

## Right Questions, Wrong Answers: A Study of World Religions

• Lesson Eight •

### What Will Happen to Us When We Die?

1. A soul goes where it belongs
2. Our bodies wait to be raised and reunited with our souls at the final judgment

## Worship

A meditation based on Revelation\*

**Leader:** After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

**Group:** **And they cried out in a loud voice: “Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”**

**Leader:** All the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, saying:

**Group:** **“Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!”**

**Leader:** Then one of the elders asked me, “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” I answered, “Sir, you know.”

**Group:** **And he said, “These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”**

**Leader:** Therefore, “they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

**Group:** **Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”**

**Leader:** “Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, both small and great!”

**Group:** **“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory!”**

\*Revelation 7:9-17; 19:5,6

**Prayer:** O Lord God, our times are in your loving hands. Through your holy gospel you have granted us everlasting life and have given us reason to face our dying days with confidence. As we turn again to your Word, help us anticipate eagerly the day of your coming and rejoice in the future that you will give us. Grant us a blessed end and take us to be with you in heaven, where we will join the saints and angels to praise you without end. Into your hands we commit ourselves, for you rule all things for our good. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

## Introduction

Day after day, people die. Death is inescapable. Make death the topic of conversation at your next party, and things will get quiet. Why?

Talk about death is considered depressing because it brings to an end the excitement and exhilaration that people want out of life. Talk about death reminds them that they only get to spend a limited amount of time in this world and that their greatest accomplishments cannot stave off their deaths. People want to have fun at parties, not be sober and serious.

The fear of death is a fear of the unknown. Unlike most things that we learn about through experience, we will have only one experience with death—our own. We cannot talk with people who have died to find out what it’s like. When it comes to understanding death, the other religions of this world flounder completely. Unlike some of their other teachings that they can base on human experience, death is a complete mystery, and any teaching about death must be manufactured through imagination.

Christians have the Word of God, though, which gives them truth about death and eternity. We turn to that Word of God and listen to what God says will happen to us when we die.

## Studying God’s Word

### A soul goes where it belongs

Read Luke 16:19-31.

1. With what attitude toward death did the rich man obviously live his life? (verse 19)

He lived in luxury every day because he had adopted the attitude “Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die.” He lived with the idea that death brought the end of existence, that there was nothing to be experienced after death.

2. With what attitude toward death must poor Lazarus have lived his life? (verses 21 and 22)

He endured his difficult lot knowing that death would bring life with God. He believed that the Lord would bless him and give him everything he needed in heaven.

3. The pain of hell is far more intense than any suffering that could be experienced on earth. List some of the ways this is demonstrated in this account. (verses 23-30)

The rich man says that he is “in agony in this fire.” The agony is so intense that a drop of water would bring him great relief. The rich man describes it as torment—with no relief in sight. Knowing that he could have avoided this fate had he listened to the Word of God, he must suffer, knowing that it was his fault that he was in hell. Knowing that he was helpless to preserve his brothers from this pain added to his misery.

4. What comforting things do we hear about heaven in this portion of Scripture? (verses 22-26)

Heaven is a gathering of believers, as is evident from the fact that Lazarus was carried to Abraham’s side. There is no more suffering for Lazarus—“he is comforted here”—even though his life on earth was filled with pain. There is a chasm between heaven and hell, meaning that it is impossible for those in heaven to fall into sin and be banished to hell.

5. Though it is not pleasing to say that everyone who ends up in hell is ultimately responsible for his or her own suffering, it is true. Why? (verses 29-31)

Every person has a time of grace in which to hear Moses and the Prophets (God’s Word). Since every person knows that there is a God, each ought to seek him out. Each person’s time on earth is a time to find out about Jesus’ life and death.

The rich man accuses God of having a silly way of communicating with sinners. Hidden behind the rich man’s request that God send Lazarus to speak to his brothers is the idea that he would have changed his ways if the Lord had appeared to him and told him to do so. According to the rich man, God ought not work through the Word, because it is too simple and ordinary. Instead, he should speak to people directly and convince them of his presence miraculously.

6. What important lesson for our lives should we take from verses 29 and 31?

The Word of God is living and active, able to perform the miraculous. Through it the Lord creates faith in our hearts, makes us his children, and gives us eternal life. We need to make a study of that Word a priority in our lives, for only there does God speak to us and assure us of his love. Only through the Word can we be equipped to face our dying days. Only through the Word will we remain convinced of Jesus’ love for us and be confident to spend eternity in heaven rather than in hell.

## Do other religions have a teaching about heaven and hell?

**Islam:** All will be raised at the day of judgment, and Allah as judge will weigh each person’s deeds in the balances. Some will be admitted to paradise, where they will experience joy in a place abounding with beautiful maidens, cool rivers, and lush gardens. Others will be sent to the unending torments of hell.

**Judaism:** Most Jews do not overly concern themselves with a life after death, choosing to focus on this life. *Heaven* and *hell* are seen as Christian terms, though there is mention of places of death and punishment in their writings. Some very religious Jews think of paradise as the reward for righteous lives and think that Jews will inherit this paradise by virtue of their connection to Abraham.

**Hinduism:** The highest goal of the Hindu is to enter the bliss of being joined to the infinite, the Absolute Being. There is no place of joy or peace, nor is there a place of punishment like hell. Nothing could be worse for a Hindu than to continue on the cycle of rebirth (reincarnation).

**Buddhism:** Nirvana is not a place but a state of being. It is a condition beyond thought, feelings, and will. The more liberal Buddhists teach that there is a paradise of pleasure. This paradise is seen as a place in which all obstacles are removed, and a person can experience complete enlightenment. There is no hell in Buddhism, simply the potentially unending cycle of rebirth.

### His Word in My Life

Orthodox Jews, the largest branch of Judaism, do have some hope for a life after this one, though it doesn’t seem to be very well defined. Reform Jews, a branch of Judaism that is popular in the United States, seem to have little concern for life after death. They choose to focus their energy on making this world a better place to live.

1. Agree or disagree: The religion of the Reform Jews is more practical than Christianity.

**Disagree.** Since our time in this world is relatively limited in comparison to the infinite number of years that we will spend in eternity, there is nothing more practical than getting ready for eternity. God considers listening to the Word (Moses and the Prophets) the most practical thing that people can do before their lives come to an end. Christians who know that they will live forever in heaven because of Jesus’ suffering and death have every reason to live as salt and light in this world. Citizens of heaven make good citizens of earth because they aim to use their every moment to glorify God and to serve their neighbor. They strive to stop the decay of the world with their words and actions. Though the Reform Jews *seem* to have a more practical religion than Christianity, just the opposite is true.

2. What could you say to your Jewish friend who doesn’t really care about what happens after death?

You might say something like this: “It’s easy to forget about eternal life now. But it will not be so easy on your deathbed when you cannot help but wonder, ‘What happens next?’ Be prepared for that eventuality before it happens.” Or you could use a different approach altogether. You could say, “That’s a bit of a gamble. Say you’re right, and there is nothing after death. Then you and I both waste into nothingness. But what if you’re wrong, and there is a heaven and a hell? Those who assume that they have earned God’s favor through their actions will end up separated from him in the suffering of hell. Don’t take that gamble. There is a heaven and a hell. God wants you to be with him in heaven. He wants that so much that he sent his Son into the world to accept the punishment your transgressions deserve.”

### His Word in My Life

Buddhists, Hindus, and New Age proponents who espouse much of Hindu thought see death as but the gate to another life. In that new life, they believe they will be rewarded or punished according to their actions in the previous life. They may come back in a different caste of society (reincarnation); they may even come back as animals (transmigration). Though they would prefer not to go through the endless series of rebirths, they are confident that they will make better use of their next opportunities.

1. Why is this teaching so seductive? What makes it so destructive?

It is built upon an idea that appeals to the old Adam: You get what you earn. It is also appealing because it promises a second chance. There is no life that has to be the last “go around.” If you don’t get it right this time, you can learn from your mistakes for the next life. The other reason that so many are seduced by it is because it offers a certain romantic experience—you can enjoy life from a variety of different angles and social classes.

This is a destructive teaching because people derive a false sense of security from the idea that they will have more than one chance to get it right. With that false sense of security, they do not bother to address the issue of heaven and hell. The Bible makes it clear that there is no second chance, not even for the richest of people. When death comes, the person’s soul is judged and his or her soul goes to its eternal home.

- List some ways in which the ideas of karma and reincarnation are making inroads into everyday thought (and even into our thought patterns and speech).

We will always have to fight against the idea that the way to life with God is by working hard. We will continually have to resist the idea that those who do enough good will be blessed and those who do not will be condemned. Reincarnation shows up when people say, “In a previous life . . .” It may be meant as a joke, but it gives credence to the idea that there are second chances, even after death.

### His Word in My Life

Some religions condemn Christianity because it not only teaches the existence of a hell, but it describes hell as suffering that knows no end.

How would you lovingly respond to someone’s arguments against hell?

God takes no pleasure in anyone suffering in hell. He desires the deliverance of all people and wants all to be with him in heaven. He sent his Son into the world to suffer separation from him on the cross. The presence of a hell does not prove that God is unloving. God is a God of justice, and those who do not believe in Jesus, who suffered for their sins, will themselves suffer God’s wrath for their unbelief and sin. Those who suffer in hell know that they brought that punishment on themselves.

*Those who have rejected the grace of God in Christ Jesus and have chosen to trust in themselves and their merits will go to hell. Those who cling to Jesus’ blood and righteousness will go to heaven to be comforted in the presence of their Savior. Paradise will be their home forever. Other world religions either deny a physical existence after death, or they construct some system of works by which a person can be sure of bliss in the hereafter.*

## Our bodies wait to be raised and reunited with our souls at the final judgment

**Read John 5:24-30.**

- What visible miracle of power will the Lord Jesus perform at the final judgment? (verse 28)

He will raise all dead bodies from the grave to be gathered for judgment. Everyone will see this grand miracle and will have to confess that the Lord Jesus is almighty God.

- In verse 24 Jesus has made it clear that life is given through faith and not by works. How can we reconcile that thought with verse 29, in which we are told that those who have done good will rise to live?

On judgment day God will use people’s works as evidence for his verdicts. Good works—those works done out of love for God, in obedience to his clear commands, as a response of thanksgiving to Jesus’ sacrifice—give evidence of faith in the heart. Evil works—those not done out of love for God, no matter how good they may appear—give evidence of the unbelief in a person’s heart. Those who have not believed and have shown that with their evil works, will be separated from God forever in hell.

**Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-53.**

- What will God do for the believers that are raised from the dead? (verses 35-44)

God will give us new bodies. These new bodies will be spiritual bodies, suited for life in heaven. We don’t know exactly what these bodies will be like, but we do know that they will be fitting for a place of glory and beauty.

2. Our new, spiritual bodies will be far superior to our physical bodies. In what ways? (verses 42-49)
 

They will be imperishable, not subject to death or decay. They will be glorious, instead of marked by sin and the effects of sin. They will not have sinful natures. They will be powerful, not frail, weak, and dying. We will bear the likeness of Jesus, having bodies like his.
3. How long will it take for the Lord to give each believer this new body? (verses 51 and 52)
 

It will happen immediately and instantly. There will be no need to stand in line, for the Lord will change all believers “in a flash.”
4. Evaluate this statement: In my next life, I will have a glorified body.
 

The terminology, *next life*, seems to be more fitting for someone who believes in reincarnation. It is true, though, that our life in heaven is our “next life.” To avoid confusion, we might want to avoid the term and simply speak of our life in heaven.

## What do other religions teach about man’s eternal destiny?

**Islam:** Those who have submitted to Allah and have lived in accord with the Five Pillars can hope to find a merciful judge when all are raised at the end. If Allah is merciful to them, they will enter paradise and live there forever. Those who have not submitted to Allah and whose good works don’t outweigh their evil works will suffer in the torments of hell.

**Judaism:** Most Jews are not all that concerned about their eternal destinies. If there is a heaven, the Jews who have loved the Lord and their neighbor will certainly inherit it.

**Hinduism:** The soul of a Hindu continues to transmigrate from one existence to another based on the quality of its previous life. Only when an individual finds release from this cycle of rebirth will he enter into the bliss of being one with Brahman.

**Buddhism:** A Buddhist will continue to be reincarnated based on the quality of his previous existence. By following the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddhist hopes to end the connection with this existence and experience nirvana. Nirvana is radically different from the physical world and is the end of suffering. The worst thing that can happen to a person is to continue the cycle of rebirth.

### His Word in My Life

Buddhists, Hindus, and members of the New Age Movement all lament what they see as the unending cycle of death and rebirth (called *samsara*). Their greatest hope is to be freed from the endless cycle of reincarnation and transmigration.

1. How does Christianity answer their wishes in a way more glorious than they could ever hope?
 

On judgment day the Lord will grant complete release from all the difficulties of life. On that day he will free all believers and give them glorified bodies, which are fitted for life in heaven and are free from all flaws and weaknesses. Instead of simply giving them new bodies and more chances to make the most of their lives, the Lord gives his children ultimate bodies and the ultimate joy.
2. What is the appropriate Christian response to the glorious bodies and life awaiting us?
 

Since we know what awaits us, we have reason to live in joy. We can use our days to share the Lord’s saving message with as many as we can, especially with those who are burdened by false doctrine. We ought to love others the way God loves us and focus our energies on bringing the Word of life to those who are heading straight toward eternal death in hell. We ought also to live in a way that glorifies God. As Peter says, “You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming” (2 Peter 3:11,12).

## His Word in My Life

Evaluate this statement concerning the Last Day: “At his coming all people will rise with their own bodies to answer for their personal deeds. Those who have done good will enter eternal life, but those who have done evil will go into eternal fire.”

Those words are from the Athanasian Creed, one of the confessions of the Christian church. They restate what Jesus says in John chapter 5. Those who believe in Jesus as their Savior will be saved. They will demonstrate their faith with good works. Those good works will be the Lord’s evidence for the judgment that he makes. Those whose unbelief has led them to do evil works (remember, evil works are any works that do not arise from hearts of faith and thanksgiving) will be sentenced to hell for their sins.

*“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” The bodies we have now will become what they once were. But that’s by no means God’s final word on the matter. When the Lord Jesus comes again in glory, he will call all bodies forth from their graves to be reunited with their souls. Those who trusted the Lord Jesus will be given new bodies, to prepare them for life with God. No one could have greater reason than we to look for the day of Jesus’ coming! What a contrast to the teachings of other religions. What a message we have to share!*

## Summary

Martin Luther gave the following advice: “We must henceforth learn a new language and speech in talking of death and the grave when we die. It should not be called dying but being sown for the coming summer and that the churchyard or burial mound is not a mound of dead bodies but an acre full of grain, called God’s grain, which is to sprout again and to grow more beautifully than any man can comprehend” (Plass, *What Luther Says*, Vol. 1, p. 378). What do you think?

That is the Christian way to view death. We have reason to look forward to the life that will be ours through death. With eager anticipation, we can await the day of judgment. We eagerly await the time when our perishable bodies will be changed into glorious, spiritual bodies, fit for living in heaven. If we have the perspective God has on our deaths, we need not consider talk about death unpleasant.

Through death the Lord brings us to life. He gives us life that is so glorious it passes our understanding. Through faith in the Lord Jesus, we will live forever in God’s immediate presence. He will give us glorious bodies, fit for life in God’s glorious kingdom. We have every reason to fall before God in thankful worship and to share with others the free gift of life through Jesus’ holy blood.

## Life with God

Day 1: Read Revelation 21:1-27. We look forward to seeing the beauty of heaven and to being in the presence of God.

Day 2: Read Revelation 22:1-17. What a glorious gift the Lord gives in allowing us to live with him forever!

Day 3: Read 2 Corinthians 5:1-10. We long for the heavenly dwelling.

Day 4: Read Luke 20:27-39. The dead rise, for the Lord is the God of the living.

Day 5: Read 1 Thessalonians 4:13–5:11. The Lord will raise everyone, and those in Christ will live forever.

Day 6: Read 2 Peter 3:1-18. Live in the light of the Last Day.