

What We Believe – 13. The Final Judgement

We believe in: *“The resurrection of the body; the judgement of the world by the Lord Jesus Christ, with the eternal blessedness of the just and the eternal punishment of the unjust.”*

A) Introduction

This final study considers the doctrine of individual eschatology and the eternal destinies of humans. Every man, woman and child will continue to exist beyond death and the return of Jesus Christ. This is therefore a topic that is both deeply sobering and extremely pertinent – it is always relevant to everyone.

B) What happens at death?

Unless the Lord Jesus Christ returns within our lifetimes, death is a certainty for every human. No amount of wealth, status or accolades in this life will have the slightest difference on extending our days beyond the number allotted by God. As Job put it, *“Man who is born of a woman is few of days and full of trouble.”* (Job 14:1)

Death is a great taboo in our pleasure-loving and youth-adoring culture. The idols of the day – wealth, career, relationships, body image etc. – are all rendered empty and vain by death. The vast majority of people express some vague belief in the afterlife, but without any real foundation for these beliefs. As God’s people, entrusted with God’s Word, we alone can (and must) speak with clarity on such a serious and important issue.

Death is an unnatural and violent severing of a human person. We are created as embodied souls, a “psychosomatic unity” (see [Genesis 2:7](#)). The body is “the real me” from the perspective of our relationship to the material world around us; the soul is “the real me” from the perspective of our relationship to God and the spiritual world. Whatever we do involves both body and soul – hence Paul can speak of

such bodily activities as eating and drinking and relate them to the supremely spiritual activity of glorifying God ([1 Corinthians 10:31](#)).

At death these two components of humanity – body and soul – are split apart ([Ecclesiastes 12:7](#)). These makes human death unique and distinct from the death of the other created beings. At death, humans enter into a strange mode of existence in which the body is no longer alive, but the person remains alive spiritually.

Belief in the Lord Jesus Christ equips a person to die well. As [Psalm 23](#) reminds us, even in the midst of death's dark shadow, "*I will fear no evil, for you are with me*". Death is a frightening thing, and it is only natural for us to recoil from it. But the Lord Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who knows and loves His sheep – He will not abandon us in our hour of deepest need.

C) What happens after death?

[Hebrews 9:27](#) tells us that "*it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgement*." At death all humans are divided into one of two groups, never to be mixed again. Contrary to Roman Catholic belief, there is no state of purgatory following death – Christ's sacrifice on the cross was a full and perfect atonement for the sin of His people (e.g. [Hebrews 10:12](#)). Contrary to the belief of the Watchtower Society (aka Jehovah's Witnesses), there is no state of soul sleep – to be "*away from the body*" is to be "*at home with the Lord*." ([2 Corinthians 5:8](#))

This state following death is commonly called the "**intermediate state**" as it will exist only until the return of Christ at the end of history. There is only limited information given in Scripture as to the nature of this state.

At death, the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ enters into the heavenly realm to live in fellowship with the Lord, other Christians and the holy angels (see [Hebrews 12:22-23](#)). A wonderful description of this state is given in [Revelation 7:15-17](#), indicating that in heaven believers will

enjoy perfect fellowship, worship, satisfaction, service and shelter.

There will be no unresolved longings, no sorrow and no regret. This is indeed a wonderful truth, though we should remember that this isn't the final eternal state of the believer. Whilst heaven is our home in the sense that it is where the Lord is, our ultimate home is in resurrected bodies on the new earth.

For those who die rejecting Christ even less is said in Scripture than for the believer. The account of Lazarus and the rich man in **Luke 16:19-31** provides a graphic picture of the nature of the intermediate state. However, it is not clear whether this is a parable or not, and therefore to what extent the details are intended to teach us about the intermediate state. But what is clear is that those who die without Christ are held under judgement in a temporary prison (in God's custody) until sentencing on the final day of judgement (note this isn't "hell"). In contrast to heaven, this state will be one of isolation, loneliness, fear, bitterness and despair. From this point on, no further opportunity for repentance remains.

D) What happens after that?

The intermediate state is brought to an end by Christ's return, which takes us to the end of the material given in Scripture. Although it is difficult to be precise about chronology, the following important events will occur:

1. Satan will be destroyed. **Matthew 25:41** speaks of "*the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.*" Hell is designed for Satan.

Revelation 20:10 describes how, at Christ's return, the devil will be thrown into hell forever.

2. Every human will be raised. There will be a general resurrection of every human – as prophesied in the Old Testament (see **Daniel 12:2**) as well as in the New (e.g. **John 5:28-29**). The believer's resurrection body will be "*raised imperishable*" (**1 Corinthians 15:52**). No information is given as to the nature of the unbeliever's resurrection body.

3. There will be a final judgement. As described in **Matthew 25:31-46** and **Revelation 20:11-15**, Jesus Christ will be the Judge of all on the last day.

4. The eternal state will begin. Those who rejected Christ will be cast into hell. This is actually what the unbeliever wants – they spent their earthly lives wishing Jesus out of existence and wanting to serve and love other things, and now those wishes will be made permanent. Hell is described in different ways in Scripture – the lake of fire, the second death, the outer darkness, a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. These are clearly pictures, and therefore ought not to be pressed too literally, but the reality is surely worse. Those who enter the eternal state without Christ experience eternal, conscious torment.

Believers will be invited to draw near to Christ and to enter into His kingdom (**Matthew 25:34**). The earth will be cleansed with fire (**2 Peter 3:10**) and the new heavens and the new earth will begin (**Revelation 21:1-4**). Believers will live as embodied wholes once more, enjoying perfect fellowship with God and each other. It will be endless joy, endless delight and endless satisfaction.

Grasping the future delights for the believer helps put troubles in this life into perspective. The Bible doesn't ever minimise the reality of our pain, but instead it maximises the reality of our blessedness in Christ – *“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.”* (**Romans 8:19**)

E) Conclusion

Every human must face the certainty of death – their own and that of those around them. Whilst death is a painful and distressing reality, it is not one we face alone – in Jesus Christ we have a Saviour who has conquered death. He has already beaten this enemy, and He will be with His people as they face it.