



**DISCOVER**

BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

**24**

**When a Person  
Dies ... What Then?**



**WAYNE STOOD** beside the bed of his brother, Dale. Dale's lungs and heart had been failing and had weakened to the point where he didn't have much time left. Dale opened his eyes and said, "I'm dying, aren't I? I don't want to die, but it will be OK. I have Jesus."

Death is the common enemy of people everywhere. We not only fear dying ourselves, but we also rebel at the thought of someone we love dying. When facing death, the question is always there: "What does it mean to die? When a person dies . . . what then?"

What are the answers to the hard questions about death? Are we born only to die? Is death the end of the story? Or is there life after death? What is the experience of those in the grave? Can we help them? Can we talk with them? Will we ever see our dead loved ones again? Where are the dead right now?

Conflicting voices clamor to give us answers. Psychic mediums teach that the spirits who speak to them are dead beings who have evolved to a higher state. Hinduism teaches reincarnation, which involves a whole series of lifetimes in which we work off our bad karma and keep progressing to a greater degree of perfection. Buddhists believe in the god within us, enlightening us and moving us into a higher state. Atheists deny all hope of a future life and declare that death is the eternal end of everything. Many Christians believe that the dead are not really dead—that they go to heaven, hell, or some intermediate place of conscious existence.

In a matter so important, so universal, so packed with emotion, where can we learn the truth about what happens when we die? The answer is: the Bible. In God’s Word, He who knows all about life and death will instruct us with comforting messages of hope.

# 1 | Facing Death Unafraid

When a friend or loved one dies, we feel grief and pain. An emptiness sweeps over us as we face the reality of death. Jesus understands. He cried when His friend Lazarus died (John 11:34-36). But fortunately, part of Christ’s mission on earth was to “destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14, 15).

In the Bible, Jesus clearly answers all our questions about death, resurrection, and a future life. To understand the truth about death, let’s begin by looking at how our Creator gave us life in the beginning.

## 2 | How God Made Us

“The Lord God formed man [adam, Hebrew] of the dust of the ground [adamah, Hebrew]” (Genesis 2:7).

The Creator could have made the first man from some celestial or supernatural substance, but He didn’t. He fashioned Adam from “the dust of the ground.” After God had combined the desired elements of earth to form Adam’s brain, bones, and body, His creative power gave life to the inert form. It took something more to transform that perfect body into a living soul—and that something more was “the breath of life.”

“The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being [soul]” (Genesis 2:7).

As God breathed into Adam, life began to flow from God through the complex network of Adam’s nervous system. His muscles expanded and contracted, and his heart and lungs moved in rhythm. The combination of the body and “the breath of life” made man “a living being,” “a living soul” (KJV).

Note that the Bible does not say Adam *received* a soul—rather it says that man “*became* a living soul.”

So we might write the human equation like this:

Dust of ground (+) Breath of life (=) A living soul

OR

Lifeless body (+) Breath from God (=) A living being

Each of us has a body, intelligence, memory, a reasoning mind, a conscience, and a will. We have one personality and one

character. Therefore, we're one whole entity, not two or more distinct parts thrown together. Just as long as we continue to breathe, we will be a living human 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:

“Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit [breath of life] will return to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The Bible often uses the Hebrew words for “breath” and “spirit” interchangeably. When a person dies, his or her body becomes “dust,” and the “spirit” or “breath of life” returns to God, its source. But what happens to the soul?

“As I live,’ says the Lord God. . . . ‘all souls are Mine . . . the soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:3, 4).

The soul dies! It is not currently immortal—it can perish.

The previous two verses show that the equation derived from Genesis 2:7, when God made us, reverses itself at death:

(Think of “-” as the word “without.”)

Dust of ground ( - ) Breath of life ( = ) A dead soul

OR

Lifeless body ( - ) Breath from God ( = ) A dead being

Death is the cessation of life—spirit, soul, and body. The body disintegrates to dust, and the breath—or spirit—goes back to God.

We are living beings in life—a living soul, but in death we are only a corpse—a dead soul. When God takes back the breath of life He gave to us, our soul dies.

