

Preparing for eternity

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Someone has said that there are only two certainties in life: death and taxes. We can't avoid either of them!

Facing our future death is not something we like to think about too much but it is a reality we all must face – unless Jesus returns soon.

When we are young we see old people around us and don't ever imagine that one day we, too, will be old! We think we will always be young and we almost never think about death.

But all too soon we find that the years have gone by and we are confronted with the reality of aging and of our future death. This is enhanced every time we attend a funeral. Someone else has died and it becomes more and more real that one day we will too.

As we become more aware of the certainty of our death this starts to affect the way we live out our lives. For many this leads to a change in priorities. Previously we were focused on creating a life for ourselves and our families, and on trying to be successful in that. Now our focus is more on ensuring our lives have significance. We recognise that we can't take anything with us when we die, so we seek to leave something behind us that will last; something that really matters.

Let's see what the Bible says about death, dying and eternity. Hopefully this will help us be better prepared for the wonderful future that lies before us. Christians have a different view of death and eternity to those outside of Christ. Death is not seen as the enemy or something to be feared. Rather it is the gateway to our future!

Everyone must die

People are destined to die and after that to face judgment. Hebrews 9:27.

Death is a reality we must all face and is part of the great hope that we have as Christians. There is still a degree of uncertainty and fear associated with death, though, as none of us know how or when it will happen or whether it will be quick, or a slow, painful process. Associated with this is the natural concern we have for those who will be left behind after we have gone to be with Jesus. But isn't it wonderful that we can face our death knowing we don't need to fear God's judgment, and knowing that we have an eternal future in heaven?

God views death differently to us

Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. Psalm 116:15.

We tend to view death as the enemy: the great unknown and something to be feared. God doesn't view it like that! In His eyes the death of a Christian is a precious thing, because it means one more will be with Him in eternity.

God created people for fellowship. That fellowship was significantly affected by the fall when sin entered the world. That is why God sent Jesus to redeem us and bring us back into relationship with Him so Christians can now have fellowship with God and give Him pleasure. Our fellowship will be much better when we are in heaven because there will be no more sin. Nothing will be in the way to hinder us from giving God the worship He deserves. Perhaps that is why God views death differently from us? Rather than death being the end of life it is the beginning of a new kind of life when we can glorify God with no barriers or hindrances.



There are two types of death

The Bible describes two types of death: spiritual death and physical death.

Spiritual death is a state of separation from God (who is life).

Jesus has provided the way we can be saved from spiritual death:

- All people are spiritually dead outside of Christ. *The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.* Romans 6:23.
- Jesus came to take the penalty for this sin (which is why He had to die on the Cross) and give us eternal life. *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* John 3:16.
- When we accept Jesus as our Saviour we pass from death to life. We are born again and become part of God's family. Our sin is forgiven; we are declared to be righteous in God's sight, and we receive the Holy Spirit. God's life then starts to work out in every aspect of our lives so that we become more and more like Jesus. *We have eternal life! God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.* 1 John 5:11,12.

Physical death occurs when we breathe our last and our spirit leaves our body.

Through His resurrection Jesus defeated physical death, the *last enemy*. 1 Corinthians 15:26. He *destroyed death and brought immortality and light through the gospel*. 2 Timothy 1:10. On the Cross Jesus experienced physical death, but after three days He rose again from the dead and went to be with the Father in Heaven. The same will happen to us! After we die we will go to be with the Father and the Son in heaven.

Our body will decay and will ultimately break down into the compounds that it was made of. *Dust you are and to dust you will return.* Genesis 3:19. Our spirits and souls (or personalities) are eternal and will live on in heaven. This is the *goal of your faith, the salvation of your soul*. 1 Peter 1:9.

What sort of body will we have in eternity?

Many Christians wonder what it will be like in eternity. What will we be like? What sort of body will we have? Will we know others and be able to communicate with others as we do now? Will we be aware of what is happening? We will still be ourselves? What will we do?

These questions were also asked by Christians in the early Church so Paul wrote an extensive explanation in 1 Corinthians 15 of what would happen to us. In part this was to explain what kind of bodies we will have in eternity, and in part it was to refute a teaching that was coming into the early Church that there was no resurrection (mainly from converted Sadducees who didn't believe there would be a resurrection of the dead). We can learn a lot about what we will be like from these verses!

See 1 Corinthians 15

v3-11 Jesus rose from the dead. This is of *first importance*. Jesus died, was buried and rose from the dead. That He rose from the dead was clearly verified by many different people, including Paul.

v12-19 Some were saying that Jesus didn't rise from the dead. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead our preaching is useless, and we are lost with no hope. The whole Christian message is futile – in fact we who have put our faith in Christ are to be greatly pitied.

v20-26 *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!* He was the first to rise from the dead. As He has risen so will we. In Adam all people have inherited death (through Adam's sin), but in Christ all shall be made alive. Jesus has destroyed the enemy: death. He rose from the dead and we will too.

