

What happens when I die?

And other questions about
heaven, hell and the life to come



Marcus Nodder



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Part of the *Questions Christians Ask* series

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Introduction

It was a Saturday morning when we got the phone-call from my mother. It was hard to make out everything she said given that she was so distressed, but it was something to do with my father having collapsed.

He was only 62 and had no health problems we were aware of, so the news that he was unwell came very much out of the blue. Ten minutes later the phone rang again. This time it was a good family friend who was there with mum. She was sorry to have to tell me that my father was dead.

One minute he'd been working away at his desk in his study at home (he was a church minister); the next he was lying on the floor dead. Apparently he would have known very little about it. Undiagnosed heart problem. It would have been as sudden as flicking a switch and turning off a light.

That was 12 years ago. My mother still finds Saturdays hard and has never really got used to living on her

own. His retirement was only a few years away and they had started making plans and were looking forward to having more time together and with the family. I look at our four kids growing up and can't help but feel a sadness that they never knew their grandfather. He was so great with kids and they would have loved him so much. And personally, I just miss him—very much.

* * *

Few experiences in life are as painful as the loss of a loved one. Only those who have been through bereavement themselves can really understand what it is like.

If that is your situation, you may have picked up this book looking for hope and comfort and answers.

We will certainly get to answers. But in looking at the subject of death from the Bible, we will also be forced to face up to some uncomfortable truths, one of which is the reality of our own death. If you've just been diagnosed with a terminal illness, you will need no convincing of this, but for the rest of us Sigmund Freud was onto something when he once wrote: "No-one really believes in his own death".

For most of us death is something that happens to other people. We read about it in the papers, we see it on TV or even experience it in our wider families, but we don't think it's going to happen to us. But it will. And we need to prepare for it. Have you come to terms with the inconvenient truth of your own death?

Some cope with the prospect of death by joking and making light of it. Others use language which hides the

awful reality of death. They speak of someone as having “passed on”, “passed away” or being “no longer with us”. Some cling to vague hopes that everything will turn out alright and that everyone goes to a better place, while others proclaim with confidence that death is the absolute end. But in neither case is this belief anything more than wishful thinking.

Yet others simply refuse to talk about death. It’s as if there’s a conspiracy of silence. People are dying in our communities every day and yet you’d hardly know. The dead are whisked away quietly and never seen.

The trouble with running from reality is that one day it will catch up with us, and the question is: *What then?* What does happen when you die? Shakespeare described death as an “undiscovered country” from which no traveller returns. So how can anyone possibly know for sure what happens?

But there is one person who knows for certain what lies beyond the grave and that is God himself. And in the Bible God reveals the truth about life and death to us. Not only that, but in Jesus, God has provided *the solution to death*. Jesus came “so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2 v 14-15).


If we are those who trust in Jesus we have the answer to death. We can face it and think and talk about it and have no need to fear it, because we believe in the one who has destroyed it.

We may, however, still have plenty of questions.

What exactly does happen when we die? Where will I be five minutes later? What will become of our bodies? How can I be sure? What will happen on the day of judgment? Will there be rewards for believers? What will life be like in eternity? How do we cope with bereavement? Will we see our loved ones again?

It is to answer these and many more questions about death from the Bible that this book is written.

Why is death such a problem?

 For most people death is a scary prospect. For some it is fear of the unknown; for others it's the awareness that death makes life so meaningless. One journalist, Tom Chivers, wrote:

I'm terrified of death; my own, my loved ones, everyone's ... 100 years after my death, no-one will really know who I was. Do you even know your great-grandparents' names?

For some their fear is that death is the end. Larry King, the former CNN broadcaster, said: "My biggest fear is death, because I don't think I'm going anywhere".

But the Bible says the reason that we all fear death is precisely the opposite. Death is *not* the end. We are going somewhere, all of us, and unless we are trusting in Jesus we have everything to fear.



Hebrews 9 v 27 says “Man is destined to die once and after that to face judgement.” People may not like to admit it, but deep down we all have a sneaking suspicion that the grave will not be the final word, and that one day justice will be done to us and to the whole world. This inner sense of a coming judgment is confirmed and brought into sharp focus by the Bible—nowhere quite as starkly as in the last book of the Bible.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life, was thrown into the lake of fire.

Revelation 20 v 11-15

The passage begins with the words: *Then I saw...* As we look over John’s shoulder at what God revealed to him, we are given a window into what lies ahead. It is revealed to us so that we can prepare for it.

