

What Happens After You Die?

Benjamin Franklin wrote that “in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” Well, he was wrong about the taxes, they can often be legally avoided – for example by living in a tax haven like Monaco. But, he was certainly right about death. Death has come to everyone who has ever lived, with only two exceptions – Enoch and Elijah, who were translated directly to heaven.

So what happens when we die, is that simply the end? Is death an ending or an opportunity? Is what we are, our essential self, completely involved with the physical functioning of the brain, so that when all electrical activity in the brain ceases, we come to an end – like a computer whose circuit boards have failed. Atheistic secularists like Richard Dawkins would certainly have us think so.

Yet, most of us cannot accept this bleak view. We instinctively believe that death is not the end, but rather a gateway to a new life. Throughout history almost all human societies have believed in some kind of life after death. In the ancient near East, the question was not ‘Is there life after death?’ No one really doubted this; and their question was ‘What are the conditions in the afterlife and how can we improve them?’

I consider that this widespread belief in an afterlife exists simply because God has designed us for eternal life. The concept of eternal life is built into creation and we are instinctively aware of that fact. For Christians there is absolutely no doubt that there is life after death. In his word to us, the Bible, God has progressively revealed the nature of life after death to us. This morning we haven’t got time to analyse the development of that revelation through the OT and into the NT and I’m just going to state what I believe the NT teaches us about life after death and then look briefly at the Scriptural justification for those statements. In my view the NT teaches us five things:

1. Between death and eventual future bodily resurrection we have an interim state of disembodied existence.

2. A final bodily resurrection for both the righteous and the wicked will take place at the second coming of Christ. This will include everyone who has ever lived including those who are still alive at the second coming.
3. Following this bodily resurrection there will be a final judgement of every human being who has ever lived according to what they have done during their earthly lives. Those who have been justified, sanctified and perfected through faith in Christ will be vindicated in this judgement.
4. Those who are condemned at the last judgement will be consigned to hell.
5. Those who are vindicated at the last judgement will have an everlasting reward of an immortal life with God.

So, now let's look at the evidence for these statements. As regards statement 1, an interim state of existence between death and final resurrection at the second coming, I think we need look no further than Jesus's promise to the thief who was being crucified alongside him:

"Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Luke 23:43 NIV)

Clearly this doesn't make sense unless the thief was going to have some kind of existence immediately following his death. Paul also implies an immediate disembodied presence with the LORD in his second letter to the Corinthians:

"Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it." (2 Corinthians 5:6-9 NIV)

As far as I'm aware the Bible doesn't tell us what happens to the wicked in this interim period, but I would assume they also have some kind of intermediate existence, although clearly not in paradise with the Lord.

As regards resurrection, judgement and the gift of eternal life, our statements 2. and 3., we need look no further than Jesus's own words as recorded by John:

“Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned.” (John 5:28-29 NIV)

and

“And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:39-40 NIV)

and

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:54 NIV)

So here we see that Jesus confirms a resurrection of both believers and unbelievers at the second coming – the last day – and also confirms that all who really and truly believe on Christ and what he has done for us will be vindicated in the final judgement and given the gift of eternal life.

Our resurrection bodies will be physical bodies made immortal. Paul teaches about this:

“But someone may ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. All flesh is not the same: Men have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is

raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;" (1 Corinthians 15:35-43 NIV)

Paradoxical as it may seem our resurrection bodies will be both continuous with and discontinuous from our earthly bodies.

Indeed Paul tells us that our resurrection bodies will be like Christ's body:

"And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven." (1 Corinthians 15:49 NIV)

and

"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." (Philippians 3:20-21 NIV) and then the scripture will come true:

"When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory.'" (1 Corinthians 15:54 NIV)

Resurrection of the body gives some people cause for concern about cremation of the body after death. In my view there is absolutely no need to worry on this score. At the second coming God will be resurrecting those who have been dead for tens of thousands of years and whose bodies have completely decomposed. God clearly doesn't need a perfectly preserved physical body in order to resurrect us.

Returning for a moment to the question of judgement, our statements 3., 4. and 5., we have seen verses which clearly teach that those who truly believe in Christ will, through that faith, be justified in the last judgement and receive the gift of eternal life. We have also seen verses which speak of final judgement according to works. No doubt those who have never received the gospel message will be judged according to what they have done. That is according to their works. However, I believe the judgement according to works will also extend amongst believers. But, this judgement will not be as regards

salvation, because we have already been assured of the gift of eternal life for all true believers and can face the day of judgement with confidence:

“If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him.” (1 John 4:15-17 NIV)

I consider that for believers this final judgement will be a judgement which will determine our heavenly rewards. In ancient times the bema or judgement seat was a place from which both punishments and rewards were given out. I believe that will also be the case with the judgement seat of Christ. So Matthew writes:

“Anyone who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward, and anyone who receives a righteous man because he is a righteous man will receive a righteous man’s reward. And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.” (Matthew 10:41-42 NIV)

and

“For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done.” (Matthew 16:27 NIV)

I don’t claim to have any idea what these rewards will be or how they will be allocated, but I’m sure we can all have complete confidence in our absolutely just and righteous God.

But what of those who are not believers, our statement 4. What of those who have not turned to Christ in faith? Peter says:

“For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, "If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?"” (1 Peter 4:17-18 NIV)

Of course it is not for us to judge our fellow man. That is God's prerogative alone. But, I think scripture makes it clear that those who have heard the gospel but have not accepted it and taken up the free pardon which Christ won for us will be condemned in the last judgement on account of their unforgiven sin:

“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.” (John 3:18 NIV)

I expect that those who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel will be judged according to what they know and have done – again we can have confidence in the just and righteous judgement of our God.

Scripture makes it clear that sinners who are condemned at the last judgement will be consigned to hell. Jesus said:

“If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.” (Matthew 5:29-30 NIV)

I think hell is a real physical place where those who are resurrected but condemned in the last judgement will be consigned. It may be a place of punishment, read for example the parable of Lazarus and the rich man which Luke recounts in chapter 16 of his gospel. I'm not sure about that, I personally find it difficult to square the righteousness and justice of God with eternal punishment for finite sin, although many scriptures do at least imply it, so I'm not completely discounting it. But, whether it's a place of eternal punishment or not, I'm sure hell won't be pleasant. At the very least it will be banishment from God's presence and all the good things that our God stands for like justice, righteousness and love. Hear what Paul says:

“They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9 NIV)

Those in hell will be separated from all the good things our God stands for, they'll be surrounded by injustice hate and evil.

There's much, much more that I could say on all of these topics, but unfortunately we just don't have time this morning.

So my message to you all today is that what happens after death is that everyone, both believers and unbelievers, will on the last day, at the second coming of Christ, be resurrected into an immortal resurrection body and you will then be judged and either be admitted into eternal life with the Father in his kingdom or consigned to a very unpleasant existence in hell. Let's all make sure that we enjoy eternal life with the Father, rather than being consigned to hell, by repenting of our sin and accepting Christ as our Lord and saviour who died for us on the cross and secured the forgiveness of our sins, so that we will be sure to be vindicated in this final judgement. Be sure you've done that, that you've repented and turned to Christ in faith, while there is still time, tomorrow may be too late.