

What Happens When You Die?



Session 1



**Matthew 22:1–2; Romans 8:36–39; Psalm 89:48;
Ecclesiastes 9:10; Daniel 12:1–3; Matthew 25:31–46;
John 4:10–14; Matthew 13:31–32**

Session Objective

One of humankind’s most basic, deepest questions is: What happens when you die? Christianity offers the unique answer that in Christ, death has been conquered! Your participants will learn what it means that life does not end with this world and will, like so many Christians, struggle over the details of that hope.






Faith Statement

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by God’s Holy Spirit, God also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for God.

—Heidelberg Catechism (4.001)

Session Overview

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For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Death means something different to most teenagers than it does to senior citizens. Many youth walk with an air of invincibility. In time, people come to understand death's inevitability; eventually, many people live with its immediacy. Wherever you are on that journey, try to consider your past feelings about death and the afterlife, and what you have learned from people who have faced their own mortality. Reflect on the following questions:

- Whose was the first funeral you attended?
- What were your own childhood images of the afterlife?
- What contributed to the development of your feelings about the afterlife?
- What have you learned from people who have died gracefully?
- Do you consider death hopeful and celebratory, wretched and painful, or somewhere in between? Why?
- Are you scared of what will happen after you die? Why or why not?



Understanding the Scripture

In one respect, Scripture is absolutely consistent about the afterlife: Physical death is not the end. The details of what comes next, however, are far from clear. Biblical writers and cultures have five main stages of thought about the afterlife.

- *Sheol* and *Hades*—Hebrews (*Sheol*; see Genesis 37:35) before the exile and Greeks (*Hades*; see Acts 2:27, compare NIV and NRSV) until the third century B.C. believed that all dead people go to a neutral afterlife, without punishment or glory.¹ Most Bibles appropriately do *not* translate these words as “heaven” or “hell.”
- *Gehenna*—Originally the name of a valley south of Jerusalem, the concept of *Gehenna* as a realm of afterlife punishment for sinners seems to have developed as a response to the injustices of the exile and became increasingly popular during the three centuries before Christ (see 1 Enoch 22, from the Apocrypha). The Bible and Qur’an translate *Gehenna* as “hell.”²
- *Resurrection of the Body*—This Jewish notion also developed as a response to the injustices of the exile, and it became much more popular after Jesus’ resurrection.³ Theories about resurrection varied, but generally the idea was that the dead would be resurrected after some time of death to new life, portrayed usually, but not always, as an eternal consequence for one’s behavior.

1. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 277.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 243, 277–278.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.

- *Heaven and Hell*—*Heaven*, actually *heavens* (*shamayim*), is the Hebrew word for “sky” and meant the nearby sky where birds fly, the solid dome above the earth, the night stars, and the home of God and angels. The concept of heaven as eternal reward does not exist in the Hebrew Bible; rather, it was developed by the Pharisees in the three centuries before Jesus. Jesus and his followers further developed a variety of ideas about heaven, or the “kingdom of God” or the “Father’s house” as the New Testament sometimes refers to it, and associated hell (*Gehenna*) as its eternal, judgmental opposite.⁴
- Rather than solving the theological tension between resurrection and heaven/hell, Christianity accepted both concepts during its first few centuries.⁵ We have lived with different versions of the tension ever since.

Alongside these five stages, the Bible also supports a concept of hell, not after life, but as a negative force on the living (2 Samuel 22:6),⁶ while heaven is a peaceful influence (John 4:10–14; Matthew 13:31–32). For some modern Christians, this existential concept has developed further, into the notion that heaven and hell are personal states of being or symbols for being close to God. For still others, heaven has come to be nearly synonymous with God’s grace, while hell is either incompatible with God’s love (and thus empty) or a concept of moral motivation (and thus unreal). There is some biblical warrant for these theories, but they require perhaps more intentional interpretation.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The *Heidelberg Catechism* was written in 1562, in order for the new Lutheran and Reformed movements to work through their differences and embrace their points of agreement. Constructed around Romans 7:24–25, the catechism’s first question addresses salvation as beginning with God’s providence during our physical life and continuing into our assurance of eternal life. The question of what happens at bodily death is, therefore, framed by faith in God’s enduring grace. Compare that to the otherworldly and retributive explanations of the afterlife in the *Second Helvetic Confession* (5.237), the *Westminster Confession* (6.177), or the *Larger Catechism* (7.197). There is nothing inconsistent between these explanations of the afterlife—just different sacred sentiments.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 270–271.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 278.