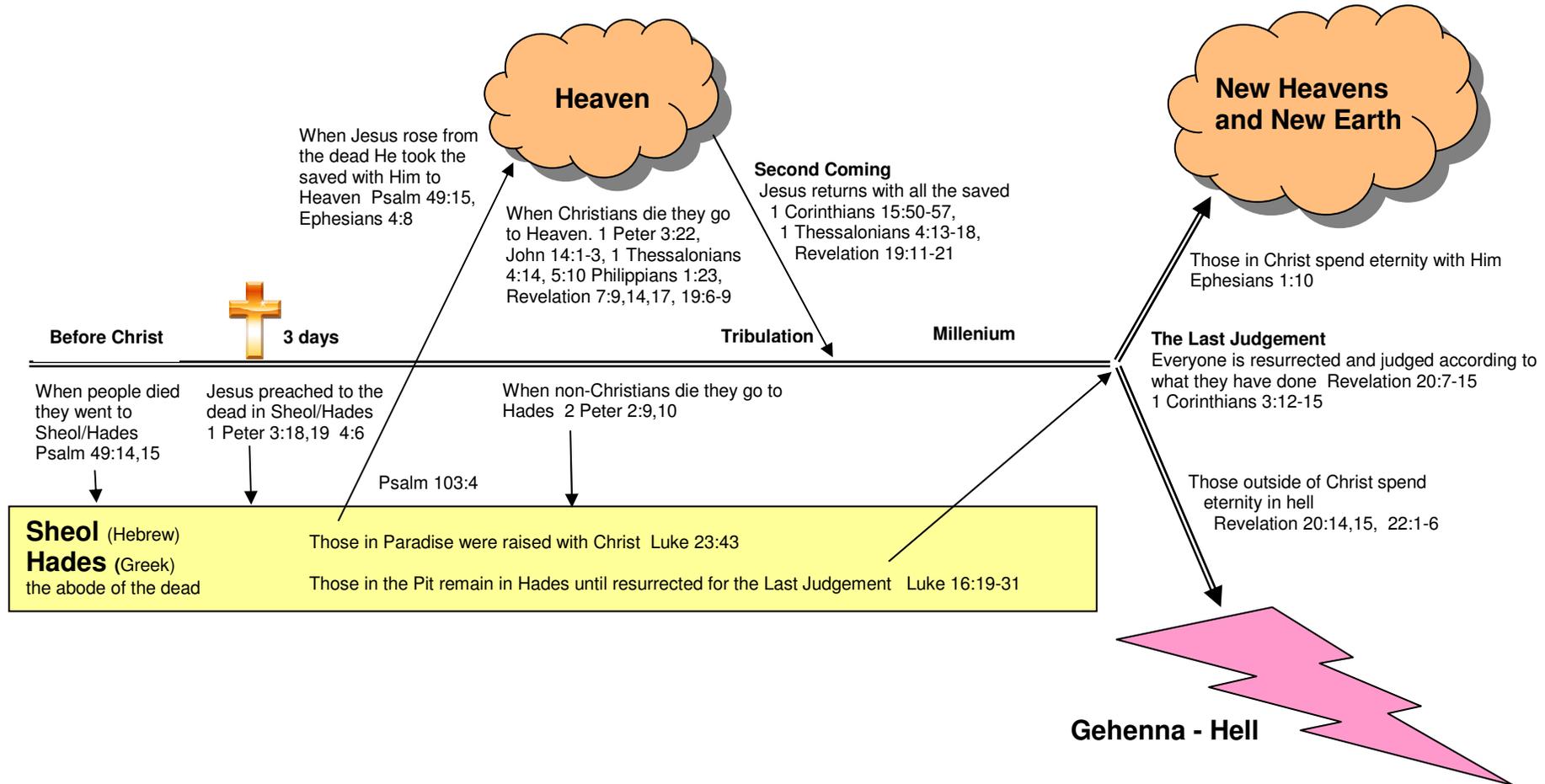
V35-49 What kind of body will we have when we are resurrected? At present we have a natural body: *soma psuchicon* – literally a soulish body; or a body that houses our soul. This body is perishable, without honour, weak and can only live for a limited time. When we are resurrected we will have a spiritual body: *soma pneumaticon*. Our new body will be spiritual, imperishable, glorious and powerful. We will be in the likeness of Jesus!

V50-55 When Jesus returns *the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.* Death will be swallowed up in victory. And then we will spend eternity with Jesus in heaven!

What happens when we die?

Many people wonder what is going to happen when they die. Will I go to heaven? Is there a hell? How do I know I am going to heaven? What will happen to me?

Here is one interpretation (of many!) that is based on many parts of the Bible that describe what happens when you die.



What is heaven like?

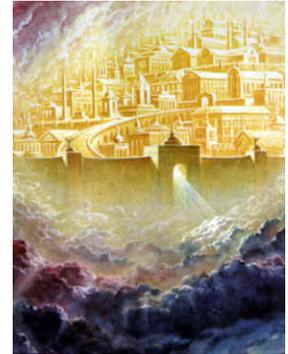
John's vision in Revelation gives us a picture of what heaven is like. Ultimately heaven is the place (or state) in which Christians will spend eternity with God, under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ. *And He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and earth together under one head, even Christ.* Ephesians 1:9,10.

