

# Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

## 21

### Death - Where is Thy Sting?

*Reflections on Death, Judgement, Resurrection and the Afterlife*



### Questions for Reflection

1. Why do you think that discussion of death is such a taboo subject even amongst Christians?
2. If the Church has now decided there is no place called Limbo, could it decide in the future that there is no Purgatory?
3. Will we retain our present body after death?
4. What will the afterlife consist of?

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**‘before God and Jesus Christ who is to be the judge of the living and the dead’** (2Tim.ch.4) and:  
**‘at the judgement seat of Christ .. each may receive what he has deserved in the body, matched to whatever he has done, good or bad’** (2 Corinthians ch.5)

**The Letter to the Hebrews** makes several references to judgement (e.g. ch.6, 9, 10, 13):

**‘and there is left only the dreadful prospect of judgement and of the fiery wrath ..’** (ch.10)

**The Book of Revelation** describes the judgement of the dead in two linked passages, possibly two separate texts written at the time of different persecutions of the Church, each intending to buoy the spirits of the faithful

**‘.. Another book was opened .. and the dead were judged from what was written, as their deeds deserved’** and **‘everyone was judged as their deeds deserved .. then Death and Hades were hurled into the burning lake which is the second death’** (ch.20)

The afterlife is described in terms of a new Jerusalem (ch.21) **‘I saw a new Heaven and a new Earth .. the new Jerusalem .. I am making a new creation’** but the highlight will be to see God face-to face **‘the throne of God and the Lamb will be in the new city, his servants will worship Him, they will see him face-to-face’**

### The Church’s Teaching on Purgatory and Afterlife

The Church teaches that after death there may be a period of purgatory for some people who have not yet expiated the effects of their sins. This teaching was initially formalised at the council of Lyons 1274 and restated at the Council of Florence 1439:

**‘.. Souls are cleansed after death by purgatorial and purifying penalties’**

The only biblical basis for this is an indirect one in 2 Maccabees ch.12:

**‘he had expiatory sacrifices offered for the dead so they may be released from their sin’**

These Councils aimed to reunite Christendom after the schism that led to the creation of the Orthodox Church. One of the less crucial areas they sought agreement on was the nature of ‘purgatory’. The Catholic Church found it acceptable **not** to describe ‘purgatory’ as a place, and went towards including the Orthodox view of viewing ‘purgatory’ in the sense of a necessary purifying and perfecting **process** (a much better view I believe), not just one of punishment and expiation, although that is how many today still tend to understand it.

In more recent times, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) outlined the Church’s position on the ‘last things’, or ‘eschatology’ as these are more formally referred to, in a 1979 letter. It made the key points that we do not have sufficient knowledge for a proper picture of life after death and, as such, must be wary of making arbitrary imaginative representations about it. However, it stressed that we can be sure of the following:

- the essential continuity between our present life and our future life in Christ whilst also recognising that there will be a radical difference between the two
- the resurrection refers to the whole person, body and soul
- after death, a spiritual element called the soul subsists, temporarily separated from the body, but which contains our Consciousness and Will
- there is a purification process for some before they see God
- there will be eternal punishment for the sinner, deprived of the sight of God

The Second Vatican Council (in the Constitution Lumen Gentium) laid greater stress on the ecclesial aspect of eschatology, that is, on the Church as a Pilgrim People, but it and the pastoral Constitution, Gaudium et Spes, also restated the following:

- that some must undergo a purification process after death
- those who are glorified see God Himself, though in varying degrees
- the whole being of a person consists of a body and a spiritual and immortal soul



## The Fear of Death

In Western culture, even amongst Christians, discussion of death is something of a taboo subject. I say 'even amongst Christians' because our beliefs should make death a thing to celebrate, another Passover into the culmination of all our longings and hopes. Yet in practice it is not felt as such, and rather than speak openly about it we actively avoid it. Our human nature intuitively fears death, and it takes all our faith to cope with its dreadful aftermath.

As was posited when we discussed the issue of suffering, when we mourn we are really mourning for ourselves, for the loss we feel, and this is quite natural, because we are creatures of emotion and emotion is integral to our humanity. But I have never understood why we do not speak openly about death, to prepare ourselves better for its inevitable arrival, to recognise that it is not part of our original nature, and to see a good death as a participation in Christ's own death and resurrection. This is how the second Vatican Council, in the Constitution Gaudium et Spes (article 22), emphasised death, not in the traditional terms of punishment associated with Adam's Fall in the garden of Eden. But it also stated: **'it is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute'**



## Death, Judgement and Resurrection in the Bible

**The Old Testament** approach to these issues has already been outlined in the talk on suffering. To recap, for much of the OT there was no belief in any divine judgement or an afterlife as we understand it, only the existence of a hazy place called Sheol where the dead were placed in a zombie type non-existence. Interestingly, though, the story of how Saul got the Witch (Necromancer) of Endor to raise Samuel (1 Samuel ch.28) is a unique insight into the prevalent belief system that it was possible to consult those in Sheol. But it was only in the last two centuries BC that a formal belief system developed that saw death not as the end of any meaningful existence but as a necessary intermediate step to a divine judgement, the resurrection of the body and some kind of positive afterlife.