But thank God, the story doesn't end here. With Christ, there is hope. But before entering into a discussion about that hope, let's first examine the question:

## 4 | How Much Does a Dead Person Know?

After death, the brain disintegrates; it can't know, comprehend, or remember anything.

"In death there is no remembrance of You [God]; in the grave who will give You thanks?" (Psalm 6:5).

All human emotions cease at death.

"Their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; nevermore will they have a share in anything done under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 9:6).

The dead 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, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten. . . . Live joyfully. . . . for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (Ecclesiastes 9:5, 9, 10).

Death is like a dreamless sleep—in fact, 54 times, the Bible calls death a "sleep." The psalmist said, "I sleep the sleep of death" (Psalm 13:3). Jesus also taught that death is like a sleep. He said to His disciples:

**It is as easy  
for God to raise  
the dead  
as it is for us  
to awaken a  
sleeping friend**



“Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’ Then His disciples said, ‘Lord, if he sleeps he will get well.’ However, Jesus spoke of his death, but they thought that He was speaking about taking rest in sleep. Then Jesus said to them plainly, ‘Lazarus is dead’” (John 11:11-14).

Lazarus was in the early stages of decay, having been dead for four days before Jesus arrived. However, when the Son of God came to the tomb, He proved that it is as easy for God to raise the dead as it is for us to awaken a sleeping friend.

It’s a great comfort to know that our deceased loved ones are “asleep,” resting peacefully in Jesus, unaware of anything happening on earth. God’s way is the best way.

Suppose, as many Christians believe, a godly mother goes to heaven at death. In heaven, she looks down on earth and sees her son. She watches as he becomes an alcoholic or drug addict. Or she sees him suffering from cancer or severely crippled in an accident. How happy would this mother be in heaven? Salvation in a circumstance like that might offer more eternal pain than joy. Thank God that death is actually like a sound, tranquil sleep!

## 5 | Does God Forget Those Who Sleep in Death?

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

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live” (John 11:25).

Those who die in Christ sleep in the grave—but they still have a bright future beyond it. Our infinitely skillful Creator preserves the complete picture of every individual He has made. The One who counts every hair on our heads and holds us in the palm of His hand will not forget.

Job had confidence in God’s unerring memory. He expressed the hope of living again:

“If a man dies, shall he live again? All the days of my hard service I will wait, till my change comes. You shall call, and I will answer You; You shall desire the work of Your hands” (Job 14:14, 15).

A *renewal* is coming for those who rest in the grave. God will never lose track of a single one of His children. We may die and return to the dust, but the record of our individuality remains clear in the mind of God. Our “life is hidden with Christ in God”



**We have hope!**  
Even if we die,  
God will never lose  
track of His children

(Colossians 3:3), and He will raise us from death as surely and completely as He did Lazarus.

“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Colossians 3:4).

The righteous dead will awaken from their sleep when Jesus comes. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope. . . . For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words” (1 Thessalonians 4:13, 16-18).

On resurrection day, death will seem like a brief rest. The dead are not aware of time passing. Those who have accepted Christ as their Savior 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 (John 14:1-3), “the hope which is laid up for you in heaven” (Colossians 1:5). The Bible is full of advertisements for that perfect home. Its inhabitants cheerfully “keep the commandments of God” and remain faithful to Jesus (Revelation 12:17;

14:12). “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain” (Revelation 21:4).

Those who love God don’t have to fear death. Beyond it lies an eternity of a real, physical, joyful, 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, the abyss that lies at the end of the road of sin. But Christ can unlock the grave. With Christ, there is hope—a bright, radiant hope.



## 6 | Are We Immortal Now?

The Bible never once describes the soul as *immortal*—that is, not subject to death. In the beginning, Adam’s heritage as a created son of God was not death but eternal life. Had Adam remained obedient to the will of God, he would never have died. But when Adam and Eve sinned, they forfeited their right to life and became subject to death. Their sin infected the entire human race

(Romans 5:12). Since “the soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4), all people are now mortal—subject to death.

The Hebrew and Greek words for *soul*, *spirit*, and *breath* occur in the Bible 1,700 times, and not once is the human soul, spirit, or breath referred to as currently being immortal. Nor is there any hint in the Bible that humans have any conscious existence apart from the body.