Heaven will be all about Jesus!

There will be new heavens, a new earth, and the New Jerusalem. See Revelation Chapter 21- 22:6.

The first heaven and earth will pass away and will be replaced by a new heaven and earth. The Holy City, New Jerusalem comes out of heaven like a beautiful Bride. There is no temple in the city because the Lord is its temple, and there is no need for light as the Lamb - Jesus - is its light. Nothing impure will be there, for all sinners will have been sent to the lake of fire. The river of life will flow through the city bringing ongoing life. Everyone will worship the Lord, and see His face.

God will then be able to have the kind of relationship with His creation that He had when He created the earth. The effects of the Fall will have been removed (sin, sickness, death etc.) and everything will be 'made new' - for eternity.



Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them, and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. Revelation 21:3,4

What is eternity like?

It is hard for us to understand the concept of eternity because our daily lives are so influenced by time. God is eternal. This means that He always has been and always will be. (See Genesis 21:33, Isaiah 26:4 and 40:28). He is *I am*. Exodus 3:14, so is timeless. When we are in eternity we will be in a state like that: timeless, ageless, everlasting, eternal.

At present we are in a period where time is relevant. The New Testament describes this as an age (Greek *eon*). e.g. Paul describes the gospel as being *the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known...by the command of the eternal God.* Romans 16:26.

So God (who is eternal and timeless) has revealed and created the world as we know it, which is time-bound.

- Before the beginning of time He decided to extend His grace towards His creation: *This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to life through the gospel.* 2 Timothy 1:9,10
- At the time of His choosing, God sent His Son Jesus into this time-bound world. *When the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman.* Galatians 4:4.
- Jesus ministry lasted for a very short time: just 3½ years.
- We are now in *the time of God's favour; now is the day of salvation.* 2 Corinthians 6:2. Atb this time anyone can be saved if they receive Jesus Christ as Saviour.
- At the time of God's choosing Jesus will return and will bring in the *end of the age*. No-one knows when that time will be *not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.* Matthew 24:3, 36. We know from Matthew 24 and Mark 13 the signs that indicate the Second Coming of Jesus is close: wars, famines, earthquakes, persecutions, false prophets, the Gospel being preached throughout the world, the rise of the antichrist, tribulations, signs in the sky But we don't know when it will happen. That is why we must *keep watch and be ready.* Matthew 24:42-44.
- There will be a final time-bound period of 1000 years (the millennium) before Jesus ushers in the new heavens and the new earth, and eternity. See Revelation 20 and 21.



The concept of eternity in the Bible is thus one of an eternal God who created a limited time period in which He carried out His will in creating and saving a people for Himself. Once that work is complete God and His people will live together in eternity.

This is a quite different concept of eternity from that of other cultures, especially the Greek culture of New Testament times and many cultures today. In these, time is thought of as being cyclical with a recurring sequence of events (hence re-incarnation, and seeking salvation by opting out of life or by working towards a future life). The Biblical concept of eternity is not that eternity is not cyclical or that it is even just a state of timelessness. Eternal life is much more about the quality of relationship that God has with His people in eternity.

Therefore ...*be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things you will never fail, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ.* 2 Peter 1:10,11.

The Lord will be with us in death

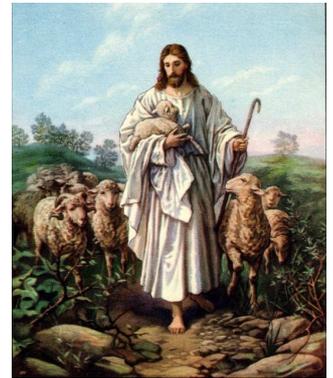
We can have great assurance that the Lord will be with us in our death (just as He has been with us in life and as He will be with us in eternity).

God says to us *Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.* Hebrews 13:5.

This is especially shown in the wonderful words of the 23rd Psalm:

The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for Thou art with me; Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever. KJV.

During our lives on earth the Good Shepherd is with us; leading us, providing for us, protecting us, blessing us. Then when it comes time for us to die He will still be there with us so that we need not fear. He has something better for us in the future when we will be even more fully blessed and will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.



What a future! What a hope!

Perhaps now you can see why *Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.* Psalm 116:15

Discussion questions

How does knowing that you are going to die affect the way you live your life?

What are you doing to prepare for your future death? What have you learned from this study that will help you in this?

What is eternity? What will eternity be like for Christians? For non-Christians?

Look up all of the references to 'eternal life' in the New Testament. What is eternal life? What is it like? How can you have eternal life? How can you be sure you have eternal life?

How can you communicate the relevance of eternity with those who are outside of Christ and who are just living for today?

What will heaven be like? What sort of body will you have there? What will you do there? What will be the central focus there?

How has Jesus defeated death? What are the implications of this for Christians?