**The New Testament** shows that while most people seemed to accept judgement after death and the resurrection of the body, there were some, indeed some significant groups, like the priestly Sadducees, who did not (Matthew ch.22 and Acts ch.4). However, the Christian Jewish sect was in the mainstream of Jewish belief, reinforced, as it were, by the statements of Jesus' preaching and the evidence of Jesus' own resurrection.

## Jesus and Death and Resurrection

Jesus' showed he was Death's master, with power over it. He raised to life several people (e.g. Jairus' daughter, Mark ch.5; the widow of Nain's son, Luke ch.7) but it is in the story of Lazarus (John ch.11) that much of Christian teaching on, and attitudes to, death and resurrection are revealed:

- Even with their faith, Martha and Mary are distraught over their brother's death. There is a hint of frustration, if not anger, at Jesus for not arriving sooner: **'Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died'**. This parallels, no doubt, our own tendency to be angry with God when death strikes, especially sudden death or the death of a child.
- Belief in the resurrection of the body is clear, as when Martha says: **'I know he will rise again at the resurrection on the last day'**
- Christian belief in the resurrection is justified, because it is guaranteed by Jesus himself: **'I am the resurrection, anyone who believes in me even though he dies will live'**
- People are saved by making a decision to believe in Jesus as the Son of God. Martha is asked directly by Jesus whether she believes in Him. Her reply, despite her suffering, should always be ours: **'I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into this world'**

- Christian belief leads to us seeing the glory of God. As Jesus said: **'Have I not told you that if you believe you will see the glory of God'** Although the particular context of these words acts as a preparation for Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, they also are an indicator of the afterlife waiting those who have been resurrected after death.



## St Paul's Teaching on Death and Resurrection

St. Paul bases his theology on the Fall of Adam. Mortality is not part of our intended nature. It only arises as a consequence of, and punishment for, Adam's first sin (Romans ch.5):

**'through one man sin entered the world, and through sin death, and thus death has spread through the whole human race because everyone has sinned'** and: **'the wages of sin is death, the gift given freely by God is eternal life'** (Romans ch.6)

But Jesus' resurrection has overcome death, and as Christians share in that resurrection therefore they are able to overcome death as well (Romans ch.6):

**'if we have been joined to him by dying a death like him, so shall we by a resurrection like his'** and **'he has abolished death, and has brought to light immortality and life ..'** (2 Timothy ch.1)

But it is in his first letter to the Corinthians (ch.15) that St. Paul shows how important Jesus' resurrection event was:

**'by one man has come the resurrection of the dead .. in Christ all will be brought to life'** and: **'death is swallowed up in victory .. death where is your sting?'**

In fact, only in this chapter is any biblical hint given as to what is meant by a resurrected body, and hence to the nature of our expected afterlife. The fact that there will be a different nature to our resurrected body is extremely important to bear in mind when this issue is ever discussed or read (e.g. as in Church documents):

**'what you sow is not the body that is to be .. there are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies .. same with the resurrection of the dead, what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable .. what is raised is a spiritual body .. we will all be changed in the twinkling of an eye'**

## Jesus' Teaching on Judgement and Afterlife

Jesus makes it clear that there will be a day of judgement when everyone will be judged on what they have done in life (Matthew ch.10):

**'In truth I tell you on the day of judgement it will be more bearable for Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town'** and: **'every unfounded word people utter they will answer for on judgment day'** (Matthew ch.12)

But Jesus does not speak about an individual judgement straight after death. His emphasis is on a great day of judgement for all (Matthew ch.25):

**'When the Son of Man comes in glory .. all nations will be assembled before Him .. to those on His right he will say come enter the kingdom prepared for you .. to those on His left .. get away from me to the eternal fire .. and they will go to eternal punishment and the upright to eternal life'**

## St Paul on Judgement

St Paul makes no argument about there being a judgement; it is something he takes for granted:

**'.. on the day when God, through Jesus Christ, judges all human secrets'** (Romans ch.2) and:

