

What Happens When People Die?

Luke 16:19-31

Sunday, February 19, 2017

A few days ago, while my wife and I were having breakfast at home, someone called her by cell phone. The caller was a listener of our radio program and he seemed to be in an emergency situation. I thought I overheard my wife mention that several of their church members were being possessed by "spirits" and he did not know what to do and so he tried to contact me through my wife to ask for counsel. When I talked to the caller he spoke so fast, I could hardly understand what he was saying and so I suggested we pray first. I prayed that God would reveal His power and glory and that He would protect the caller and his church from demons. As he calmed down and explained his situation, I found out that his problem was more of a theological problem. He explained that a certain teacher who claimed to be an anointed one influenced their pastor about some teaching that had to do with spirits, demons, and Hades, etc. He wanted to know what the Bible has to say about this. Because we are into Revelation and I have been doing some study about the abyss, Hades, demons, and where believers and unbelievers go when they die, I had some ready answer to many of his questions.

This is the reason why I thought that today, instead of continuing our study on Revelation chapter 20, I would share with you a lesson which is very relevant and helpful in our context. Many Filipinos, especially those who are in the rural areas are ignorant of Scripture and at the same time influenced by superstition. Some of them have had encounters with spiritists and mediums and ghosts and other supernatural phenomena, and they live in fear and yet they do openly talk about these mysterious things. But I am sure they want to know the truth because it is the truth that will set them free.

And so today, I want to address a topic about what happens when people die? As I go along in this study, I will touch on purgatory, ghosts, and other matters that many Filipinos have questions about but perhaps do not know where to find the answers.

So what happens when people die? I often share this in funeral services but for the sake of our listeners over the radio and internet and those who have not yet heard this let me share again this information. In the 1970s, **Dr. Raymond Moody**, did a serious study on this and wrote the book ***Life after Life***, which sold over 13 million copies world wide. In this book, Dr. Moody recounts the testimonies of more than 100 people who had clinically died or almost died, and revived. Dr. Moody concluded that there are nine experiences common to most people who have had a near death experience. These are:

1. hearing sounds such as buzzing
2. a feeling of peace and painlessness
3. having an out-of-body experience
4. a feeling of traveling through a tunnel
5. a feeling of rising into the heavens
6. seeing people, often dead relatives

7. meeting a spiritual being such as God
8. seeing a review of one's life
9. feeling a reluctance to return to life

I haven't read the book but I discovered an advertisement that the publishers have used to promote the book. It says,

"The extraordinary stories presented here provide evidence that there is life after physical death, as Moody recounts the testimonies of those who have been to the 'other side' and back—all bearing striking similarities of an overwhelmingly positive nature. These moving and inspiring accounts give us a glimpse of the peace and unconditional love that await us all."

For me, this raises warning signals about the possible dangers and problems of the book. I find it difficult to believe the very positive experiences of those who have been interviewed because, unless they are all spiritually regenerated, God's Word says that those who are without Christ are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins, they follow the ways of this world, they are influenced by the devil, and they are ruled by the selfish desires of their bodies and minds. As a result, God is angry with them and will punish them forever unless they repent and trust in Christ for forgiveness. The Bible also says that Satan, who is the god of this world, could disguise himself as an angel of light and deceive people. And so it is possible for a thousand unbelievers who have been revived after they have been declared to be clinically dead to be deceived into thinking that what they experienced is Paradise and that they were welcomed there by a benevolent and nonthreatening God who does not care about their sin. Unbelievers will not like what I said, but it is the truth.

And so today, I want to share with you what the Bible really says regarding what happens when people die. 2Timothy 3:16 in the New Living Translation says that *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right.*

I want to recognize the help I have received from Wayne Grudem's book, *Systematic Theology*, for today's study. Many of the ideas I will share with you are taken from chapter 41 of the book entitled **Death and the Intermediate State**. One of the subtopics of that section is where I got the title of our study, **"What happens when people die?"**

1. The souls of believers go immediately into God's presence.

Scripture says that death happens when the soul is separated from the body (Jas 2:26 says, *"the body apart from the spirit is dead."*)

Once a believer dies, his or her physical body remains on the earth and is buried and at the moment of death the soul (or spirit) of that believer goes immediately into the presence of God.

- *2Co 5:8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.*
- *Phil 1:23, I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*

- *Lk 23:43 And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

And Scripture also reveals that God will not leave our dead bodies in the earth forever, for when Christ returns the souls of believers will be reunited with their bodies, their bodies will be raised from the dead, and they will live with Christ eternally. 1Th 4:13-14 [NLT] says, *And now, dear brothers and sisters, we want you to know what will happen to the believers who have died so you will not grieve like people who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and was raised to life again, we also believe that when Jesus returns, God will bring back with him the believers who have died. ... 16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the Christians who have died will rise from their graves. 17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever.*

a. Now there is a question regarding the OT believers. Did Old Testament believers enter immediately into God's presence when they died?

I am not absolutely certain about this but some Bible teachers think, that the souls of believers who died before Christ's resurrection did not go to heaven immediately but went to a certain place in Hades and waited for Christ's work of redemption to be completed. Some of the support for this doctrine comes from Luke 16:19-31 and Ephesians 4:8-10.

They say that before the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, Hades had two compartments: The righteous like Lazarus, were in Paradise section of Hades, where Abraham and other OT saints were, while the unrighteous, like the rich man, were in the "Place of Torments." These two places were separated from each other by a "great chasm fixed" (16:26). Then they say, using Ephesians 4:8 where it says that "When [Christ] ascended on high he led a host of captives," it means that from then on, Paradise has been vacated and heaven is opened so that all believers who die after the ascension no longer go to Paradise in Hades but go to Heaven. The only compartment left in Hades is the place of torments. Now on the Day of Judgment at the Great White Throne in Revelation 20, Hades will surrender the wicked. They will resurrected and be judged and cast into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:13-14).

The problem with this two-compartment division in Hades before Christ's ascension is that it has no clear support from Scripture. You might say that the story of Jesus about Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16 support it. But I think we need to be careful in using that because our Lord Jesus did not intend share it so that we could use the details of his story to form a major doctrine. The point of Jesus is more general. It does point to the idea of two eternal destinies only. It does point to the idea that where your soul goes you can no longer transfer to another place. The intention of Lord was also to show to the Pharisees who loved money that if they were not using it to show acts of mercy then, they will find themselves to be in hell when they die. And the most important thing that Jesus wanted to do here was to confront all of those who did not believe in Him unless he showed some spectacular miracle. Jesus said that if they do not believe the what Moses and the Prophets wrote, they would not believe even if someone rose from the dead.

Eph 4:9 could also not be used to support the idea that Jesus went to Hades and took the believers there then brought them to heaven so that now the Paradise

section of Hades is vacant. I don't want to go into details but suffice to say that that is reading too much into this text. And many scholars say that when Ephesians 4:8-10 says that "He ascended," it means Jesus was exalted after resurrection. And when it says he descended, it refers to His incarnation. Thus, the result of Christ's exaltation (cf. Php 2:9-11) is that He might fill all things (v. 10), i.e., He might exercise sovereignty.

Not many Scripture references talk about the state of Old Testament believers after they had died, but those that do show immediate conscious enjoyment in the presence of God, not of a time of waiting away from God's presence.

- "Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:24).
- Elijah was not taken to a place on the border of hell, but 2Ki 2:11 says, *And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.* (In Mt 17:3, we see Elijah again appear with Moses, talking with Jesus during His transfiguration.
- And David is confident that he will "dwell in the house of the LORD for ever" (Ps. 23:6).

Therefore it seems likely that Old Testament believers also entered immediately into heaven and enjoyed a time of fellowship with God upon their death. Now if I am mistaken and the two-compartment about Hades is correct, this is still not a problem, because the important thing is that all believers today go immediately to heaven when they die.

b. The Bible does not teach the doctrine of "soul sleep."

This doctrine of soul-sleep teaches that when believers die they go into a state of unconscious existence, and the next thing that they are conscious of will be when Christ returns and raises them to eternal life.

Support for the doctrine of soul sleep has generally been found in the fact that Scripture several times speaks of the state of death as "sleep" or "falling asleep." For example is 1Th 4:13, *"But we do not want you to be uniformed, brothers, about those who are **asleep**, that you may not grieve as other do who have no hope. 14 For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who **have fallen asleep**."*

But when Scripture represents death as "sleep" it is simply a metaphorical expression used to indicate that death is only temporary for Christians, just as sleep is temporary. This is clearly seen in the example of the death of Lazarus (not the Lazarus in the story of Jesus but His fiend)

Jesus told His disciples in Jn 11:11 *"Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him."* We should notice that Jesus does not here say, "The soul of Lazarus is sleeping." Rather Jesus simply says that Lazarus has fallen asleep.

Jn 1:12-14 says, *The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will recover." 13 Now Jesus had spoken of his death, but they thought that he meant taking rest in sleep. 14 Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus has died."*

The other passages that speak about people sleeping when they die are likewise to be interpreted as simply a metaphorical expression to teach that death is temporary.

The passages demonstrating that the souls of believers go immediately into God's presence and enjoy fellowship with him there all indicate that there is conscious existence and fellowship with God immediately after death for the believer.