The courtroom

The heavenly scene appears to be a courtroom, but with some unusual features.

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them.

Verse 11

The first thing that catches John's eye is a huge white throne. It's not what you find in a normal courtroom. A judge usually sits on what is called a bench but is more often than not a chair—definitely not on a throne. But this court is being held in the throne room of God. Seated on the throne is Almighty God, the Creator and Judge of all people. That the throne is great tells us that God's power, majesty and authority are great. The whiteness of the throne tells us that God is completely holy and pure.

The timing of the heavenly court is shown by the detail in v 11 that “The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them”. This court session will take place when Jesus returns and this present age comes to an end, making way for the new heavens and the new earth.

The accused

But as he looks, John sees not just God on his throne but those who are standing before him. And what a sight it is:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing
before the throne'. Verse 12

Picture that. *Every* person who has *ever* lived standing before the enormous white throne. Billions of people. Great and small, rich and poor, the powerful and the oppressed. The great sprawling mass of humanity standing before their Creator. It is an awe-inspiring scene.

But this is not just a story in a book., because you will be there, and so will I. We will be there not as disembodied souls, but physically raised from the dead.

The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and
Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in
them. Verse 13

It doesn't matter how people died; everyone will be raised to life for this end-time court appearance. It doesn't matter whether they were buried, cremated or lost at sea—all will be raised.

This idea of a final resurrection of all people is not just something we find in the last book of the Bible. In the Old Testament the prophet Daniel prophesied that: "Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake; some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt." (Daniel 12 v 2). The apostle Paul teaches that: "there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (Acts 24 v 15). And Jesus himself states very clearly that: "A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out" (John 5 v 28).

This is where history is heading. History isn't going endlessly round in circles—it's heading towards this final day of reckoning. It was Bertrand Russell who famously said: "When I die I shall rot", but Christians know that this is just wishful thinking. Death is not the end. We will all be raised from death to appear in this heavenly courtroom.

Is this really going to happen?

It's interesting that so many people appear to have a deep-seated feeling that one day justice will be done. We cannot imagine a universe in which those who have done evil will just get away with it. This universal inner sense that justice will one day be done is God-given and confirms the clear testimony of the Bible. But the ultimate proof is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

As Paul says in Acts 17 v 31, God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

The last days have already been set in motion by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The trial

Courtroom dramas make for good television viewing, but it's not quite so entertaining to find yourself featuring in one—especially when you are the defendant. Each of us will be on trial before the God who made us:

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. An-



other book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. Verse 12

In John's vision there are two sets of books.

1. The books of deeds

First, the books of deeds: "The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books" (v 12) and "each person was judged according to what they had done."

The other day my wife found our two-year-old son in the living-room, his trousers soaked through, standing in a pool of pee, our attempts at potty-training looking rather pathetic.

My wife asked him: "Have you peed in your pants?" He looked at her and without missing a beat replied: "No, daddy did it!" You don't have to teach a two-year-old to pass the buck, and as adults we instinctively do the same when confronted with wrong in our lives.

But in these books is recorded everything we have ever done. We need to bear in mind that this is a part of the Bible which uses symbolism to represent reality. The books symbolise God's memory, in which absolutely *nothing* is missing.

Perhaps if God had given this vision today rather than in the 1st century, instead of books he may have pictured that record as a video of your life. Imagine that being projected onto a huge screen on that last day, with all the people you've ever known in this life watching

with you. What rating do you think your film would be given by the censors?

All our secrets. All those things which we have now long forgotten. There would be so much of which we would be ashamed. If the video was posted on your Facebook site, how many friends would you have this time next week?

In TV detective shows a recurring challenge is the need to get enough evidence to prove someone's guilt. Sometimes a case collapses because there's not enough evidence. But if the charge at the final judgment is failing to love God and your neighbour as God commands, how long would it take to establish your guilt? How long would the film need to run before we'd say: "Okay, spare us the rest. I plead guilty!"?

The trial will be *totally* just and fair because all the evidence will be there. There'll be no rough justice, because judgement will not be based on reputation or appearance or family connections. And God knows *all the facts*. Not only what happened, but what was in our hearts. He knows all the circumstances and mitigating factors in full. Unlike us, his judgements are based on knowing all the facts in intimate detail. In the words of Romans 2 v 6: "*God will give to each person according to what he has done.*"

Sometimes people say things like: "I'm basically a good person", or "I'm much better than many others". But based on such a judgement, who could possibly walk away from that court a free man or woman?