



Lesson Five

What happens after Death?

God's Purpose for Mankind

One of the biggest problems that plagues mankind today is this sense of lost potential. Many people question their existence, a lingering sense of why hovering their psyche. The theme of feeling unfulfilled, like one should be doing more with their life, is rampant. Especially in today's technological world, millions of people feel as if they are not reaching their full potential in life.

It is important that we understand the topic of Creation, how it plays into our purpose in this life, and how it contributes to our apperception of death. Little of God's original intention is reflected today. Yet when we come to know God's purpose for mankind, it helps us connect the dots, and we can clearly see how far off course we've come, including the consequences of mankind's decisions.

Discussion: Why is it important that we study God's original purpose for mankind?

Very little of early human history is available archeologically. Back then, people didn't know how to write. Records were stored by word of mouth, not on written tablets. Eventually, man would develop a writing system. Yet much of what once existed in the written record had been destroyed in 539 BC when the Babylonian empire fell to Persia. This included ancient texts taken from the Temple of Solomon, pillaged by the Babylonians and Assyrians many times throughout history.

Thankfully, some texts did survive. Yahweh preserved history for us to learn from in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and

Deuteronomy. Together, these are known as the Torah. Most of the Torah was written by Moses, and scribes kept copies for us to use today. It is in these five books that we learn the origins of mankind and where Yahweh outlines His purpose for us.

Discussion: Where can we learn about human origins? Who wrote these?

What do we learn from these texts? When we read Genesis, we can see exactly what God intended for mankind. When God first created mankind, it was into a lush paradise land where He assigned them tasks. The bible says, "And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over

every living thing that moves on the earth.”” (Genesis 1:28, ESV). Notice the tasks given to them: that they were to be fruitful, to subdue the earth, and have dominion over the animals. It was Adam’s task to take care of the earth and all that was living on it.



Adam and Eve were meant to take care of the earth and live forever upon it

God’s purpose for Adam and Eve was to live on an earthly paradise for all eternity. While God created us to take care of His creation, there was a deeper purpose for why God created us (Isaiah 45:18). Adam and Eve were able to communicate directly with God. They walked with Him, talked with Him, and had a personal relationship with Him. God intended for us to be companions with Him (Isaiah 43:7). Yahweh wanted companionship with us. This is why we were made in His likeness.

Yahweh intended for Adam and Eve to live forever. How do we know? The bible tells as much many times. In Ecclesiastes, it is written that God “put eternity into our hearts” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). God created man with a desire to go on living, and to therefore fear death. We can also discern God’s eternal intention through careful reading of the Genesis narrative of creation.

When God created Adam and Eve, He warned them not to eat from the Tree of

Knowledge because they would die (Genesis 2:16-17). Conversely, Yahweh also planted in the Garden of Eden the Tree of Life, from which Adam and Eve could attain everlasting life if they continued to eat the fruit (Genesis 3:22-24). Yes, God very clearly wanted man to live forever in a paradise on earth.

Why, then, do we die? We die because Adam introduced sin to the world. When they chose to disobey God, Adam and Eve were ousted from Eden. Only those who were spiritually pure could reside in paradise. Through disobedience, Adam had lost his state of perfection. No longer could he be allowed to stay in Eden.

Some people claim that kicking Adam and Eve out of Eden was an injustice on

God's part. These people often speak with emotion instead of logic. Let's look at an example of a human father and his son. If a father owns a home, he may choose to give free room and board to his adult son. The adult child need only follow the rules of the house, and he is able to stay with his father for free. If that child breaks even one of the rules, the father is well within his rights to kick his adult child out. The grown child only gets the benefits of living rent-free if he agrees to live by his father's standards.

Entrance to Eden is much the same. Humankind can only live in God's paradise if they agree to do so by His standards. Death is not a punishment for mankind; it is a natural consequence of living on our own, just as the adult child will have to pay rent if he cannot live with his father. Humans live and die

today because our original parents, Adam and Eve, chose to disobey God's rule, and were thus expelled from paradise. We inherited that sin from Adam and live in an imperfect state. Since everybody sins, everybody dies (Romans 5:12).

But God doesn't want us to die. The bible calls death our enemy (1 Corinthians 15:26). Our death is in direct contradiction with God's purpose for us. It is a terrible tragedy, one that makes hurts Yahweh deeply. How thankful we can be that Yahweh provided the ransom for us, so that we may live forever!

What is Death?



In a red-brick church in a small town, a funeral is happening. The pews are filled with teary-eyed loved ones. At the end of the aisle, an open casket reveals their sunken form. From the pulpit, a preacher talks about what a wonderful person the decedent was. "God has gained another angel," he says sorrowfully to at the end of his speech.

In many ways, this phrase is problematic. Firstly, it perpetuates the idea that God causes bad things to happen, which the bible says He does not (James 1:13). Phrases like this also skewers the bible's message for what happens to us when we die. For centuries now people have had the idea that their

loved ones are basking in heaven with wings and halos while the nameless, faceless "wicked" suffer for all eternity in ever burning hellfire. Are either of these true? What truths does the bible teach about what happens when we die?

Questions like these have plagued people for centuries. Everyone experiences death. It doesn't matter where you are from, how you grew up, or what you did in your lifetime. Eventually, you will die. When someone we care about dies, it is only natural to wonder, what happened to them? Where did they go?

It might not surprise you to learn that we can find answers to the many

questions we have about death in the bible. As the Creator of all life, Yahweh God knows what happens to us when we die. Since the beginning, Yahweh has been teaching us about death, why we die and what happens to us when we do. Despite what many people teach about death, the bible is very clear in its message about the subject: *when we die, we cease to exist*.

Yahweh first describes what happens when we die when he admonished Adam right after his disobedience. "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return." (Genesis 3:19, ESV). God told Adam that they would "return to the ground" and "return to dust". This refers to the state they were in before they were created;

before they were created, they did not exist, therefore, after they died, they would not exist either.

Discussion: How did Yahweh describe death to Adam?

In later scriptures, the bible describes the state of death. It says that *the dead know nothing* (Read: Ecclesiastes 9:5). The bible also says that the dead cannot work nor gain wisdom (Ecclesiastes 9:10). When a person dies, their plans – or thoughts – perish (Psalm 146:4). Yet more scriptures state that in death is silence (Psalm 115:17).

Death is the opposite of living. Think of a candle. When the fire goes out, where does the flame go? The flame ceases to exist. Likewise, when we die, we cease to exist. The bible describes this state as sleep.

We are not aware of anything or awake to anything. We are unconscious, unaware.



Like the flame of a candle that has been put out, we cease to exist when we die

Another way to think of death is like being asleep. When his close friend, Lazarus, passed away from illness, Jesus spoke about Lazarus as if he were sleeping (John 11:11-13). In the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel describes death as a state of being asleep (Daniel 12:2). When we sleep, we are

unconscious to the world around us. We have no awareness of what others might be doing or saying nearby.

Have you ever been under general anesthesia? Brain scans of those as they die reveal that the process of dying is very similar to what one experiences when they are put under anesthesia. The experience of going under can only be described as a deep, dreamless sleep. One second, you are lying on a hospital bed with nurses telling you they are about to give you the medication to make you sleep. The next, you will be waking up, possibly in a different room and at a much later time. The period in between, time has passed normally for everyone else, and you were completely unaware.

Discussion: How is the

experience of general anesthesia similar to how the bible describes the state of the dead?

Perhaps you find it unnerving to think of death in this way. Indeed, many find it creepy to imagine our bodies without us behind the wheel, so to speak. However, there is also a measure of comfort in this description. In death, there is no awareness of pain or suffering. There is just a deep sleep.

That does not mean we seek death. Death is a tragedy. Our lives are gifts from Yahweh God. He breathed life into us by means of His holy spirit. When creating the world, Yahweh intended for us to live forever. Death is a deeply saddening occurrence to both us and Him (2 Peter 3:9). Human death is in direct contrast with Yahweh's purpose for mankind.

Heaven or Hell?

Does our Soul Live On?



You have probably heard that when we die, we either go to heaven to live with Jesus there, or go to hell in eternal damnation. Are either of these true? No. The bible is very clear that death means ceasing to exist, like a very deep sleep. So why do people say we go to heaven or to hell?

There are many scriptures used to support such doctrine. Many people believe in hell because of bible verses that speak of smoke and eternal fire. Yet it's important for us to dive deeper to gain a better grasp of what these scriptures really mean. Let's examine some scriptures that people use to support the doctrine of hell.

People refer to Revelation 14:11 as proof that unrighteous humans are sent to hell. "And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name." (Revelation 14:11, ESV). However, this kind of language is a poetic reference to Sodom and Gomorrah. See this scripture from the book of Jude. "Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which likewise indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural desire, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire." (Jude 2:17, ESV). Clearly, Sodom and Gomorrah are

not still burning to this day. The language is allegorical. The fire itself is not eternal. The destruction of that fire is what is eternal. Notice what Jesus describes in the Gospel of Matthew. "And these will go away into eternal punishment". Punishment, not punishing.

The book of revelation describes a "lake of fire" that burns across the earth. The lake of fire is also called the second death. "But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death." They will be burned in the hellfire, not for eternity, but until their deaths. Notice what Jesus said of the hellfire to his disciples. "And do not fear those who kill the body but

cannot kill the soul. Rather fear Him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." The soul is destroyed in hell. Therefore, rather than a place of everlasting torment, *hell is a place of everlasting destruction.*

Discussion: What is 'hell'?


The doctrine of the second death is an important one to consider in our next lesson, called "The Resurrection". It ties into the ransom promise and shows us how God intends to deliver punishment to those who face judgement. For now, it's important to recognize that 'hell' is not a place of eternal damnation. Rather, it is a state of permanent death with no hope of a resurrection. Even the word 'hell', which did not exist in ancient times, can reflect this truth.

The word 'hell' was translated from four different words in the bible. First was the word *sheol*. Sheol was an ancient Israeli word that literally means 'the common grave'. Ancient scholars understood sheol to be a place of complete darkness, quiet, and cold. In sheol there was no knowledge, pain, passion, or emotion. There was no love, no understanding, and no thought. Sheol merely described the state of non-existence which is death.

The second word often translated to 'hell' is the word *hades*, which is found exclusively in the Greek scriptures. This word is simply a translation of sheol from Hebrew to koine Greek. The word refers to the realm of the dead and is used in the same context as the word sheol had been. In fact, when translating ancient Hebrew

scriptures, Greek scholars used the word *hades* in place of sheol, ascribing the same meaning to both of the words. Hades is yet another reference to the state of non-existence which is death.

The third word often translated to 'hell' is *Gehenna*. Gehenna was a real place outside of the city of Jerusalem in the valley of Megiddo. Gehenna was a place where all of the town refuse was sent to be burned into ashes. When Jesus used the word Gehenna, he was not referring to a place of eternal damnation. Instead, he was referring to the actual trash heap outside of the city. Sometimes, bodies of the sick or especially poor were taken to Gehenna to be burned with the trash. By referring to Gehenna, Jesus was referring to the second death, a place where a person's entire existence



would be swallowed up in death.

The last word translated into 'hell' only appears once in the entire bible. The word is *Tartarus*. Tartarus was a reference to Greek mythology, and was a prison used to trap the titans, ancient monsters according to the Greek faith. Bible scholars understand Tartarus to be, not hell, but a prison that will hold Satan and all of the demons for 1000 years during the millennial reign of Christ. No human will ever be sent there. This is why it is important to deeply study the scriptures; it is easy to be misled when we don't.

Discussion: How does our study of bible language help us to know that 'hell' is not a place of eternal damnation?

If people are not going to be

sent to hell, does that mean that the common theology regarding going to heaven when we die is also false? Just because one theology is false does not mean the other has to be as well. However, in this case, it is true that *we do not go to heaven when we die*. How do we know?

Like all spiritual discussions, we must turn to the bible for true answers. In this case, the bible shows us that we do not ascend to heaven upon our death. During his ministry on earth, Jesus said that "no man has ascended into heaven" (Read: John 3:13). That includes all of patriarchs, such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or even David, was often described as having a good record before God (Acts 2:34). Jesus' own cousin, John the Baptist, arguable one of the most

spiritual men in Jesus' time, did not ascend to heaven by Jesus' account (Matthew 11:11).

Discussion: How does our knowledge on what happened to good men in the past when they died shape our understanding of death theology today?

One of the scriptures most cited as a reference to going to heaven when we die includes John 14:2-3, which reads, "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also." (John 14:2-3, ESV). Here, the word place comes from the Greek τόπος (topos), which means "a position in space" but also

means "a condition or staple held by an individual".

The bible refers to this "place" as a reward (Matthew 5:12). Notice that while this reward is stored in heaven, it is not granted to us there. "Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done." (Revelation 22:12, ESV). *When Jesus returns, he will bring our reward with him down from the heavens.*

What about the man on the cross beside Jesus? For three days, Jesus and two criminals were on their crosses, waiting to die. During that time, one of the criminals repented from his sins and declared his faith in Jesus as the Messiah. "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43, ESV). Some people say that this proves

that we go to heaven now that Jesus has. However, that thinking is flawed. For starters, *Jesus did not ascend into Heaven on that day*. It would not be for three days after his death that Jesus would ascend into heaven.

This is a prime example of an allegorical verse being taken as literal. Jesus was not telling the man that on that very day they would go into paradise. Rather, he was making a statement that the man's repentance and faith would allow him a place in paradise, even though he was repenting at the last moment of his life.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Dr. F. Scott Spencer- a professor in New Testament Theology and Biblical interpretation at the University of Durham -wrote this: "The concern here is not

where the two will go after they die. What matters is the certainty of the second criminal's salvation. Even in one's dying moments, it is not too late to repent and receive the gospel." We must allow our understanding to be guided by scripture. The notion that the criminal would rise to heaven on that very day does not align with the rest of scriptural teaching. Therefore, we can reject that this verse proves that we go to heaven the moment we die.

Discussion: Does Jesus' words on the cross mean that the criminal went to heaven the day he died?

The Problem with the Immortal Soul



Perhaps the reason so many people believe in some form of afterlife is because of the teaching of the immortal soul. This flawed doctrine has been taught for centuries and is a big part of mainstream Christianity. However, this teaching is problematic in many ways. It does great harm to Yahweh's Name.

The teaching can be simplified to this: when we die a physical death, it is only our bodies that die. Our souls continue to live after our bodies expire. You have probably heard this before. It is a staple of many religions, not just mainstream Christianity. But does it align with scripture?

No! The bible teaches that

we are comprised of three main parts – body, soul, and spirit. Our bodies are our physical vessels through which we experience life. Our souls are our life force, the spark that gives us life. And our spirits are what makes us who we are. These three things are so deeply intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. In fact, the word for spirit and soul is the same word in ancient Hebrew!

What happens to our spirit and soul when our bodies die? The bible answers: "and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." (Ecclesiastes 12:7, ESV). Here the word spirit comes from the Hebrew רוּחַ (rûah)

which means *breath, wind*, or metaphorically *soul*. God breathed life into us by means of His holy spirit. When we die, our 'soul' – or life force – returns to God (Genesis 2:7). Our spirits experience the darkness, nothingness, and non-existence we described earlier.

Is the soul immortal?
Absolutely not. How do we know? God Himself told us so. Twice, in Ezekiel 18, He says, "The soul who sins shall die." (Ezekiel 18:4, 18:20). We experience a sleep state until our awakening at the resurrection (Hebrews 9:7)

The problem with the teaching of the immortal soul is that it opposes bible teaching. Scripture says that the reward of faith is "everlasting life" (Read: Romans 6:23). Wouldn't it make sense, then, that the

punishment of sin is everlasting death? The bible confirms this in John 3:36 where it says, "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life..." (John 3:36, ESV).

When we add in doctrines such as hellfire, it becomes especially problematic. What kind of loving God sends His own children to eternal torment? The teaching of eternal hellfire is an attack on God's character. The bible describes God as loving, patient, and just (1 John 4:16). Think of a child that breaks a rule in his father's house. Would it be loving, patient, or just of the father to then stick his child's hand into a burning fire as punishment? Of course not! Likewise, it would be completely against God's character to punish us through everlasting torture.

Discussion: How is the teaching of the immortal soul problematic for Christians?

This teaching can only come from someone who wants to dissuade us from putting our faith in God. And that can only be one person: Satan, the devil. Satan propagates the belief in eternal torment, first through paganism. Eventually, the true beliefs of Christianity would be replaced by the falsehoods of paganism. We can see this happening through historical records. Originally, the Jewish people did not believe in hell or the immortal soul. But over time, the mythologies of Egypt, Rome, and Babylon would creep into bible theology. Typically, uneducated ones would find themselves swayed into beliefs not found in true worship. Their traditions would become more mainstream overtime,

until they were added to theological canon.



Hellfire teachings have roots in ancient Egyptian mythology, as well as other pagan origins

That is why bible scholarship is so important. Instead of rooting our beliefs in tradition, which can be faulty, we need to lean our understanding on the scriptures of God. It means more than just reading the bible. We need to contextualize scripture based on linguistic understanding, historical context, and textual cross-reference. At NCMA, we seek to make this process easier for the average bible student through the many resources available on our website.

Even though death is a solemn topic, there is real hope to be found as well. While we all die, the promises of God prove that this state is not permanent. "For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day." (John 6:40, ESV). God will resurrect the dead through His son, Jesus! The souls who sleep will be awakened. Furthermore, God promises the return of Paradise on earth for us to enjoy for all eternity!

Knowing the truth about death is beneficial. True perception about death helps us overcome the lies we've been taught by mainstream religion. It also puts perspective on bible truths. Now that we know that the

dead are not living on in a spirit realm, the promise of eternal paradise takes on real meaning.

But how are we getting to this paradise? If people die today, how do we come to live forever? In our next lesson, we will discuss one of the most important topics of bible truth: The resurrection.