- Jesus did not say, "Today you will no longer have consciousness of anything that is going on," but, "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Certainly the conception of paradise understood at that time was not one of unconscious existence but one of great blessing and joy in the presence of God.
- Paul did not say, "My desire is to depart and be unconscious for a long period of time," but rather, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23). To "be with Christ" was to enjoy the blessing of fellowship in his presence, and that is why to depart and be with Him was "far better" (Phil. 1:23).
- In Revelation we see clearly that the souls or spirits of those who have died and who have gone to heaven are either praying or worshiping.
 - Rev 6:10 They cried out with a loud voice, "*O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*"
 - Rev 7:9-10 *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

All of these passages deny the doctrine of soul sleep, for they make it clear that the souls of believers experience conscious fellowship with God in heaven immediately upon death.

c. The Bible does not teach the doctrine of Purgatory.

The fact that the souls of believers go immediately into God's presence means that there is no such thing as purgatory. In Roman Catholic teaching, purgatory is the place where the souls of believers go to be further purified from sin until they are ready to be admitted into heaven.

According to this view, those who die in venial sins or forgiven mortal sins will ultimately will go to heaven, but they must first go through purgatory—a state of purification, to achieve the "holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven." All who die in mortal sin go straight to hell.

According to medieval Theologians taught that the least degree of pain in purgatory is even worst than the greatest pain one can suffer in this world. The degree of pain and the duration of discomfort though are determined by God depending on the kind of life you led. Those who die suddenly, without the last rites, might remain in purgatory for hundreds, even thousands of years.

So what can be done to shorten time spent in Purgatory? ... Catholics believe suffering is lessened and the soul's journey to heaven quickened by the saying of prayers and Masses and by the giving of alms or purchase of indulgences. Schools, almshouses and hospitals were built by the wealthy in the hope of reducing to a minimum the time it would take to cleanse their souls. Some also endowed chantries where priests would say prayers for their souls.

This doctrine is not taught in Scripture, and it is in fact contrary to the verses I mentioned a while ago. The Roman Catholic Church has found support for this doctrine, not in the pages of canonical Scripture but in the writings of the Apocrypha, tradition of the church, and wrongly applied passages from the Bible.

The Apocryphal passage is in 2 Maccabees 12:42–45:

[Judas Maccabeus, the leader of the Jewish forces] also took a collection, man by man, to the amount of 2,000 drachmas of silver, and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking into account the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to *pray for the dead*. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought. Therefore *he made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin*.

Here it is clear that prayer for the dead is approved, and also making an offering to God to deliver the dead from their sin.

- But in response it must be said that this literature is not equal to Scripture in authority, and should not be taken as an authoritative source of doctrine.
- Moreover, it contradicts the clear statements about departing and being with Christ quoted above, and thereby opposes the clear teaching of New Testament Scripture.
- Furthermore, when it talks about the offering of Judas making “atonement for the dead” it contradicts the explicit teaching of the New Testament that Christ alone made atonement for us.
- Finally, this passage in 2 Maccabees is difficult to square even with Roman Catholic teaching, because it teaches that soldiers who had died in the mortal sin of idolatry (which cannot be forgiven, according to Catholic teaching) should have prayers and sacrifices offered for them with the possibility that they will be delivered from their suffering.

The support that Catholics use from Tradition is also unreliable because of Acts 20:29-30 *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.*

The so-called other biblical support could also not be used because they are often a misuse of Scripture. One example is 1 Corinthians 3:15 where Paul says that on the Day of Judgment, the work that everyone has done will be judged and tested by fire, and then says, “If any man’s work is burned up he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.” But this does not speak of a person being burned or suffering punishment, but simply of his work as being tested by fire—that which is good will be like gold, silver, and precious stones that will last forever (v. 12).

Other passages of Scripture that have sometimes been referred to in support of the doctrine of purgatory simply do not speak directly about this idea at all.

- Once believers die they enter into God’s presence and they are in a state of perfect happiness with him. What good would it do to pray for them anymore? Further, the souls of unbelievers who die go to a place of punishment and

eternal separation from the presence of God. It would do no good to pray for them either, since their final destiny has been settled by their sin and their rebellion against God in this life. To pray for the dead therefore is simply to pray for something that God has told us has already been decided.

- The doctrine of purgatory robs believers of the great comfort that should be theirs in knowing that those who have died have immediately gone into the presence of the Lord, and knowing that they also, when they die, will “depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23).
- An even more serious problem with this doctrine is that it teaches that we must add something to the redemptive work of Christ, and that his redemptive work for us was not enough to pay the penalty for all our sins. But this is certainly contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

2. The Souls of Unbelievers Go Immediately to Eternal Punishment.

a. The Bible does not teach annihilationism.