Teaching Today's Question

The theory of afterlife with which your participants might be most familiar—that at death one's personal immortal soul travels to an eternal realm as a consequence of one's life—is never actually expressed in the Bible. Some passages support separate aspects of it, but many, many more passages offer alternative theories. That might feel uncomfortable to you and your participants, but keep in mind that all those biblical images are faithful attempts to understand God's love, justice, and purpose for us, across thousands of years and diverse cultures. The goal of this session is not to convince your participants of a single, clear answer to this deepest of human questions; the Bible does not present a single, clear answer for you to teach. Rather, through the patchwork of ideas, emphasize to your participants this central hope of our faith: In Christ death has been conquered!

Also, be aware that some of your participants may be dealing with grief. Be sensitive to any loss by pointing out the consistent message of all the biblical writers and cultures: Life does not end with this world. As well, be very sensitive if someone raises the topic of suicide. Assure your group that it is perfectly normal to feel depressed sometimes, but God is always there. If you have any suspicion that a young person is considering suicide, tell your educator or pastor as soon as possible.



Enter

Option A: If-Then Sides

Designate one side of your meeting space as “agree” and designate the other side as “disagree.” Explain to your participants that you will read a number of statements to them. Ask the participants to show whether they agree with each statement by moving to the appropriate area of the room. Read the following statements one at a time to the group, giving time after each statement for the participants to respond by moving:

- If you came home after curfew, then your parents would ground you.
- If you aced your next math test, then your teacher would be surprised.
- If you stay up all night, then you can function just fine.
- If you are baptized, then you are guaranteed to go to heaven.
- If you listen to your coach or music teacher or drama director, then you will get better.
- If your best friend told a secret you shared, then you would not forgive him or her for a while.
- If your brother or sister took something of yours, then you would take something of his or hers.
- If you go to church every week, then you are more likely to go to heaven.
- If you break the speed limit a lot, then you will eventually get a ticket.
- If someone gave you paper and a pencil, then you could draw a good self-portrait.
- If you live an awesome life, but don’t believe in Jesus, then you will not go to heaven.
- If you serve Jesus, then you are guaranteed to go to heaven.

Option B: Afterlife Matchup

- Copy of “Afterlife Pictures” (Web Resource 1a) and “Afterlife Words” (Web Resource 1b) for every 4 or 5 participants, scissors, poster board for every 4 or 5 participants, glue sticks

As participants arrive, divide them into small groups with four or five people in each group. If you have fewer than five people, do the activity as one group. Give each small group a copy of “Afterlife Pictures” (Web Resource 1a), a copy of “Afterlife Words” (Web Resource 1b), and a piece of poster board. Ask each group to match a word from “Afterlife Words” (Web Resource 1b) to each of the images found on “Afterlife Pictures” (Web Resource 1a), explaining that there are no right or wrong answers. Have the groups glue their paired words and images onto the poster board and display the poster board in your meeting space. Give the groups an opportunity to share their poster boards with the rest of the participants.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Newsprint, marker, candle, matches, recording of contemplative music, music player

Before participants arrive, write *What happens when you die?* on a sheet of newsprint and post the newsprint in a prominent location. Place the candle in the center of the meeting space.

Gather the participants in a circle around the candle. Light the candle to focus the group's attention as you begin to contemplate and wrestle with the question for this session: *What happens when you die?* Call the participants' attention to the session question on the newsprint, and let them know that it was initially asked by a Presbyterian young person who was wondering about heaven and hell. Invite group members to contemplate the question while you play the contemplative music. After a couple of minutes, invite the participants to share their reflections while discussing the session question and the following questions:

- Why might someone ask this question?
- Do you believe that there is life after death? Why or why not?
- What is one specific question you have about the afterlife?
- Do the good or bad moments of life make you more hopeful for life after death? Why or why not?

Opening Prayer


God, grant that while I work for the maintenance of this life, and care for the things which pertain to food and clothing, I may raise my mind above them to the blessed and heavenly life that you have promised to your children. Amen.⁷

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Heavenly Banquet

- Bibles, tables, plates, napkins, silverware, chocolate fondue set or chocolate fountain, fondue chocolate, bowls, fruit and other foods to dip in chocolate

Before participants arrive, set up the fondue set or chocolate fountain and melt the chocolate according to the instructions that come with the chocolate. Prepare and put out the various items for dipping in chocolate. Set the tables with plates, napkins, and silverware. Consider doing this activity in another meeting space, so it will not distract participants during Enter.

-  Be sure to check with youth and parents about any possible food allergies—especially when using nuts or products that could have been exposed to nuts during packaging.

7. Cited in John H. Leith, ed., *The Christian Life/John Calvin* (Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1984), p. 78, alt.

