

What  
Happens  
When I  
Die?

**by Ralph Martin**

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# What Happens When I Die?

Two things in life are sure: death and taxes. Or so goes the saying. But how do we *live* with the inevitability of death? We would be in sorry shape if we walked around every day fearful that each breath would be our last. And so we choose not to dwell upon the fate of all human flesh.

But how fragile is human life!

*A recently retired factory worker is unexpectedly felled by a heart attack...*

*A seasoned truck driver is suddenly buried in the rubble of an earthquake...*

*A successful executive in the prime of life is killed in an airplane crash...*

*A young mother suffers a slow, painful death from leukemia.*

*A teenager caught in a drug dispute is stabbed to death by an inner-city gang...*

*A young child is gunned down in a school playground, the innocent victim of a madman...*

*A newborn baby dies of a birth defect.*

The starkness of death often smashes into our consciousness. The finality of it all. The unknown.

Much of what drives the human race is *fear of death*. We don't want to lose our lives. We want enough food, enough love, enough relationships, and enough shelter because we are afraid of not *being*. When our livelihood is threatened, we recognize how vulnerable and fragile we are. Much of our drive to accumulate possessions and power is rooted

in fear of death.

Yet we avoid thinking about it or talking about it. Hospitals keep the sick and dying safely tucked away. Funerals are somber affairs attended by people who don't know quite what to say. We always assume that death will come to someone else...surely not to ourselves...surely not soon...surely not now.

There have been a growing number of reports of “near death” phenomena, the experiences of those who have almost died yet lived to tell about it. Many of these people tell of hovering over their own bodies, entering into a tunnel of light, feeling a great sense of peace and warmth, being welcomed home, or being offered a choice to return to their loved ones.

In the face of death, people often recount seeing their whole lives flash before their eyes, each second seeming an eternity as they remember the vivid details of their days. Often those who narrowly escape death are radically changed in their outlook on life.

What does await us after death?

Do we face consequences for our actions on this earth?

Are heaven and hell relevant concepts?

Let's examine what Scripture has to say about what happens when we die.

### *The Wages of Sin is Death*

We find that no matter how firmly we attempt to hold onto life, it slips through our fingers. We are powerless to possess it, powerless to stop the relentless movement toward death. We can slow it down or drown it out—by using money, medicine, music, work, relationships, drugs, hobbies — but

we are finally overcome by our great enemy. It all ends.

Why is this the case? In Wisdom 2:2 it says, “Through the envy of the devil death came into the world.” Satan tells us lies about God and lies about ourselves. And his lies remain the same today as they were thousands of years ago. “Have you heard God correctly? You won’t die if you disobey, you will only have greater knowledge.”

When we give in to the temptation to believe Satan instead of God, we sin against our creator who loves us and has only our best interests at heart.

Are there consequences to believing Satan’s lie? Yes. God’s word is very clear: “The wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). Death of life, love, joy, gentleness, kindness, and blessedness. Saying yes to the lie makes us slaves of the prince of lies. It pulls us away from God and under the rule of Satan.

God said through his prophet Jeremiah, “See, I am giving you a choice between life and death” (Jer 21:8). That choice begins now. There are two ways, and only two ways, set before the human race: life and prosperity, death and doom (Dt 30:15-20). God sets before us life and death, the blessing and the curse. And he encourages us to choose the path that leads to life.

What price do we pay for choosing the path that leads to destruction? Death comes “on the installment plan,” in the heartache and frustration and despair that inevitably flow from life lived apart from God. And there is the death that comes at the end, death that never dies, in darkness and gloom and torment, *separated from God forever*.

Sin never brings anything good. The glory that Satan promises is bitterly disappointing. We always experience in

our own person the penalty for sin. Sin does not result in the happiness or wholeness which it promises. Sin brings death, psychological disintegration, and physical decay.

The consequences of sin are enormous. But even more important is the fact that we sin against a holy God. Sin is a very personal affront to the one who loves us with a perfect love. God is sovereign over all creation and will not be mocked. And he is a jealous God who for our own sake will not tolerate others in his rightful place.

In the face of the overwhelming weight of sin throughout the ages, what could we ever do to express repentance and make restitution? How to expiate the intolerable burden of blasphemy and idolatry, hostility and murder, rape and violence, theft and greed, infidelity and adultery, envy and jealousy, falsehood and deception?

What to present as appropriate satisfaction for the millennia of wars and pillage, genocide and infanticide, foul perversions and corruption of children? How to make up for the oppression of the poor, the torture and slaughter of the innocent, the sin and horror of all time?

No person or group of people could ever hope to make recompense for these countless affronts to a holy God. Indeed, their restitution could never even have been imagined from within the human race, so enormous was our collective guilt, so personal our complicity, so deep-seated our inability to repent corporately or even personally.

