

What Happens When I Die...

Personal Study Guide

Reading Plan Introduction

As we take a deeper look into some of the questions asked last summer regarding what happens when we die, it's important to understand how those questions (and their answers) are woven into the broader narrative of God's restorative and redemptive plan for all creation. With that in mind, our reading plans over the next few weeks will prayerfully broaden our understanding of judgment, heaven, hell, and other topics by anchoring our hope that God's Kingdom will reunite heaven and earth through Jesus.

Week #1 (Week of April 23rd)

This week's study was developed by The Bible Project and can also be found at: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/heaven-and-earth/>.

Watch the [Heaven and Earth video](#) from The Bible Project and answer the questions below.

1. The garden of Eden was the first place where God's space and humanity's space were one. Read **Genesis 3** and consider how these two spaces were driven apart.
2. God wants to live with his people, so he made a place (tabernacle/temple) and a practice (animal sacrifice) for humans to be forgiven so that God's space and humanity's space could once again overlap. Explore these ideas as you read **Psalms 65:1-4** and **Leviticus 4:34-35**.

3. With all the above in mind, compare/contrast any significant details you notice about Jesus' dwelling, or "tabernacling," on Earth (see **John 1:14**) and Jesus being called the Lamb of God (see **John 1:29** and **Revelation 5:1-12**).
4. **Revelation 21** tells us that one day God's space and humanity's space will completely overlap. As you read Revelation 21, how does the author describe the tabernacle and the Lamb?

Week #2 (Week of April 30)

This week's study was developed by The Bible Project and can also be found at: <https://bibleproject.com/downloads/archive>.

Read the devotional and answer the questions below.

Jesus' Favorite Topic

Jesus was a prophet, and his favorite topic was heaven and earth uniting. He used the phrase "the kingdom of God" to refer to this reality. Just imagine you lived in Jesus' time. Word has spread that he is passing through your village, so you rush into town with everyone else. This is your one chance to hear him speak—your whole community's one chance. What does he say? Knowing he may not visit your town again, what's the one message he prioritizes above everything else? "The kingdom of God has arrived." Today, Jesus is most often associated with his moral teachings, such as his command to love others as you love yourself,

but that reputation is not actually a reflection of the message he valued most. To his contemporaries, Jesus was not viewed primarily as a moral teacher, but as a new prophet announcing that the long dormant promises of prophets like Isaiah were finally coming to pass. Heaven was aggressively invading earth, just as the prophets predicted—and Jesus presented himself as the one making it happen. Once your radar is alerted to Jesus' core concern for the arrival of God's kingdom, you can't un-see it. It's everywhere. For instance, consider the Lord's Prayer. Jesus teaches his disciples to ask God to bring his kingdom to earth before they ask for anything else. Heaven invading earth was Jesus' top priority, and he wanted it to be the disciples' too. What did it mean that the kingdom of God had arrived? Clearly, God had not thoroughly renewed all of creation. Yet, somehow, Jesus signaled a new arrival of God's domain overcoming and settling into our domain. In Jesus, God began a full-throttle invasion of our domain. No longer was God's domain limited to the inner sanctum of the temple or short, dream-like visits to key Israelites. The general was on-site, and he was recruiting an army. This army was going to break down the gates of she'ol. Victory was unavoidable. Heaven and earth were going to unite.

An Unlikely Kingdom

What is the kingdom of heaven like? This invading kingdom—also called “the kingdom of heaven”—was, and

is, fundamentally different from human kingdoms. Jesus repeatedly pointed to the Old Testament, reminding his listeners that Israel was the most successful when they were most dependent on God and least dependent on their own military, wit, or resources. Think of God's work through Abraham, the wandering and long-childless patriarch; through Gideon, a cowardly, army-less warrior; and through David, a no-name shepherd boy. Jesus presented himself as the king the prophets had hoped for—the king bringing divine rule to Israel. But he would not bring his rule through military might or coercive power. Rather, Jesus taught that the most powerful members of his kingdom were the slaves and the rejects. God's kingdom is a strange one, where all of our normal ways of living and thinking are turned upside-down—or right-side up. That right-side-up reign of God exists fully in God's domain, and with the arrival of Jesus, it began moving into ours. Jesus taught his followers to pray every day that God's kingdom would advance farther into earth, that God's domain would reclaim more and more of humanity's domain.

The Present-Future Kingdom of God

An interesting puzzle that has exercised the imaginations of Bible readers for a long time is the diversity of the language Jesus used to talk about the kingdom of God. In many of his teachings, it's clear that Jesus believed God's heavenly reign was a clear and present reality. He said it had

“arrived” in himself, and that by following him and living by his teachings a person could “enter” or “see” or “seek” or even “receive” God’s kingdom. These phrases indicate that God’s heavenly reign is an earthly reality that can be experienced here and now. But Jesus also talks about the kingdom as if it hasn’t arrived yet—at least not completely. When he taught his disciples to pray, he said, “May your kingdom come,” implying that it was not present, but future. He talked about his future return after the resurrection as “the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.” So, which is it? Is the kingdom a present reality or a future hope? Is God’s heavenly rule something that has invaded earth, or is it an impending promise? It seems that Jesus’ answer was “yes and yes.” One minute Jesus portrays the kingdom as something you pray will come; then a few moments later he talks about the kingdom as something you can “seek” and “enter” in this moment by following him. Our stark either/or categories simply won’t help us in explaining Jesus’ vision of the heavenly kingdom. New Testament scholars use the word “inauguration” as a metaphor to help us understand what’s going on. In the ancient world, before telecommunications and Twitter, it took time for an entire empire to be notified that a new king was on the throne—and even longer for that king to personally visit each district. So, though a new king was technically an inaugurated ruler, it took a while for the

kingdom to fully experience his rule in person. A theologian named George Eldon Ladd used the handy phrase “already and not yet” to capture the kingdom’s dual present and future reality.

Questions to Answer

- Think about familiar parables we didn’t touch on in this session. Which stories make more sense now that you see Jesus’ main teaching as an announcement of God’s kingdom?
- How are realities of the kingdom true or not true in your life?
- How has your experience with Jesus been a taste of heaven and earth uniting?
- What does it mean to you that Jesus is God’s temple?

Week #3 (Week of May 7)

This study was developed by The Bible Project and can also be found at: <https://bibleproject.com/downloads/archive>.

Read the devotional and answer the questions below:

Do We Go to Heaven When We Die?

We’ve established that the focus of the biblical story is the union, split and future reunion of God’s domain and our domain. We know heaven and earth aren’t simply separate living quarters, but they are representations of spaces

where God rules and defines good and evil and where humans have staked out their own realm and define good and evil for themselves. But, so far, our dive into this story hasn't addressed one of our most common and pressing questions: What happens after we die? Don't followers of Jesus "go to heaven?" Isn't going to heaven one of the main things a Christian should hope for? Get ready for the answer.

There is not even one passage in the Bible that talks about "going to heaven" after you die. The phrase "go to heaven" doesn't appear anywhere in the Old or New Testaments in relation to death. Not once. This doesn't mean the Bible has nothing to say about what happens to God's people after they die. It just means that "going to heaven" isn't the way biblical authors thought about it. Let's look at the New Testament passages that speak to what Jesus' followers will experience after they die. They all use the same phrase: Our hope is about being "with Jesus." (LUKE 23:42-43) Jesus spoke to the repentant criminal being crucified next to him, saying, "Today you'll be with me in paradise. Paul discussed his possible execution in a Roman prison, and he said death wouldn't be so bad. It would make the Philippians sad, but he would get to be "with Christ" (Philippians 1:21-24). Paul talked about the true hope that drives Christian faithfulness, even

in the face of death. The result of death, he said, was being “with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6–9).

Both Jesus and Paul believed that not even death could separate people from God’s love, and that Jesus’ followers would be with him after death. However, Paul does not envision this disembodied mode of existence as permanent, or even desirable. In 2 Corinthians 5:2 (NIV), Paul wrote that in this world “we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling.” He’s referring here to a resurrected body believers will inherit when they are finally made like Jesus. For Paul, the end goal is not disembodied bliss in heaven, but rather a restored physical existence, which is a gift from heaven. But what about the interim period when our mortal bodies rot in the ground? Paul describes this interim experience as “falling asleep.” And he wasn’t alone in using sleep as a metaphor for death. It was common in Jewish culture. The phrase “lay down with my ancestors” was a common Old Testament way to describe death. The prophets described death as a form of sleep and the hope of future resurrection as “waking up.” Remember that these are poetic metaphors, so we shouldn’t analyze them for precise information about what we will experience after we die. Some people believe we’ll essentially be unconscious until the new creation is fully realized. Others expect to be with Jesus right away.

Whichever view you hold, the takeaway is clear: Death is not the end for followers of Jesus. Just as he went through death and came out the other side in a transformed physical existence, so also his people can hope for the same. Our ultimate hope is to inhabit reborn creation with the one who died was reborn on our behalf.

Questions to Answer

- Read Genesis 1–2, which describes the original heavens and earth. Then, read Revelation 21–22, which describes the reborn heavens and earth. Write down every image that appears in both accounts. What's the same? What's different?
- What questions do you have about what the new creation will be like? Does this future reality seem comforting? Strange? Exhilarating?
- How would you change if your hope was in the future reunification of heaven and earth?