

# Discover Bible Studies

## #24: When a Person Dies, What Then?

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We cringe when a child first asks, "What does it mean to die?" We shrink from talking about or even thinking about someone we love dying. Death is the common enemy of people everywhere.

What are the answers to the hard questions about death? Is there life after death? Will we see our dead loved ones again?

### 1. **FACING DEATH UNAFRAID**

All of us at certain moments, perhaps right after the passing of a friend or loved one, have felt that emptiness in the pit of our stomachs, that lonely feeling that sweeps over us, as we catch a glimpse of the end of life.

In a matter so important, so packed with emotion, where can we learn the truth about what happens when we die? Fortunately, part of Christ's mission on earth was to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (Hebrews 2:15). And in the Bible, Jesus presents comforting messages, and answers clearly all our questions about death and a future life.

### 2. **HOW GOD MADE US**

To understand from the Bible the real truth about death, let's start at the beginning and see how our Creator made us.

*"The LORD God formed the man [adam, Hebrew] from the DUST OF THE GROUND [adamah, Hebrew] and breathed into his nostrils THE BREATH OF LIFE, and the man became A LIVING BEING [SOUL, Hebrew]." -Genesis 2:7. (Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural texts in the DISCOVER guides are from the New International Version of the Bible [NIV].)*

At Creation God fashioned Adam from "the dust of the ground." He had a brain in his head ready to think; blood in his veins ready to flow. Then God breathed into his nostrils "the breath of life," and Adam became "a living being" [Hebrew, "a living soul"]. Note carefully, the Bible does not say Adam received a soul; rather it says that "man became a living soul." As God breathed into Adam, life began to flow from God. The combination of the body and "the breath of life" made Adam "a living being," "a living soul." So we might write the human equation like this:

*"Dust of Ground" + "Breath of Life" = "A Living Soul"*

Lifeless Body + Breath from God = A Living Being

Each of us has a body and a reasoning mind. As long as we continue to breathe, we will be a living being, a living soul.

### 3. WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON DIES?

At death the reverse of the creative process described in Genesis 2:7 takes place:

*"And the DUST returns to the ground it came from, and the SPIRIT [BREATH OF LIFE] returns to God who gave it." -Ecclesiastes 12:7.*

The Bible often uses the Hebrew words for "breath" and "spirit" interchangeably. When people die, their body becomes "dust" and the "spirit" (the "breath of life") returns to God, its source. But what happens to the soul?

*"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD . . . every LIVING SOUL belongs to me. . . . THE SOUL WHO SINS IS THE ONE WHO WILL DIE." -Ezekiel 18:3-4.*

The soul dies! It is not now immortal-it can perish.

The equation derived from Genesis 2:7, when God made us, reverses itself at death.

*"Dust of Earth" ÷ "Breath of Life" = "A Dead Soul"*

Lifeless Body ÷ Breath from God = A Dead Being

Death is the cessation of life. The body disintegrates to dust, and the breath, or spirit, goes back to God. We are a living soul in life, but in death only a corpse, a dead soul, dead being. So the dead are not conscious. When God takes back the breath of life He gave to us, our soul dies. But as we will see later in this lesson, with Christ there is hope.

### 4. HOW MUCH DOES A DEAD PERSON KNOW?

After death the brain disintegrates; it can't know or remember anything. All human emotions cease at death.

*"Their love, their hate and their jealousy have long since vanished . . ." -Ecclesiastes 9:6.*

The dead are not conscious, so they are not aware of anything that takes place. They have absolutely no contact with the living:

*"For the living know that they will die, but THE DEAD KNOW NOTHING." -Ecclesiastes 9:5.*

Death is like a dreamless sleep-in fact, the Bible calls death a "sleep" 54 times. Jesus taught that death is like a sleep. He said to His disciples:

*"Our friend LAZARUS HAS FALLEN ASLEEP; but I am going there to wake him up.' His disciples replied, 'Lord, if he sleeps, he will get better.' Jesus had been speaking of his death, but his disciples thought he meant natural sleep. So then he told them plainly, 'LAZARUS IS DEAD.'" -John 11:11-14.*

Lazarus was dead for four days before Jesus arrived. But when Jesus went to his tomb, He proved that it is as easy for God to raise the dead as for us to awaken a sleeping companion.

It's a great comfort to know that our deceased loved ones are "asleep," resting peacefully in Jesus. The tunnel of death, which we ourselves may someday pass through, is like quiet, peaceful sleep.

## **5. DOES GOD FORGET THOSE WHO SLEEP IN DEATH?**

The sleep of death is not the end of the story. At the tomb, Jesus said to Martha, Lazarus' sister:

*"I AM THE RESURRECTION and the life. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE, even though he dies." -John 11:25.*

Those who die "in Christ" sleep in the grave-but they still have a bright future. The One who counts every hair on our heads and holds us in the palm of His hand will not forget us. We may die and return to the dust, but the record of our individuality remains clear in the mind of God. And when Jesus comes, He will awaken the righteous dead from their sleep, just like He did Lazarus.

*"We do not want you to be ignorant about THOSE WHO FALL ASLEEP, OR TO GRIEVE LIKE THE REST OF MEN, WHO HAVE NO HOPE. . . . For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and THE DEAD IN CHRIST SHALL RISE FIRST. After that, WE WHO ARE STILL ALIVE and are left WILL BE CAUGHT UP TOGETHER WITH THEM in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. THEREFORE ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER WITH THESE WORDS." -1 Thessalonians 4:13, 16-18.*

On resurrection day, the tunnel of death will seem like a brief rest. The dead are not aware of time passing. Those who have accepted Christ as their Saviour, will be awakened from sleep by His wonderful voice coming down to earth.