Who could possibly restore our ruptured relationship with God?

### *A Life Preserver*

What no human beings could do for themselves, the Son of God-made-man did for us. When we had nothing to

give, Jesus took human form and offered himself freely as an acceptable sacrifice. Out of love, he descended to the depths that we might ascend to the heights. The Son of God became man that we might become as gods.

When we were drowning in the ocean of our sin, God threw us a life preserver. “Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). God desires that all men be saved. Out of his great love, he provided a way for us to be restored, the curse of sin and death broken.

Jesus led a life of perfect holiness, in utter obedience to the Father, for the sake of those who would be his brethren. He offered a blameless sacrifice as recompense for the millennia of horror and blasphemy, and he made intercession with a pure heart for the sins of the human race. Christ gathered to himself in intensified form all the punishment accruing from the sin of all humankind throughout the ages, and he suffered in his own person the consequences of the Fall and the rebellion of Satan.

Jesus, though himself without sin, faced the imminence of his own death in the agony in the garden. So terrible was the struggle that he sought the help and support of his disciples. Jesus said to them, “My heart is nearly broken with sorrow. Remain here and stay awake with me” (Mt 26:38). But they were exhausted and fell asleep.

Jesus walked a little further and fell prostrate in prayer: “My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Still, let it be as you would have it, not as I” (Mt 26:39). Once having made this surrender of his will to his Father, Jesus went on to face the cruel torture awaiting him at the hands of men.

Our sin finally nailed the Son of God to a cross.

Under the terrible weight of sin, Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). Then Jesus said, “Now it is finished,” bowed his head, and freely yielded up his spirit to God (Jn 19:30).

As the believing thief who was crucified with Jesus observed, we die for our sins (Lk 23:41). We deserve that judgment. Just as Jesus prepared for his death, we need to prepare all the more. We also are called to surrender back to God our spirits, to return the gift of life to our loving creator. We can trust the one who did not spare the life of his only Son for our sake.

Critical as the passion and death of Christ are, they represent only one dimension of the salvation God has wrought for us. There is another: *the resurrection*. God did not let his Holy One see corruption but raised Jesus up to his right hand.

The resurrection manifests the Father’s acceptance of his Son’s sacrifice on behalf of the human race. This glorious fact shows us that Satan has been overthrown, the curse of sin and death lifted, the Spirit of God bestowed. The resurrection assures us that all flesh can be saved and creation itself redeemed.

*O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and sin gets its power from the law. But thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:55-57).*

Although all human beings must still pass through physical death (a consequence of sin and the Fall that has not yet been lifted), the *sting* of death for a Christian has been removed. The sting of death is sin, which leads to eternal separation from God. For a Christian, however, the forgive-



ness of sins has removed this sting, and death becomes a passageway to everlasting joy in the presence of God.

The life, passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus more than satisfied the requirements of our reconciliation with God. Through his death and resurrection, Christ became the foundation stone on which the human race was refounded. Jesus became the beachhead of the reign of God in a fallen world, the first dwelling place of salvation, the firstborn of the dead, the firstborn of many brothers.

If we are joined to Jesus in baptism, believe in him, place our hopes in him, and follow and obey him, God stands ready to forgive our sins and free us from our bondage to Satan. From then on, we can count ourselves as his adopted sons and daughters, new men and women filled with God's own Spirit. We have become dead to sin and alive to God, partakers in the divine nature, heirs to Christ's own inheritance, and destined, like him, for resurrection and eternal life.

The salvation of the human race is not a game or an intellectual exercise. It is real, historical, factual. Humankind really sinned and experienced extremely tangible consequences. Something real and extraordinary had to happen to repair the vastness and enormity of our sin.

This real and extraordinary atonement was accomplished in history in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God opened up a new beginning, another chance to escape the futility of a life lived in sin, ruled by Satan, destined for death and eternal misery. Now Christ has made it possible for us to freely choose to turn back to God, repent of our sin and rebellion, and ask for forgiveness and pardon.

Christ's death and resurrection—the new chance for the

human race—is also the last chance. Nothing more can be done or given than what has been done and given in Christ. The Son of God offers us all that is required and more.

Jesus Christ is the only way of salvation offered to the human race, the only life preserver available to a drowning person. None bypass him or exist apart from him. To be in Christ is to be saved; not to be in him is to be lost, to sink beneath the waves forever.

People who have never heard the gospel through no fault of their own may still be saved if they sincerely seek God and live according to the light received. Yet these individual non-Christians will be saved by God's mercy and because Christ reconciled the human race to God.

The gospel of Christ has consequences. Our response to God's offer in the death and resurrection of Jesus makes an eternal difference. Jesus came the first time as a lamb to take away the sins of the world by his sacrificial death. But he is coming again, this time as king and judge of the entire human race.