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.

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory’” (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

As human beings, we are not currently immortal, but by faith in Jesus, we can now claim the promise of immortality. The Christian’s assurance is that he or she will gain immortality when Jesus returns.

The certainty of the promise of immortality was demonstrated when Jesus burst open His tomb.

“Our Savior Jesus Christ . . . has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10).

The teaching that we are now immortal lies behind the belief in an eternally burning hell. Both the immortality of the soul and

an eternally burning hell are ideas derived from Satan's lie to Eve in Eden, when he promised, "You will not surely die" (Genesis 3:4).

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

## 7 | Facing the Death of a Loved One

The fears 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, and we all have to go through a grieving process.

Some feel the separation from a loved one so keenly that they try to make contact with their dead loved ones. They can fall under the influence of psychic mediums who claim they can communicate with the dead.

However, the Bible specifically warns us against trying to ease the pain of death in this way:

"When they say to you, 'Seek those who are mediums and wizards, who whisper and mutter,' should not a people seek their God? Should they seek the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isaiah 8:19).

The real solution to the anguish caused by separation from a loved one is the comfort that only Christ can give. After all, it's Christ, not some psychic, who holds our loved one in the palm of His hand. It's Christ the Creator who safeguards the blueprint for that individual.

Spending time communicating with Christ is the healthiest way to go through the grieving process. Slowly, His perspective sinks into our minds and His promises shine on our gloomy thoughts.

Remember that your loved one is asleep, and a night's sleep seems like just a few moments to the sleeper. The next conscious moment that will come to those who sleep in Christ will be the Second Coming!

Your loved ones who rest in Jesus will rise in the “resurrection of life” (John 5:29) when Jesus returns once more. On that glorious day, loved ones and friends who are believers will all be caught up together to meet Christ in the air.

God is planning some wonderful reunions. Children will be returned to their ecstatic parents. Husbands and wives will once again feel each other's embrace. All of life's cruel separations will be swallowed up in a crescendo of reunions rising into the sky. Truly, “Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Corinthians 15:54).

## 8 | Facing Death Unafraid

There's no doubt about it: death is an enemy, and it 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. This is the second death” (Revelation 20:14).

In the meantime, 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 at the Second Coming.**

#### 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 to you. . . . Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it 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” (Psalm 23:4), so He knows about the dark nights we experience. He died and rose from the grave to give us an unshakable hope.

“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself [Jesus Christ] likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Hebrews 2:14, 15).

Dr. James Young Simpson, the great pioneer in the field of anesthesia, 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 small obelisk pointing like a spire toward the heavens. On it, he carved these three words: “Nevertheless I live” (Galatians 2:20, KJV), pointing to the promise of life that we have in Jesus Christ. That says it all.

*Continued on page 16*

# WordSearch

If you want to go deeper into this study topic, complete this section.

1. Where do both the righteous and the wicked go when they die? (John 5:28, 29)

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2. What did the Apostle Peter say about King David, centuries after David's death? (Acts 2:29, 34)

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3. Will the righteous who are raised to life when Jesus returns ever die again? (Luke 20:35, 36)

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4. Without believing in Jesus, is it possible to have eternal life? (1 John 5:11-13)

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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 will live also” (John 14:19).

When Christ comes again, He will give us immortality. We will never again live under the shadow of death, for we have eternal life.

Have you discovered this great hope that you can cherish in your darkest moments? If you have never accepted Jesus as your Savior, will you do so now?

## My Decision

- I want to thank Jesus for the knowledge that death is a sleep. I accept His promise of a resurrection to eternal life for all those who trust and follow Him.
- I want to accept Jesus as my personal Savior and spend eternity with Him and my loved ones.

## My Prayer

*Heavenly Father, I long for the day when Jesus will return to this earth and my loved ones will be resurrected and I can be reunited with them. Help me to trust You completely and to believe the Bible. Continue to guide my life as I study Your Word. I ask this in the name of Jesus, Amen.*

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Editor: Kurt Johnson | Design: Michelle C. Petz

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