



ada bible church

8899 cascade road se | ada, mi 49301
868.7005 | adabible.org

We Believe | Eternity

Hi, my name is Doug Redford. On behalf of the elders and staff at Ada Bible, I'm delighted to be able to bring you this teaching. Thanks for taking a few minutes to explore with me the topic of Eternity.

Let's begin with a quote from one of the most influential Christian writers of the last century. C. S. Lewis wrote this: *"There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal... your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses"* (*The Weight of Glory*).

"You have never talked to a mere mortal." Although we might not think to say it in that way, we can all relate to the feeling that there is more to our existence than just our physical life. Where does this sense of "something more" come from? Well, Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 3.11 that God *"set eternity in the hearts of men."* God put in our hearts this sense of "something more," a greater purpose, a God to worship, a destination to pursue. In fact, all of the writers of God's Word make clear that physical death is not the end of our stories because death is not the end of God's Story.

At the beginning, God created humans to know him, to walk with him, and to enjoy his presence. That's core to what it means to be human. But when Adam and Eve rebelled they brought horrible consequences to the human race.

Now if we know that death is not the end of the story, the natural question is, "what happens when we die?" It's an important question and how we answer it will directly impact our lives today. Let me say that again: How we answer the question, "What happens when we die?" is not merely an interesting thing to think about— it directly impacts our lives today. And, of course, if we're not sure how to answer it, that lack of clarity will impact us today as well.

Paul knew this when he wrote, *"Brothers, 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"* (1Thessalonians 4.13). He knew that if those early Jesus followers got this right they would have hope that others didn't have; they would grieve differently, and they would relate to others in more life-giving ways.

That's my prayer for you as you listen to this teaching. May you be encouraged, inspired, and convicted. Encouraged that there is hope (more to life than what you face today), inspired to engage life in a new and meaningful way, and convicted that your life really does matter for eternity, and eternity should matter to you.

In the next few minutes, we'll take a look at what God has said about eternity, not necessarily the exact steps of how things will happen, but the basic questions of what happens after death, where we will spend eternity, and what it will be like.

First, let's address the subject of death itself. As we've said, death was not a part of God's original design. Death is the result of sin. Many scholars believe that we could have lived forever in the Garden of Eden, but when Adam and Eve rebelled they introduced sin into the universe. Paul writes in Romans 5.12, *"Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way, death came to all men, because all sinned..."*

One way to understand death is with the word "separation." Physical death separates us from the physical world, spiritual death separates us from God, and eternal death separates us from God eternally or permanently. If you will think of death in this relational way, as separation, it will help you appreciate the significance of things like heaven and hell, which we'll look at shortly.

It's a huge thing to know death was not part of God's original intention for us. We were meant for life: physical life in our physical world, spiritual life walking in God's presence, and eternal life—enjoying God's presence forever. Death ruined that, but the good news is Christ came to reverse the curse of death by offering up his life—dying on the cross—and being resurrected to new life.

As Paul sat in a prison cell facing death himself, he wrote in 2 Timothy 1.10 that Jesus "destroyed death." How do you "destroy" death? Jesus did it by reversing the curse of death. He died and then didn't stay dead. He came back to life. Death couldn't hold him. The new life Jesus lives is not subject to death, and he offers that life to us through faith in him. Compare this to what Adam did. Again, Paul writes in Romans 5.15 *"the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many!"*

So, what Adam condemned us to, Jesus redeemed us from. Thus, for the Christian, death continues the life that began when we accepted him as our Savior. It is the event that finalizes our ultimate destination in God's presence. On the other hand, for those who reject Jesus and never receive life—those who remain spiritually dead—death continues what was already true and finalizes their destination, separate from God and his grace.

Some of us may flinch at this either/or dynamic: either up or down, heaven or hell. But we must remember that in the Bible the whole heaven/hell discussion is wrapped in the broader context of relationship with God. We were created to be with God, but our sin separates us from him. Paul describes it in Ephesians with words like "dead in trespasses and sins," "separate from Christ" and "far away." Without God's intervention, we're all heading toward permanent separation from him, and that by our own choice, through our sinful behaviors.