Being prepared for Jesus' second coming is as important as being prepared for his first. Let us now turn to a consideration of what the gospel says about the Lord's return.

### ***Jesus Will Come Again***

Christ speaks to us as one who has risen from the dead. Death could not hold him. Before Jesus left his disciples, he promised them many things. He promised that he was going to prepare a place for them and would come back to take them with him. He promised not to leave them orphans, but to send his Holy Spirit to dwell within their hearts (Jn 14:2-3, 16-18).

Christ came once into our midst as a servant, a slave, a

lamb sacrificed for us. He *will* come again. But the second time he will come in glory to definitively establish his reign over the human race. The first time, Jesus came as God's offer of full salvation. The second time, he will come to judge how the human race has responded to that offer.

To those who have put their trust in him, Jesus will give the fullness of salvation. Those who have persisted in wrongdoing, who have rejected him, his word, his servants, will be banished from his presence.

*Just as it is appointed that men die once, and after death be judged, so Christ was offered up once to take away the sins of many; he will appear a second time not to take away sin but to bring salvation to those who eagerly await him (Heb 9:27-28).*

Jesus himself frequently referred to his return in glory. "Then men will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory," he told his disciples. "He will dispatch his angels and assemble his chosen from the four winds, from the farthest bounds of earth and sky" (Mk 13:26-27).

At Jesus' ascension, angels assured the disciples of Jesus' return: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking up at the skies? This Jesus who has been taken up from you will return, just as you saw him go up into the heavens" (Acts 1:11).

This firm, clear belief in Jesus' visible and glorious return in power, as king and judge, is consistently taught and proclaimed throughout the New Testament. Living in expectancy of Christ's coming—indeed, longing for it!—is an essential element of Christian life itself. "From now on a merited crown awaits me," Paul tells Timothy. "On that Day, the Lord, just judge that he is, will award it to me

—and not only to me, but to all who have looked for his appearing with eager longing” (2 Tim 4:8).

What will the coming of the Lord be like? It will be sudden and unexpected (1 Thes 5:2-3). The human race as a whole will be caught by surprise.

*The coming of the Son of Man will repeat what happened in Noah's time. In the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and being married, right up to the day Noah entered the ark. They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them. So it will be at the coming of the Son of Man (Mk 24:37-39).*

Christ's coming will be personal, clearly manifest, unmistakable, and visible to all. It will not be hidden or invisibly “spiritual.” This will be the incarnate Son coming, not an invisible working of the Holy Spirit.

*Remember, I have told you all about it beforehand; so if they tell you, “look, he is in the desert,” do not go out there; or “he is in the innermost rooms,” do not believe it. As the lightning from the east flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be. . . The sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the clans of the earth will strike their breasts as they see “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven” with power and great glory (Mt 24:25-27, 30).*

When will the return of the Lord take place? No one knows the day or hour (Mk 13:32). Jesus stated that the Father had reserved that knowledge to himself (Acts 1:6-7). Paul reaffirms this teaching: “As regards specific times and moments, brothers, we do not need to write you; you know very well that the day of the Lord is coming like a thief in the night” (1 Thes 5:1-2).

We are exhorted to be alert and watchful, prepared by lives of holiness and service to Christ (1 Thes 5:4-8). Scripture also warns us not to be thrown off guard by apparent delays in his coming. Our human judgments about relative lengths of time might cause us to lose hope or become cynical or indifferent regarding the reality of Jesus' return (2 Pt 3:3-13).

When Christ comes again, it will be to accomplish specific purposes. His coming will bring the resurrection of the dead and the judgment of the whole human race. Let us now consider the resurrection that will accompany his coming.

### *Rising to a New Life*

The resurrection of Christ is central to the Christian faith. It is the manifestation of Christ's identity as Messiah, Savior, and Lord—the proof of his victory over death and of the reality of the redemption he has wrought.

But Christ's resurrection is also *for us*, just as his suffering and death are *for us*. The fact that we share in his death through faith and baptism means that we also participate in his resurrection. When we ourselves are raised from the dead at Jesus' second coming, we will share fully in our inheritance as children of God.

The return of the Lord will usher in a new age, and signal the end of the present age. Scripture refers to a certain order of events during that transition. It is when Christ comes again that we will be raised:

*Just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will come to life again, but each one in proper order: Christ the first fruits and then, at his coming, all those who belong to him. After that will come the end (1 Cor 15:22-24).*

Paul gives more details about these end-times events in his first letter to the church at Thessalonica:

*We would have you be clear about those who sleep in death, brother; otherwise you might yield to grief like those who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those also who have fallen asleep believing in him. We say to you, as if the Lord himself had said it, that we who live, who survive until his coming, will in no way have an advantage over those who have fallen asleep. No, the Lord himself will come down from heaven at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet; and those who have died in Christ will rise first. Then we, the living, the survivors, will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly. Console one another with this message (1 Thes 4:13-17).*

This is the initial order of the resurrection; first Christ, the first fruits; then those who have died in Christ and then those followers of Christ who are alive at his second coming. Then will come the end.

Death is the greatest sign of man's fall from God's friendship—the most visible, overarching indicator that something has gone profoundly wrong with the human race. At its root, death is the curse that came upon the human race as a result of our rebellion against God.

Scripture refers to death as “the last enemy,” the manifestation of man's fallenness most closely tied to the work of Satan and last curse to yield to the power of redemption (1 Cor 15:26). We still suffer the pangs of death in the first stages of redemption, when Satan will only be chained. But

at Christ's second coming, death will be destroyed when Satan is thrown into the lake of fire to eternal ruin.

Because death is such an underlying torment to human life, casting a shadow over even our best moments, it lies at the heart of many of the fears and compulsions of the human race. A key part of the significance of Christ's resurrection for us, therefore, is that he frees us not only from death, but from the *fear of death*.

We are freed from the fear of death by joining ourselves to Christ in his death and resurrection. We are given the Spirit to take away our fear and assure us of what awaits us at Jesus' coming. A new way of life in Christ is characterized by freedom, confidence, trust, joy, peace, courage, faithfulness, and strength to endure difficulty.

The resurrection of Christ signals the conquering of death, the lifting of the curse, the crushing of Satan, the redemption of our race. It guarantees that God has saved us as he created us—as flesh-and-blood creatures, redeemed through a flesh-and-blood Savior who was raised victorious from the dead in his body.

### ***What Happens After Death & Before Resurrection?***

The teaching of Scripture is clear that the resurrection of human beings will occur at the second coming of Christ. What happens then after death to those who die before Jesus comes again?

Paul's reference to "the sleep of death" does not provide much insight into what the actual state of existence is like (1 Thes 4:13). In other places though, almost inadvertently, we are given glimpses into the nature of life after death and before the resurrection.

Scripture distinguishes between the life of the body and the life of the soul or spirit, which continues after our bodily death. Jesus warns us not to fear those who can kill the body, but rather him who also has power to kill the soul (Mt 10:28). Stephen, at the point of death, prays, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (Acts 7:59).

Other scripture passages suggest that some kind of participation in the life of the blessed or the life of the damned begins immediately after death—even before the resurrection—in a place called Sheol or Hades. This is not the definitive heaven or hell that will be manifest at the Lord’s coming, but rather an intermediate stage, a preliminary participation in the blessing or punishment to come.

The story of Dives and Lazarus presents Lazarus as participating in the life of the blessed immediately after death, and Dives in the torment of the damned. They remain within sight and communication of each other, yet with a great abyss between them (Lk 16:19-31).

On the cross, Jesus promised the believing thief that “this day, you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42). Paradise, then, can be understood as that section of Hades reserved for the blessed.

This understanding of life after death before the resurrection is further clarified by the following passage from the first epistle of Peter. After Christ died he descended into Hades to proclaim his saving work to the imprisoned spirits:

*The reason why Christ died for sins once for all, the just man for the sake of the unjust, was that he might lead you to God. He was put to death insofar as fleshly existence goes, but was given life in the realm of the spirit. It was in the spirit also that he went to preach to the spirits in prison (1 Pt 3:18-19).*



The mainstream of Christian tradition and teaching has maintained that the soul or spirit of a person already begins to participate in his eternal destiny after death, and that the complete form of reward or punishment awaits the resurrection of the body. The Catholic understanding of “purgatory” is related to scriptures which indicate the need for purification by “fire” for those who are not to be condemned, but are in need of some purification before being able to enter fully into the heavenly presence of God.

### ***What Will Our Resurrected Bodies Be Like?***

As with many other questions, Scripture does not tell us all we might like to know about this, but just what we need to know. The main scriptural teaching on the resurrected body is in 1 Corinthians 15:35-54. Paul points out that there is some continuity between the earthly body and the resurrected body, comparing it to the relationship between the seed and the full-grown plant. But he further explains that the resurrection brings us into a different order of existence where many of the earth’s natural laws no longer hold.

We can see the interplay of continuity and discontinuity, earthly and heavenly, in the accounts about the resurrected Christ. He still had a tangible body that could be touched and felt, that could eat, that his disciples could experience as solid and real, that still bore the marks of his wounds, that was recognizable as the person they had known and lived with for three years.

