

What Happens When a Person Dies?

Death and the Believer

I. Introduction

“Now I saw that between them and the Gate was the River of Death. But there was no bridge over it, and the river was very deep. There was no way to escape the river. At the sight, therefore, of this river, the pilgrims were much astounded; but the men that went with them said, ‘You must go through, or you cannot come to the Gate.’”¹

“Tears may, and must come; but if they gather in the eyes that are constantly looking up to heaven, they will glisten with the brightness of the coming glory.”²

II. Several Truths about Death and the Believer

- A. They go to be with the Lord (Luke 23:43, Acts 7:54-60, Phil. 1:20-23, 2 Cor. 5:6-8)

- B. Their souls are made perfect, and they are with other believers before the Lord (Heb. 12:22-24).

- C. They are conscious and comforted. They are praising God (Rev. 7:9-17, Rev. 6:9-10).

III. False Doctrines Related to What Happens to a Believer at Death

- A. **Soul Sleep** The notion that when a believer dies, he or she goes into a state of unconsciousness until Jesus returns (Jehovah’s Witnesses, 7th Day Adventist).
 - 1. Their support for this: the “fallen asleep” asleep passages (ex. John 11, Acts 7).

 - 2. Biblical Response
 - a. The “sleep” passages refer to the body – it is a metaphor referring to the body, not the soul (2 Cor. 5:6-8, Acts 7:59).
 - b. To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (Phil 1:20-23, 2 Cor. 5:6-8).

B. Purgatory

“In Roman Catholic doctrine, Purgatory is a place where those who have died in a state of grace (that is, free from mortal sin) and in friendship with God, but who still lack the requisite holiness for heaven due to the presence of venial sin [normal sins vs. major sins]” go. . . . In Purgatory, the person is “purged, that is, expiated, cleansed, or purified through punishment visited on the offending believer or by works of the living on behalf of the dead. . . .” “The judgment of purgatory is expected to be severe punishment that can last for a considerable time . . . but will eventually lead to a matriculation to heaven.”³

¹ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

² Susannah Spurgeon.

³ Kevin D. Zuber, *Heaven and Hell: A Survey of the Biblical Doctrines of Personal Eschatology*, 44-45.

1. Their support for Purgatory
 - a. Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees 12:45
 - (i) In response
 - This book is not and was not considered part of the canon of Scripture.
 - The passage makes no reference to a place called purgatory.
 - Further, it actually does not support the RC view of purgatory at all because these men died in mortal sin, as idolators.
 - b. Supposed NT support
 - (i) 1 Cor. 3:13. However, this speaks of the bema seat judgment of believers works.
 - (ii) 1 Pet. 1:7. But this refers to our faith “being tested by fire” and resulting to the praise of Christ “at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”
 2. Biblical Response
 - a. Christ’s blood covers ALL a believer’s sins (1 John 1:7).
 - b. All the passages of being with the Lord immediately upon death that we saw earlier (see esp. the thief on the cross who had a lot of sin worthy of purgatory – Luke 23:43).

IV. How Should We Think about the Death of Believers?

A. Our own death

1. Don’t have to fear death (Heb. 2:14-15).
2. Death cannot separate a believer from the love of God or from relating to God (Rom. 8:38)
3. Gain and joy of being with the Lord (Phil 1:20-23)
4. Death is an enemy (1 Cor. 15:57)

B. The death of Christian friends and relatives

1. Genuine sorrow (Acts 8:2, Jn. 11:35, Acts 20:37-38, Phil 2:27).
2. Nevertheless, there is hope (1 Thess. 4:13-14).
3. Trust in and worship of God (Job 1:20-22).