Introduce your group to this session's question: What happens when you die? Ask a few participants to respond to the question by sharing a short answer or images that arise when they think about the question. Make sure each participant has a Bible, and have a volunteer read Matthew 22:1–2 while everyone else follows along. Explain that Jesus often used stories and images to explain important things, such as spiritual truths. This parable says much more, but the banquet image is a great way to consider the afterlife. Explore the following questions together:



- How might heaven be like a banquet?
- If heaven is like a banquet, what is hell like?
- What are some other images that might help us think about the afterlife?

Invite someone to read the opening prayer, and let the young people dig into their banquet! While everyone is eating, continue the conversation about images of the afterlife, using the following questions:



- Many people imagine heaven as up and hell as down. Where do you think that image developed? (*Before people knew that the earth was round, they thought the sky was God's home, and below the earth was as far as one could get away from God.*)
 - How does the up-down imagery help or hinder your thinking about the afterlife?
 - If the up-down image is not a physical description, where are heaven and hell?
 - Many Christians imagine some part of the afterlife as including judgment. Where do you think that image developed? (*The Hebrew exile caused Jews to think that their oppressors deserved punishment and that they deserved some vindication. If those things did not happen in this life, then God, being just, must be saving them for the afterlife.*)
 - How does the punishment-blessing imagery help or hinder your thinking about the afterlife?
 - Do you believe that the punishment-blessing imagery is real or metaphorical? Why?
 - How would it affect your perception of the afterlife if the punishment-blessing imagery lasted for a specific time or eternally?

Pray the opening prayer.




Explore

Option A: What's Next?


- Bible, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008, PG-13), movie-viewing equipment, copy of the *Book of Confessions* or "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1c) for each participant

Preview the following clip from *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*: 00:20–2:32.

Explain to your group that *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is about Benjamin, who is born as a very old man and grows physically younger as he ages, and Daisy, who is born at about the same time and ages normally. Tell the group that the clip is a scene in which a very old Daisy begins to tell her daughter about Benjamin. Watch the clip together and then explore the following questions:

-  Why do people want to know what's next?
- Do you think young or old people care more about what's next? Why?
- Do you think theists (people who believe in God) or atheists (people who do not believe in God) care more about what's next? Why?
- Skeptics say that heaven is wishful thinking about continuing our own life or about continuing our friends' and family members' lives (like the clockmaker in the movie). How would you respond to them?

Give each person a copy of the *Book of Confessions* or a copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1c). Invite a volunteer to read this session's Faith Statement, the first question and answer from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, out loud to the group. Then ask another volunteer to read Romans 8:36–39 out loud to the group and explore the following questions together:

-  What does the Faith Statement say about what's now?
- What does the Faith Statement say about what's next?
- How does the Faith Statement explain the connection between what's now and what's next?
- Do you think of the afterlife as a new beginning, as a different stage of life, as a continuation of life, or in some other way?

Option B: Short Skits

- Bibles

Divide the participants into four equal groups. (Adapt this activity according to your group size. If you have fewer than six participants, do this activity as a whole group and assign one of the themes to the group. If you have more than

six and fewer than twelve participants, divide the participants into small groups of three or four people and assign each group one of the themes.) Make sure each group has a Bible, and assign each group one of the following sets of information:

- Group 1—Neutral afterlife; Psalm 89:48 and Ecclesiastes 9:10
- Group 2—Resurrection; Daniel 12:1–3
- Group 3—Heaven and hell; Matthew 25:31–46
- Group 4—Kingdom of God; John 4:10–14 and Matthew 13:31–32

Ask each small group to create a short skit about what the assigned Scripture passage says about the afterlife. Consider allowing the groups to use materials around the meeting space and church building as props and assigning each group a genre, such as science fiction, western, underwater, Shakespeare, opera, cooking show, or surfer. After a few minutes, give the small groups an opportunity to share their dramas with the rest of the participants. Encourage the youth to respond to each presentation by asking questions for clarification or follow-up and challenging or praising the message. Explore the following questions:



- Do you imagine the afterlife as just life after death, as most of the Hebrew Bible assumes; with consequences, as most of the New Testament assumes; or some other idea?
- Why is it important to Christianity to have life after death?
- Why is it important to some Christians that God judge us after death?