Yet at the same time, Jesus had been transformed and his disciples often did not recognize him. His resurrected body could transcend the limitations and physical laws to which his earthly body had been subject: he could now enter locked rooms, appear and disappear.

Jesus' resurrected body prefigures what ours will be like. We will be the same as before in some respects, yet different: corporeal, but not bound in the same way by space and time; human, but now also incorruptible, immortal, glorious. As Paul writes:

*Now I am going to tell you a mystery. Not all of us shall fall asleep, but all of us are to be changed—in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, at the sound of the last trumpet. The trumpet will sound and dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. This corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, this mortal body with immortality (1 Cor 15:51-54).*

Christ will come again. At his coming the righteous and the wicked will be raised, and then will come the judgment.

### ***The Final Judgment***

At the moment of death, each person is judged and begins to participate in his or her ultimate destiny, heaven or hell. This is called the particular judgment. At the end of time all of this and more will be made manifest in the general or universal judgment.

In the book of Revelation, Jesus identifies himself as the one who holds “the keys to death and the nether world” (Rv 1:17-18). The following vision describes what will happen when Jesus unlocks the dwelling place of the dead:

*Next I saw a large white throne and the One who sat on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence until they could no longer be seen. I saw the dead, the great and the lowly, standing before the throne. Lastly, among the scrolls, the book of the living was opened. The dead were judged according to their conduct as recorded on the scrolls. The*

*sea gave up its dead; then death and the nether world gave up their dead. Each person was judged according to his conduct. Then death and the nether world were hurled into the pool of fire, which is the second death; anyone whose name was not found inscribed in the book of the living was hurled into this pool of fire (Rv 20:11-15).*

A frightening vision to those who fear their names are not inscribed in the book of the living! All men and women will rise at the last day and face judgment. The great and the lowly will appear together before the throne of the Lamb.

Justice is never done perfectly here on earth: the good die young; the righteous suffer; the poor are defrauded. But God's word speaks over and over of that great Day of the Lord. God's faithful ones will be rewarded and blessed beyond measure; his enemies and those who have lived unrighteous lives will be eternally punished.

The reign of God was inaugurated with the life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and the sending of the Spirit. With these, the age of the Church began.

But the reign of God will not be fully established until this present age is brought to a conclusion at the second coming of Jesus. As the Creed states: "he will come again to judge the living and the dead, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The New Testament continually restates this basic teaching about the coming judgment. The preaching of Acts:

*God may well have overlooked bygone periods when men did not know him; but now he calls on all men everywhere to reform their lives. He has set the day on which he is going to "judge the world with justice" through a man he has appointed—one whom he has endorsed in the sight of*

*all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).*

Paul to the Romans:

*We shall all have to appear before the judgment seat of God. ... Every one of us will have to give an account of himself before God (Rom 14:10,12).*

Peter to the Diaspora:

*They shall give an accounting to him who stands ready to judge the living and the dead (1 Pt 4:5).*

*The present heavens and earth are reserved by God's word for fire; they are kept for the day of judgment, the day when godless men will be destroyed (2 Pet 3:7).*

From these and many other such passages, it is clear that the very message of salvation is presented within the context of the coming judgment. The salvation offered by Jesus is salvation *from* the wrath to come, salvation *from* condemnation on the day of judgment. "Now that we have been justified by his blood, it is all the more certain that we shall be saved by him from God's wrath" (Rom 5:9).

The message of Scripture is clear: God is merciful and just. He extends his mercy now through his Son Jesus Christ, who died and rose for our salvation. God is not gleeful in his judgment, but desires *all* humankind to be saved. Indeed, he is showing exceeding patience until all have had a chance to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But this age of mercy and grace will come to an end. Those who have rejected God's offer of grace and mercy will experience his wrath. God is just as well as merciful. Those who choose not to enter his kingdom through Jesus, the doorway he has established, are left outside forever.

*Consider the kindness and the severity of God—severity*

*toward those who fell, kindness toward you, provided you remain in his kindness; if you do not, you too will be cut off (Rom 11:22).*

Jesus constantly warned his hearers to take heed lest they face the wrath to come on the day of judgment (Mt 11:24; Lk 13:4). Human beings who hear the gospel but close their hearts to it will be condemned. Jesus even promises that those who reject his brethren will be judged as if they rejected him: “I assure you, it will go easier for the region of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than it will for that town” (Mt 10:15).

Scripture also specifies certain types of behavior whose practitioners will be excluded from the kingdom of God. Among those barred from heaven will be those who dishonor marriage; those who live as thieves, idolaters, sodomites, misers, fornicators, adulterers, drunkards, slanderers, robbers; those who are liars or who do detestable acts; those who are cowards, traitors, or deceivers (Heb 13:4, 1 Cor 6:9-11; Rv 21:8, 26-27).