The hope of resurrection has a companion: the hope of a heavenly home where God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4). Those who love God don't have to fear death. Beyond it lies an eternity of a fulfilling life with God. Jesus holds "the keys of death" (Revelation 1:18). Without Christ, death would be a one-way street ending in oblivion, but with Christ there is a bright, radiant hope.

## 6. ARE WE IMMORTAL NOW?

When God created Adam and Eve, they were created mortal, that is, subject to death. Had they remained obedient to God's will they would never have died. But when they sinned, they gave up their right to life. By disobedience they became subject to death. Their sin infected the entire human race, and since all have sinned, we are all mortal, subject to death (Romans 5:12). And there is not even a hint in the Bible that the human soul can exist as a conscious entity after death.

The Bible never once describes the soul as now being immortal-that is, not subject to death. The Hebrew and Greek words for "soul," "spirit," and "breath" occur in the Bible 1,700 times. But not once is the human soul, spirit, or breath referred to as immortal. At the present time God alone possesses immortality.

*"God . . . ALONE IS IMMORTAL." -1 Timothy 6:15, 16.*

Scripture makes it clear that people in this life are mortal: subject to death. But when Jesus returns, our nature will undergo a radical change.

*"Listen, I tell you a mystery: WE WILL NOT ALL SLEEP, but WE WILL ALL BE CHANGED-in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, AT THE LAST TRUMPET. For the trumpet will sound, THE DEAD WILL BE RAISED imperishable, AND WE WILL BE CHANGED. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and THE MORTAL WITH IMMORTALITY." -1 Corinthians 15:51-53.*

As human beings, we are not now immortal. But the Christian's assurance is that we become immortal when Jesus comes again a second time. The certainty of the promise of immortality was demonstrated when Jesus burst open His tomb and:

*"DESTROYED DEATH and . . . BROUGHT LIFE AND IMMORTALITY TO LIGHT through the gospel." -2 Timothy 1:10.*

God's perspective on human destiny is clear: eternal death for those who reject Christ and cling to their sins, or immortality as a gift when Jesus comes for those who have accepted Him as Lord and Saviour.

## 7. FACING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

The fears that we naturally struggle with in the face of death become especially acute when a loved one dies. The loneliness and sense of loss can be overwhelming. The only solution to the anguish caused by separation from a loved one is the comfort that only Christ gives. Remember that your loved one is asleep, and your loved ones who rest in Jesus will rise in the "resurrection of life" when Jesus comes.

God is planning some wonderful reunions. Children will be returned to their ecstatic parents. Husbands and wives will melt into each other's arms. Life's cruel separations will be over. "Death has been swallowed up in victory" (1 Corinthians 15:54).

Some feel the separation from a loved one so keenly that they try to make contact with their dead loved ones through a spiritualist medium or a New Age channeler. But the Bible specifically warns us against trying to ease the pain of death in this way:

*"When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" -Isaiah 8:19*

Indeed, Why? The Bible clearly reveals that the dead are not conscious. The real solution to the anguish caused by separation from a loved one is the comfort that only Christ gives. Spending time communicating with Christ is the healthiest way to grow through the grieving process. Remember always, the next conscious impression that comes to those who sleep in Christ will be the sounds of the second coming of Christ to awaken the dead!

## **8. FACING DEATH UNAFRAID**

Death robs us of almost everything. But the one thing it can't take from us is Christ, and Christ can put everything back together again. Death will not always reign in this world. The Devil, the wicked, death, and the grave will perish in "the lake of fire" which is "the second death" (Revelation 20:14).

Here are four simple suggestions for facing death unafraid:

- (1) Live a life of hopeful trust in Christ, and you will be prepared for death at any moment.
- (2) Through the power of the Holy Spirit, be obedient to Christ's commandments, and you will be prepared for a second life in which you will never die.
- (3) Think of death as a short sleep from which Jesus' voice will awaken you when He comes a second time.
- (4) Cherish the assurance Jesus gives us of a heavenly home with Him for all eternity.

Bible truth releases a person from the fear of death because it reveals Jesus, the One whom even death could not conquer. When Jesus comes into our lives, He floods our hearts with peace:

*"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. . . . Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." -John 14:27.*

Jesus also makes it possible for us to cope with the tragedy of losing a loved one. Jesus walked through "the valley of the shadow of death"; He knows about the dark nights we go through.

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that BY HIS DEATH he might destroy 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 2:14, 15.*

Dr. James Simpson, the great physician who developed anaesthesia, experienced a terrible loss when his eldest child died. He grieved deeply as any parent would. But then he found his way to hope. On his beloved child's grave he erected a marker and on it he carved these words Jesus spoke concerning His resurrection: "Nevertheless, I live."

That says it all. Personal tragedy may seem to blot out the sky sometimes; nevertheless, Jesus lives! Our hearts may be breaking; nevertheless, Jesus lives!

In Christ we have hope of life after death. He is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25), and He promises, "Because I live, you also will live" (John 14:19). Christ is our only hope of life after death. And when Christ comes again He gives us immortality. We will never again live under the shadow of death, for we have eternal life. Have you discovered this great hope that we can cherish in our darkest moments? If you have never accepted Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, will you do it just now?

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