This is a doctrine that says that unbelievers, either immediately upon death, or else after suffering for a period of time, will simply cease to exist—God will “annihilate” them and they will no longer be. Although the idea initially sounds attractive to us, and it avoids the emotional difficulty connected with affirming eternal conscious punishment for the wicked, such an idea is contradicted by those passages that talk about conscious punishment for unbelievers after they die and that this punishment goes on forever (Rev. 14:11; 20:10).

The story of Lazarus and rich man shows conscious punishment. *Lk 16:23-24 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.'*

Jesus says that at the day of final judgment he will say to those at his left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” and he says that “they will go away into eternal punishment but the righteous into eternal life” (Matt. 25:41, 46).

b. The Bible does not teach a second chance after death.

Hebrews 9:27 says, “just as it is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment...”

Jesus’ story about the rich man and Lazarus gives no hope that people can cross from hell to heaven after they have died: though the rich man in hell called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame,” Abraham replied to him, “Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us” (Luke 16:24–26).

Some have argued for a second chance to believe in the gospel on the basis of Christ’s preaching to the spirits in prison in 1 Peter 3:18–19: *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, 19 in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison.*” First of all the word “proclaimed” here is does not

mean to proclaim the gospel. It could mean to proclaim or to announce His victory. The "spirits in prison" reminds us of Satan who is placed in prison in the bottomless pit during the millennium. And so this passage in Peter speaks of Jesus making an announcement to the angels who were bound in the abyss that he is victorious and he confirms their condemnation. To be honest this is a difficult passage but the interpretation I shared with you is one that is an acceptable interpretation.

The idea that people have a second chance to accept Christ after death would also destroy most motivation for evangelism and missionary activity today, and is not consistent with the intense missionary zeal that was felt by the New Testament church.

c. The Bible does not teach that the souls of unbelievers loiter on earth.

*Lk 16:22-31 The poor man died and was **carried by the angels** to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, **between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.**' 27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"*

Is there such a thing as ghosts?

"The answer depends on what you mean by ghosts. If the term means "spirit beings," the answer is yes. If the term means "spirits of people who have died," the answer is no.

The Bible teaches very clearly that there are indeed spirit beings who can connect with and appear in our physical world. These beings maybe angels or demons. But the Bible negates the idea that the spirits of deceased human beings can remain on earth and "haunt" the living. (*Heb 9:27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*).

Isaiah 29:4 mentions "ghost" ("familiar spirit" in the KJV). The term *familiar* is used to describe the demon because it was regarded by the English translators as a servant ("famulus"), belonging to the family ("familiaris"), who was on intimate terms with and might be readily summoned by the one possessing it. Thus a familiar spirit is a demon.

I heard a teaching many years ago that these demons are called familiar spirits because they are familiar with the deceased human beings who they try to impersonate. According to 2Co 11:14-15, demons masquerade as "angels of light."

Appearing as a "ghost" they try to impersonating a deceased human being. When that happens, people want to contact the spirits of what people thought to be their deceased loved one or friend. But they do not realize that they are opening the doors to demonic involvement. This is why the Bible forbids communicating with the dead.

Isa 8:19-20 And when they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living? 20 To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

Dt 18:10-12 There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer 11 or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, 12 for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.

Comment on Ouija boards and spirit of the glass. Students in a prestigious school were possessed by demons because of playing with spirit of the glass.

d. Unbelievers go to Hades before the resurrection.

Scriptures teach that unbelievers go to Hades upon death and their bodies will not be raised until the day of final judgment. On that day, their bodies will be raised and reunited with their souls, and they will stand before the Great White Throne for final judgment to be pronounced upon them in the body. And then if their names are not written in the Lambs book of Life, they will be thrown into the Lake of Fire along with Satan and his angels. This is Gehenna (Mt 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Lk 12:5; Jas 3:6) or "the lake of fire" (Rev. 19:20; 20:10; 21:8), the eternal abode of all wicked, unrepentant creatures, including Satan, angels, and men (Mt 25:41 cf. Mk 9:43,47,48).

End with a positive note.

1. Share how a person gets to heaven using. Jesus says that the key is found in "Moses and the Prophets." This is simply referring to the writings of Moses and the Prophets or simply the Scriptures. And what does the Bible teach regarding how to be saved? {Show them the example of repentance and faith found in the life of the criminal nailed beside Jesus in Luke 23:39-43.}
2. Share my experience of being afflicted by a demon in our province when I was a child. It's effect on me when I went to bed.
3. Close with the illustration of how I overcame a demonic attack when I was a young believer. Read the passages below:
 - *1Jn 4:4 Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*
 - *Eph 1:19-23 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might 20 that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, 21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 22 And he put all things under his feet and gave him as*

- head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.*
- *Col 2:8-9 See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. 9 For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, 10 and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority.*
 - *Ac 16:16-18 As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. 17 She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." 18 And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.*
 - *You can pray, "Deliver us from the evil one."*