In addition, false teachers—especially those who deny the Lord, his second coming or the judgment, or who encourage immorality—will be excluded from the kingdom of God. Even the fallen angels will receive a final judgment and be eternally banished from God’s presence (2 Pt 2:1-22; 3:1-4).

### ***The Basis of Judgment for Christians***

For those who have believed in Christ and obeyed him, the day of judgment is the long-awaited day of fullness of redemption and reward. Scripture encourages Christians who have been living in union with and obedience to Christ to approach the day of judgment with confidence and joyful expectation. Paul declares that “there is no condemnation

now for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). He adds that when Christ comes, we will see that the sufferings of the present are nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us. Indeed, he says, “the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God” (V. 19).

Jesus himself clearly taught his disciples that all who heeded his voice have *already* passed from death to life:

*I solemnly assure you, the man who hears my word and has faith in him who sent me possesses eternal life. He does not come under condemnation, but has passed from death to life. I solemnly assure you, an hour is coming, has indeed come, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who have heeded it shall live (Jn 5:24-25).*

Nonetheless, Christians too will have to give an account of their lives. Whatever has not been set right or corrected adequately before Christ’s coming will be dealt with. However, the Lord affirms that his judgment of the redeemed will be in terms of correction and purification, not condemnation, and will end ultimately in reward.

Jesus specifically mentions some things for which no reward will be given, such as religious activities done with impure motives. Almsgiving, prayer, and fasting to impress others are particularly singled out (Mt 6:1-18). What has been hidden will be brought into the light:

*Stop passing judgment before the time of his return. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and manifest the intentions of hearts. At that time, everyone will receive his praise from God (1 Cor 4:5).*

Part of the judgment for Christians will be the determination of rewards. Apparently, there are degrees of reward

and glory in heaven, related to the degree of love and service with which we have followed Christ. Anything in our lives and work that has not been built solidly on Christ and in harmony with his intentions will be judged. Although these things may be found lacking, we ourselves will be saved:

*Everyone, however, must be careful how he builds. No one can lay a foundation other than the one that has been laid, namely Jesus Christ. If different ones build on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay or straw, the work of each will be made clear. The Day will disclose it. That day fire will test the quality of each man's work. If the building a man has raised on this foundation still stands, he will receive his recompense; if a man's building burns, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as one fleeing through a fire (1 Cor 3:10-15).*

### ***Judgment on Lukewarm Christians***

This may come as something of a surprise, but Scripture indicates that lukewarm Christians have a chance of being damned. I was surprised, even shocked, when I studied what God's word said about this. Jesus' general attitude toward lukewarmness is vividly expressed in the following excerpt from Revelation:

*I know your deeds: I know you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were one or the other—hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spew you out of my mouth! (Rv 3:15).*

Scripture makes clear that saving faith is not just an intellectual assent to certain truths, or even an emotional “born again” experience, but a commitment of the heart and will to act on and live in accordance with the words

that our Savior and Lord speaks to us, in the power of the Holy Spirit. “Be assured, then, that faith without works is as dead as a body without breath” (Jas 2:26).

To profess faith in Christ without the corresponding actions is counted by Jesus as worthy of condemnation:

*Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. You can tell a tree by its fruit. None who cry out, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of God but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. When that day comes, many will plead with me, “Lord, Lord”... Then I will declare to them solemnly, “I never knew you. Out of my sight, you evildoers!” (Mt. 7:19-22, 23).*

Not to be fruitful for the Lord, not to use well what he gives us, is to run the risk of condemnation. Material possessions, gifts and abilities, time and resources, insights and faith—an unprofitable use of any of these could result in their being taken away and their owners being declared unfaithful servants. This is what is indicated in the parable of the silver pieces or talents (Mt 25:14-30). The servant who has not made a profit with the master’s money is stripped of the talents he was given and thrown into the outer darkness.

Scripture also points out the dangers of becoming so involved in our ordinary, day to day lives that we do not remain alert to God, eager to do Christ’s will, and ready for Christ’s second coming. To be nominal Christians but not to be clothed in righteous deeds makes one unfit for the kingdom of God. Being invited into the kingdom is one thing; responding properly is another:

*When the king came in to meet the guests, however, he caught sight of a man not properly dressed for a wedding*



*feast. “My friend,” he said, “how is it you came in here not properly dressed?” The man had nothing to say. The king then said to the attendants, “Bind him hand and foot and throw him out into the night to wail and grind his teeth.” The invited are many, the elect are few (Mt 22:11-14).*

We also become liable for judgment if we fail to persevere in faith and obedience until the end of our lives or until the Lord’s return. Short-lived enthusiasm followed by a drifting back into lukewarmness is just as dangerous. Christians who do not persevere, who return to serious sin or end up denying the faith, will be dealt with severely.

*If we sin willfully after receiving the truth, there remains for us no further sacrifice for sin— only a fearful expectation of judgment and a flaming fire to consume the adversaries of God. Anyone who rejects the law of Moses is put to death without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Do you not suppose that a much worse punishment is due the man who disdains the Son of God, thinks the covenant-blood by which he was sanctified to be ordinary, and insults the Spirit of grace? We know who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay” and “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb 10:26-31).*

There is only one way for Christians to meet the criteria required for eternal life: we must allow the Lord to transform us and make us holy—not just in external actions, but in our hearts and minds and wills.

Scripture quite clearly shows that God expects man to obey the law he has placed within him, availing himself of the help provided in and through his Son and his body, the

Christian people. Not to obey God in a serious matter puts one in danger of punishment.

On the basis of the final judgment on the Day of the Lord, some will rise to eternal life, others to eternal damnation. Let us consider further the consequences of our actions here on earth: heaven or hell.

### ***Heaven or Hell?***

With the second coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment, human history as we currently know it will come to an end. The time of mercy will draw to a close for those in rebellion against God. The chance to escape his wrath and punishment will end. Evildoers will be banished from his kingdom forever and enter into eternal punishment, and those who have responded to the light God gave them will enter into eternal joy.

Jesus described the final judgment in terms of separating all of mankind into two groups, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats:

*The sheep he will place on his right hand, the goats on his left. The king will say to those on his right: "Come. You have my Father's blessing! Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world... Then he will say to those on his left: "Out of my sight, you condemned, into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels!"... These will go off to eternal punishment and the just to eternal life (Mt 26:32-34; 41, 46).*

At the end of time, Satan along with the rebellious angels and unredeemed humanity are all finally banished from the kingdom of God. Even death and the nether world are to be destroyed and replaced by "the pool of fire, which

is the second death” (Rv 20:14). All those whose names are not found in the book of life will be condemned to the eternal torment of this second death.

Hell, the fate of the damned, is vividly described in Scripture. Sometimes it is referred to as “outer darkness,” where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Mt 22:13). Sometimes it is described as “unquenchable fire” (Mk 9:43), or the “furnace of fire” (Mt 13:42, 50), or the “fiery pool of burning sulphur” (Rv 21:8).

Sometimes hell is described as the place where the tormenting worm never stops gnawing (Mk 9:48). Sometimes it is simply “damnation” or “death” (Jn 5:25, 29), “eternal punishment” (Mt 25:46), or “eternal ruin” (2 Thes 1:7-10).

Will hell literally be a place of flames, darkness, and tormenting worms? Perhaps. Perhaps not. The only certainty is that hell is not a pleasant place to spend eternity! Scripture warns us to do everything possible to avoid ending up there, since its sufferings are truly awful. We are literally playing with fire if we ignore these graphic images and simply psychologize the reality of hell.

An ancient tradition of the Christian church holds that because of the very nature of the resurrection, the sufferings of hell must include not only the awful pain of separation from God, but bodily agony as well. Just as we will be judged *in the body* for deeds done in the body, we will also suffer *in the body* for deeds done in the body. God, who came to earth and took on human flesh, takes our bodily nature seriously both before and after death.

Another question about hell is whether it is indeed the *eternal* dwelling place of the damned. Human thinking would argue that surely a God of love and mercy would one day of-

fer pardon to those poor suffering souls in hell. But nowhere does Scripture indicate such a reconciliation will take place. The reality of *eternal* damnation has been clearly taught and affirmed by the Christian church throughout the centuries.

One last question is often entertained by those who want to delay their commitment to Christ: will we be offered an opportunity for repentance and faith at the time of death or after death? Unfortunately dying often seems to be a time when faith is tested rather than suddenly given.

Although deathbed conversions certainly happen, death is the supreme moment of summons to judgment on the basis of a lifetime of choices and decisions—not primarily a “last chance.” If one is not ready before the moment of crisis, it is presumptuous to plan on “preparing” at the last minute (Mt 25:1-13; Jn 9:4).

For those who have responded to God’s offer of salvation, death can indeed be a happy occasion. Those made pure by the blood of the Lamb can look forward to entering into the fullness of life and blessing to be found in God’s presence forever.

Heaven is variously described in Scripture. It is eternal life (Mt 25:46), “glory beyond compare” (2 Cor 4:17), a place in which the redeemed participate in the life of God in glorified, immortal, incorruptible bodies (1 Cor 15:35-55).

Heaven is “the city of the living God” which is filled with “angels in festal garb” (Heb 12:22). The holy city Jerusalem gleams with the splendor of God, with “the radiance of a precious jewel,” with twelve gates each made of a single pearl and streets of pure gold, crystal clear. “The city had no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb” (Rv 21:18-23).

