal?

The Bible explicitly links the fire of judgment with torment, not with destruction. Two passages from Revelation make this point clear:

. . . and he will 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 goes up forever and ever; and they have no rest day and night. (Revelation 14:10-11)

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

The Bible teaches that all sin is against God who is just when He judges it (cf. Psalm 51:4). Any sin is, ultimately, sin against God. The issue is not the person who commits the sin, but the person against whom the sin is committed. There are no finite sins against an infinite God.

The Bible teaches that God is to be praised for His righteous, eternal judgment. The fourfold Hallelujah of Revelation 19:1-6, for example, is based on the fact of God's judgment: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgments are true and righteous." Not only do God's love and salvation bring Him eternal praise; His holiness and judgment bring Him eternal praise as well.

Is hell eternal? Absolutely! Hell is eternal because sin against an infinite God requires it and because the eternal demonstration of God's righteousness brings Him praise.

What does the Bible teach about hell? The Bible teaches that hell is necessary, final, and eternal. What implications can we draw from that teaching?

- First, God is holy and righteous. We must not downplay those attributes by focusing exclusively on His love.
- Second, sin is serious. All sin is committed against an infinite God and, therefore, carries infinite guilt.
- Third, the atonement is necessary. The only way to remove the infinite guilt resulting from sin is by a sacrifice of infinite value.
- Fourth, human choice is legitimate. Divine sovereignty does not negate human responsibility. Our choices and decisions carry consequences.
- Fifth, death is final. Once our souls leave our bodies at death, there is no turning back. There are no second chances.
- Sixth, evangelism and missions are essential. Only those men and women who call on the name of Jesus Christ will avoid hell. The only instruments God uses to get the gospel to those who have never heard that name are His people.
- Seventh, faith in Christ is decisive. Jesus Himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but through me."

Is hell in the Bible? Absolutely! Hell is real, and multitudes of people all around us are headed there. May our attitude be the same as that of C. T. Studd, who wrote:

Some want to live within the sound of church or chapel bell.
I want to run a rescue shop within a yard of hell.

What Will Heaven Be Like?

What will heaven be like? Will there really be pearly gates and streets of gold? Will it be like our favorite city, only better? Will we *really* speak Hebrew in the morning, Aramaic in the afternoon, and Greek in evening as my biblical languages friends always maintain? Will there be golf in heaven? If so, will I be able to break par? Will heaven be comparable in any way at all to life as we presently know it?

Well, as always, the best source for answers to those sorts of questions is Scripture. In fact, the Bible devotes two entire chapters to what we call “heaven.” The Bible calls it the New Jerusalem. What will heaven be like? Revelation chapters 21 and 22 tell us that **heaven will be a place of total transformation characterized by consolation, glory, and restoration.** For that reason, we should be excited about the future because of the amazing changes which will take place.

Sorrow will be replaced by joy (21:1-4).

Where would you begin if your task were to describe heaven? Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John includes both what is present and what is absent. What does John describe as being present? God Himself (21:3). He will live in our midst, and we will experience in all its fullness what it means to be His people.

It's characteristic of each of the three paragraphs we'll be studying, though, that John also points out what will be absent. It's almost as though the only way he can describe what heaven will be like is to contrast it to life as we know it. Look at verse 4—“He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death...mourning, or crying, or pain.” Those things — the first things — will have passed away.

You know what that means, don't you? It means that everything which has ever hurt you, disappointed you, or grieved you will be forgotten. Instead of mourning, crying, and pain, we will experience consolation, laughter, and joy. Is that something to look forward to?

Shadows will be replaced by substance (21:22-27).

In this paragraph, John jumps right in with what's absent — a temple (21:22). Why is that fact significant? Well, what was the temple and the entire sacrificial system of the OT designed to do? It was designed to point ahead to Jesus and his sacrifice. Yet, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that both the temple and the sacrificial system were merely earthly shadows of the heavenly realities (8:5; 10:1). There's no longer any need for a structure to represent God's presence, and there's no longer any need for a structure where sacrifices are offered. Jesus is there, and the shadows have been replaced by substance.

Nor is there any need for sun or moon. Why not? Because Jesus' glory will provide all the illumination we will ever need (21:23), just as Isaiah prophesied (cf. Isaiah 60:19-20). Finally, there is no need for the gates of the city to close. Why not? Because Jesus provides the access. That access is *continual* (the gates never close); it is *universal* (it extends to all the nations); and it is *particular* (only those written in the Lamb's book may enter).

Not only will we experience new emotions, we will experience a completely new society — with direct access to God, direct experience of God's glory, and total absence of sin. Is that something to look forward to?

Curse will be replaced by blessing (22:1-5).

Do you realize that life is depicted as "normal" in only four chapters of the Bible: Genesis 1-2 and Revelation 21-22? Everything in between is abnormal. Do you understand why that is so? It's because of Adam's sin and the curse which followed that sin (cf. Genesis 3:14-19). Now, look at verse 3a: "And there shall no longer be any curse." Think about it! All the effects of the fall will be reversed. Life will be restored to the way God intended it to be when He planted the garden and placed Adam and Eve in that garden to tend it.

Consider for a moment the parallels between Revelation 22:1-5 and the first chapters of Genesis. Revelation 22:1 mentions a river which will be in the middle of the New Jerusalem. Genesis 2:10 notes that "a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden." Revelation 22:2 talks about the tree of life. Genesis 2:9 notes that "the Lord God caused to grow ... the tree of life ... in the midst of the garden." Revelation 22:4 describes God's fellowship with His people. Genesis 3:8 describes "the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day." Revelations 22:5 notes that we will reign forever and ever. Genesis 1:28 states that God commanded Adam to "rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Yes, life as we know it will be completely transformed. God will remove the curse under which we've been living since Adam and Eve sinned. He will restore life to the way He intended it to be. Instead of the sickness, alienation, and conflict which we have known, we will experience a life of healing, fellowship, and dominion. Curse will be replaced with blessing. Is that something to look forward to?

Yes, we *should* be excited about what lies ahead of us in the New Jerusalem, because it will be a place of total transformation characterized by consolation, glory, and restoration. All our sorrow will be replaced with joy; all the shadows of this life will be replaced with the real thing; all the effects of the curse will be replaced with blessings. Paul says it well in Romans 8:18: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared to the glory that is to be revealed to us."

If you know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you have a lot to look forward to. But what about those around us who don't have a personal relationship with Jesus? What steps can we take to give them the opportunity to experience the total transformation which heaven promises? As we rejoice in the future which awaits us, may we never lose track of our responsibility to lead others to that same future.