Okay, so what happens when we physically die? Well, if we have already received new life through Jesus, our souls (also called "spirits" in the New Testament) are separated from our bodies and we enter God's presence in a new, richer way. *"While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed,"* (in Acts 7:59) *'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'* And to the thief hanging on the cross next to him, Jesus said, *"Today, you will be with me in paradise"* It will be a place of worship and rest—not a physical place yet but a spiritual place with no sin, no despair, no pain, no death, no illness, and no regrets. All of the peace and joy of heaven will be true here because we will be in God's presence.

If we have not received new life through Jesus, we go immediately into what the Bible calls "Hades" (sometimes translated "hell"), separated from God's love and fellowship. You can read a description of this in Luke 16.19-23. Essentially, we go where God's presence, goodness, love, peace, and joy aren't present, which will naturally be excruciatingly painful. Luke writes, in Luke 16.26, *"And besides this, between us and*

you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." This state of separation from God will be permanent.

Did you notice that at this point, either in God's presence or in Hades, we will not have a body? We'll have left our bodies and will only be souls or spirits. We weren't created to be without a body, so this isn't our final destination. It's the first step in a two-step process.¹ The Christian Hope is not that we merely go to heaven when we die—it's that we will be resurrected, like Jesus was, and live as humans were meant to live.

So, according to Scripture, we will be resurrected and given spiritual bodies. We'll be reunited with our actual bodies, and they will be resurrected and changed. Paul writes about this in 1 Corinthians 15, *"So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."*

The resurrected body will be physical, in that it won't be ghostlike or immaterial. We see this in Jesus' resurrected body, which the disciples could touch physically. To prove he wasn't a ghost, Jesus told them in Luke 24:38-39, *"Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have."* Then, he ate fish in front of them. Jesus' point was that his resurrected body was physical—flesh and bone—and our bodies will be the same. We won't become like angels; we'll become like Christ.

However, our bodies will be transformed. They will be spiritual bodies as well. Paul affirms this in Philippians 3. He writes, *"But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body."* This is also taught in the Old Testament. Isaiah writes in 26:19, *"But your dead will live; their bodies will rise. You who dwell in the dust, wake up and shout for joy."* Jesus taught about the resurrection, and in one passage makes what seems to be a shocking statement in John 5:28-29, *"Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out – those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned."*

Did you notice something in that verse? Not only will those who have trusted Christ for salvation, but also those who have rejected him, will be raised. Death isn't the end of anyone, even nonbelievers. All people will appear before Christ to be judged, and Jesus followers will receive rewards from Christ based on their actions in this life. Paul makes this clear in 2 Corinthians 5:10, *"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad."*

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope* (HarperOne, 2008), 169.

While salvation is a free gift through grace by faith (John 3.36), our works determine the kind of rewards we are given in heaven. A couple chapters earlier, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3.11-14, *"If any man builds on this foundation [that is, Christ] using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is... It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward."*

Rewards are described as "prizes" or "crowns" in 1 Corinthians 9; and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 connects our service in this life for "the least of these"—the poor in our world—to the service we give our Lord. Whatever we do for the least fortunate, Scripture says, we do for him. Jesus makes the statement in Matthew 16.27 that, *"The Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."*

Here's where the rubber really meets the road. This passage shows that our eternal lives are directly connected to our life on this earth, particularly as we serve the least fortunate. Our eternal life is guaranteed by grace through faith in the work Christ accomplished on the cross, but our rewards have direct connection to the work we accomplish with God's help—especially for the benefit of the least fortunate.

Okay, so we've looked at death, resurrection and judgment. Now, let's talk about heaven and hell in greater detail. At this point, we want to talk not about heaven and hell in the sense of where we go when we die, but rather what is the nature of heaven and hell.

First, let's start with the hard one. What does the Bible say about hell? We've already mentioned that when someone dies who does not know Christ they are permanently separated from God and all that God's presence brings. This remains true for eternity. Listen to these sobering words from one of Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, chapter 1, verses 8-9. *"He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power."* Let those words sink in a bit—"shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power."