Perhaps this passage from Revelations says it best:

*Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer. I also saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God, beautiful as a bride prepared to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne cry out: "This is God's dwelling among men. He shall dwell with them and they shall be his people and he shall be their God who is always with them. He shall wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, crying out or pain, for the former world has passed away" (Rv 21:1-4).*

### ***The Deadline of Death***

Heaven and hell coexist on this earth. We can partake of God's presence and abundant life here and now, or we can taste the bitter poison of Satan and the pain of death here and now. But there is a day of harvest coming, a day of reaping, a day of sorting.

Life is short. Even though some days seem as though they will never end, the years fly by with seemingly increasing speed. When will you die? Soon. Whether it's sixty minutes or sixty years, death is always soon. Life is always short. Even if we are alive when the Lord comes again, we face the divine deadline of the final judgment.

In the perspective of eternity, the days allotted to each human being are hardly worth counting. As the psalmist says, "Man's days are like those of grass; like a flower of the field he blooms; the wind sweeps over him and he is gone, and his place knows him no more" (Ps 103:15-16).

The choice we face is literally life or death, heaven or hell—beginning in this world and continuing forever. We are

responsible for our choices and actions here on earth. Eternal consequences await each of us when we come face-to-face with God. There really is a heaven. There really is a hell.

The choices we make now—to come under the reign and rule of Christ, or to sin and rebel and come under the rule of the devil—have lifelong and eternal consequences. We can choose to die now to our own sinful desires, or we can die later in the eternal lake of fire. Eternal separation from God begins now by the wrong choices we make.

Jesus said to his disciples:

*If a man wishes to come after me, he must deny his very self, take up his cross, and begin to follow in my footsteps. Whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. What profit would a man show if he were to gain the whole world and destroy himself in the process? What can a man offer in exchange for his very self? The Son of Man will come with his Father's glory accompanied by his angels. When he does, he will repay each man according to his conduct (Mt 16:24-27).*

Jesus Christ came the first time as a lamb to take away the sins of the world. He plunged himself into our pain and misery and took it all upon himself on the cross. Jesus willingly chose to die because of his enormous love for each of us.

And God raised him up.

God made Jesus to be the firstborn of the dead, the first of the human race to be restored—the curse of sin and death broken. Life was placed in the Son to give freely to all who draw close to him.

We were created never to feel at home until we are at home with God our Father in heaven. Jesus says to you now,

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through me” (Jn 14:6). We have a way to repent and to be restored and reconciled to our heavenly Father. Jesus is the way, the only way.

What is really important in the short time that God has given us? All that matters is to “love the Lord our God with your whole heart, with your whole soul, and with all you mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37, 39).

I believe that the Lord wants us more and more to look at life as he looks at it— *in the light of eternity*. Picture yourself standing before the Lord. Ask yourself: “What will seem important or unimportant? What will I regret and not regret?” Make those decisions and choices while you still have time.

Many people think, “I’ll get around to it some day.” But none of us knows how long our life will last. How many people reach the end of their lives having intended to turn to the Lord, but never having gotten around to it!

The prophet Isaiah issued an urgent plea to those who would put off coming to the Lord:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
call him while he is near.  
Let the scoundrel forsake his way,  
and the wicked man his thoughts;  
Let him turn to the Lord for mercy;  
to our God, who is generous in forgiving  
For my thoughts are not your thoughts,  
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. (Is 55:6-8)*

The words of Isaiah carry both a promise and a condition. The promise is that God stands ready to show mercy to us, to generously forgive us. The condition is that we

seek the Lord *while he may be found*.

Inexorably, every day brings each of us closer to death. No matter how glorious or inglorious our lives, the fate of all humankind is death. No matter how fancy the funeral, death is the great reducer of our commonality. Each must pass through that gate alone, stripped bare of all possessions.

### ***What Will Happen When You Die?***

May this booklet help all who read it to indeed escape the “wrath that is to come” by joining themselves to the person of Jesus Christ, living as a member of his body, the church, and being faithful to his teachings to the end.

The Lord himself urges you: Don't wait another day. Don't wait another hour. Wherever you are right this moment, whatever you're doing, whatever time it may be, open your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ. You may find it helpful to pray this prayer:

*Lord Jesus Christ, I believe in you. I've hurt you. Forgive me my sins. I want to follow you. Touch me. Lead me. I open my life to you. Please give me your Holy Spirit so that I may follow you now and be with you forever. Amen.*

As we grow in union with him may we all be able to join in that great prayer of the Spirit and the Bride and with increasing freedom and joy say, “Come, Lord Jesus, come!”

And may we all by God's grace see each other in heaven.

