

## What Happens When Believers Die?

Scripture: Luke 16:22–23

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It's hard for our finite minds to conceive of eternity—or for that matter, anything outside of our routine experience in this temporal realm. In spite of the pictorial language employed by the biblical authors, it can be difficult for us to form a clear concept of heaven, or understand what it will be like to pass through death and into eternity.

And whenever the topic turns to our eternal home, certain questions are appropriate. Someone inevitably asks about the state of believers who die before the final consummation of all things. Do believers who die receive temporary bodies until the resurrection? Are there compartments within heaven? Where did Old Testament believers go when they died? And what about purgatory—is it real?

A number of speculative views have been proposed to attempt to answer those questions. With regard to the state of Old Testament believers, for example, some teach that before Calvary, Hades (the realm of the dead) was divided into two sections—one for the wicked and one for the righteous. They suggest that Old Testament saints who died went to the realm called “Abraham’s bosom” (cf. Luke 16:22–23)—a sort of holding tank. According to this theory, these believers were kept in that compartment of Hades and not brought into the heaven of heavens until Christ conquered death in His resurrection.

Most of that is sheer conjecture with little if any biblical support. Wilbur Smith writes, “However abundant the Scriptural data might be regarding the resurrection of believers and their life in heaven, the state of the soul between death and resurrection is rarely referred to in the Bible.” [1] Wilbur M. Smith, *The Biblical Doctrine of Heaven* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 155. Scripture simply does not give much information about the intermediate state. But what we do know from Scripture is enough to debunk wrong theories.

## Soul Sleep

One view held by many is that the soul of a believer who dies remains unconscious until the resurrection. This view is found in some of the noncanonical writings of the early church. Its best-known advocates today are the Seventh-Day Adventists. They point out that the word “sleep” is often used in Scripture as a synonym for death. For example, Jesus told the disciples, “Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I go, so that I may awaken him out of sleep” (John 11:11). And Paul described the dead in Christ as “those who have fallen asleep in Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

But the sleep referred to in such imagery has to do with the body, not the soul. In his account of the crucifixion, Matthew wrote of a great earthquake: “The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matthew 27:52). It is the *body*, not the soul, that “sleeps”

in death. The body lies in rest, utterly devoid of any sensation or awareness, awaiting reconstitution and resurrection in eternal perfection to join the soul that is already in heaven. But the soul never sleeps—it enters the very presence of the Lord at the moment of death. This was affirmed again and again by the apostle Paul in the verses we considered [last time](#), as he described his desire to be absent from the body, so that he could be “at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23).

The souls of the departed enter into their rest. But it is a rest from labor and strife, not a rest of unconsciousness. The apostle John said of the righteous dead that they “rest from their labors” (Revelation 14:13). Yet he is clearly not describing a rest of unconscious sleep; in the scene John witnessed in heaven, the souls of the redeemed were there, actively singing and praising God (Revelation 14:1–4).

Everything Scripture says about the death of believers indicates that they are immediately ushered *consciously* into the Lord’s presence. In the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

The bodies of men after death return to dust, and see corruption; but their souls, (which neither die nor sleep,) having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them. The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. (32.1)

Sadly, soul sleep is not the only false concept of eternity that we must confront and debunk. Next time we’ll consider one of the most popular and deceptive lies that Satan has perpetrated: purgatory.



(Adapted from [The Glory of Heaven](#).)

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