Express

Option A: Twitter Your Faith



Copy of the *Book of Confessions* or “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1c) for each participant, copy of “Twitter Your Faith” (Web Resource 1d) or a blank sheet of paper for each participant, pens, *optional*: cell phones

Give each person a copy of the *Book of Confessions* or a copy of “Session 1 Faith Statement” (Web Resource 1c). (Participants may already have a copy from Option A of Explore.) Invite a volunteer to read this session’s Faith Statement, the first question and answer from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, out loud to the group. Explain that this statement of faith comes from the *Heidelberg Catechism*, one of many confessions that attempt to express and explain Christian belief. Tell the students that confessions, creeds, and faith statements are ways that Christians self-differentiate, very much like online profiles. Challenge the group to pay attention to what this session’s Faith Statement would tell a non-Christian about Christian faith in the afterlife. Explore the following questions:



- How well would the first question and answer from the *Heidelberg Catechism* serve as a profile for Christian belief about the afterlife?
- What else would you add? What would you take away?
- Do you agree with the Faith Statement enough to put it on your online profile? Why or why not?

Make sure everyone in your group knows what Twitter is: a Web-based social-networking tool that allows users to update friends about their real-time status. Twitter updates can be up to 140 characters, including spaces and punctuation. Challenge the young people to “Twitter their faith” by writing their own faith statements about the afterlife, in 140 characters or less in one of the following ways:

- Have them send their faith statements to your cell phone via text message. Keep the statements on your phone, and send each person’s statement back to him or her via text message later in the week.
- Give each person a copy of “Twitter Your Faith” (Web Resource 1d) or a blank sheet of paper and a pen.

Option B: Message Bracelets



Two blank white rubber wristbands for each participant, various colored permanent markers

Give each participant two white rubber wristbands and make permanent markers available. Have the participants decorate their two bracelets with words and symbols they associate with what they’ve learned about Christianity’s understanding of the afterlife. One bracelet is to keep, the other to give away. Encourage the youth to think creatively about whether the two bracelets need to be identical. After a few minutes, give each participant an opportunity to share his or her bracelets with the rest of the group. Explore the following questions together:

- What sort of message do you want to see when you look down at your bracelet? Why?
- How will it feel to be reminded about our understanding of the afterlife through the day?
- What message do you want someone else to see?



Exit

Praying Together

Gather the participants in a circle. Give each person an opportunity to share one thing that he or she learned during the session. Then ask each person to share a prayer request with the person on his or her left. Pray the closing prayer, which includes a time for each person to share the prayer request of the person on his or her right.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Closing Prayer

God of all people, who calls us to be Christ's hands and feet in the world, send us into the world to spread your love to everyone we meet. We pray especially this day for . . . (Give each participant an opportunity to share the prayer request of the person on his or her right.) For all of these things and for the things that remain silent in our hearts, we pray in Christ's name. Amen.

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Web Connections

Send youth to the following Web sites to research what other religions and denominations believe about the afterlife:

- religionfacts.com/big_religion_chart.htm
- religionfacts.com/christianity/beliefs/afterlife.htm

Film Connections

Have a movie night for youth and their parents to watch *What Dreams May Come* (1998, PG-13) together. Afterward, discuss the film using the questions found on "Film Questions: *What Dreams May Come*" (Web Resource 1e) with the group. Be sure to provide comfortable seating and plenty of popcorn! If it isn't possible to schedule a movie night in the near future, e-mail "Film Questions: *What Dreams May Come*" (Web Resource 1e) to the participants and their parents or caregivers and encourage them to watch the film at home together.

Worship and Congregational Connections

If your participants created faith statements in Express, Option A, consult with your pastor and worship committee about using the faith statements in worship. Perhaps they could be used in a litany, as an affirmation of faith, or as inspiration for a sermon. Also, consider publishing the faith statements in your congregation's newsletter or on your congregation's Web site.

Sociology of Religion Project

Organize the group to conduct a survey to study the sociology of religion. (Sociology of religion is the study of the relationship between society and religion. It is not concerned with the truth of religious beliefs. Rather, it studies how religious beliefs and practices affect people and how people shape religion.) Work together to create a survey with ten to fifteen multiple-choice questions about the afterlife. Have a volunteer type the survey and e-mail it to the rest of the participants. Be sure to have a place on the survey that asks for demographic information. Before the survey begins, have the participants make hypotheses about the data. Ask: What patterns will emerge? Which demographic group will believe what? Have the participants survey as many people as possible, paying attention to the balance of the demographics they are looking for. (Consider also using an online survey service such as surveymonkey.com.)

After a few weeks, plan a gathering to evaluate the survey results. Work together to tally the surveys and review the results together. How do the results compare to the hypotheses created at the beginning of the project? Compare the group's findings with national data that can be found at pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=380. What do your findings and the national data tell you about people's religious beliefs? Where do your group's beliefs fit into the larger patterns?