Those in hell experience the absence of God, and since we are created with a built in longing to be with God, this will be torment without rest. Jesus describes it a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 13.42) and a place of darkness and fire (Matthew 8.12). Picture the excruciating pain of burning forever. That's what complete and permanent separation from God will be like, and we need to take it seriously. Unbelievers will experience unending punishment for rejecting the grace offered through Christ's death on the cross according to 2 Thessalonians 1.8-9.. Let's be clear on this: hell is something we all choose when we sin, because sinful actions are a way of rejecting God. If we reject God, he lets us have our way.

But, thankfully, that's not the only option. Jesus died for a reason. God has made a way for us to be forgiven and for our relationship with him to be restored. As the writer of Hebrews put it in 10.22-23, *"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess for he who promised is faithful."* The whole discussion of hell is definitely a warning to those who have not received Christ, but it is not meant to scare those who have. We can know with certainty that our hope is somewhere else. Let's close by looking at what that hope is.

The Bible often refers to heaven as the place where God most fully dwells. We often call it the “abode of God.” For example, Luke records in Acts 7:55 that Stephen *“looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God.”* When we die we will reside there with God in peace, rest, and worship, awaiting our resurrection. However, just as the old hymn sings, “Heaven came down and glory filled my soul,” heaven will come down again.

Many of us have this notion that heaven is “up there” or “out there” somewhere in the heavenlies. Scripture actually teaches that heaven will be a place on earth. It will, in fact, be a new earth. Listen to these words from the second to last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 21:1-3. They describe what it will be like when Jesus returns and finishes his work of redemption: *“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.’”*

This “new heaven and new earth” is where we, as Jesus followers, will spend eternity. It will be a place of unimaginable beauty and splendor. God’s glory will be fully manifest and will far exceed the highest form of beauty we perceive on this earth. Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 2:9 that *“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him”* (see also, Revelation 21:18-23).

Think of it. In heaven, all things will be made new. Broken lives will be remade. Evil will be finally vanquished. God will be with us in the fullest possible way, and we will be fully alive as humans were created to live. That’s why we don’t live our lives today as if they don’t matter. They do matter. We’re created for this, and we will spend eternity enjoying God’s creation. The difference will be the absence of evil and the complete presence of God. Those who have made Christ their Lord in this life will enjoy God forever free of pain, suffering, illness, or sin—not as an arbitrary reward for those on the “inside” but because our sins are forgiven through Jesus. Revelation 21:4, *“He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*

No amount of hardship on this earth will compare with the splendor we will experience there. All pain now will be redeemed. Paul writes in Romans 8 to encourage his friends that *“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*

Is this different than what you thought heaven would be? We often envision heaven as some dream-like state of passive rest. Some have called the popular concept of heaven “the boring white place” where we sit on clouds and play harps all day. However, Scripture teaches that in the New Heaven and New Earth, we will be quite active, living fully human lives in God’s creation.

Life will be marked by a certain and permanent state of joy. Psalm 16:11 reads, *“You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.”* We will actively worship God forever. We will serve God in love and adoration, judge the world, and reign with him.

Why does all this matter? It is vital to see our eternal destinies in their proper perspective. It affects how we see people on this earth and how we choose to invest our time. The choices we make, whether for Christ or apart from him, have eternal consequences; and as we endure pain, suffering, and the loss of loved ones, we can know with a settled confidence that Jesus is making all things new, including us. We can be encouraged and endure what we face today with patience and love, because in Christ our future is settled. And it’s a good one.

But this also motivates us to make a difference in this life and to invest our time in ways that glorify God and have eternal rewards. Scripture calls us to live lives that build on the reality of God in Christ and to treat our time on earth as an investment into God's eternal kingdom. Do you want your life and your efforts to really matter? Live your life with an eye on eternity, knowing what the future holds for believers and unbelievers. Foster relationships with those who are far from Christ in order to help them connect with God and prepare themselves for eternity. We only have one life to live and we have to make it count on behalf of those around us. Your life really does matter for eternity, and I pray that eternity will matter to you. May you live your life for him who gave his all for you!

Thank you for spending this time with me. If you wish to explore more scripture references or want to review the scripture references that were mentioned, please see the written manuscript and outline for this teaching that is posted on our website. May God bless you as you seek him!