

Q&A

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*“Are we judged twice, an initial one when we die and then the final judgment when Christ returns?”*

When a person dies -- when their soul parts from their body -- they enter into what is called the “intermediate” state. This is the state of the soul after its departure from the body and prior to the final resurrection (when the soul and body will be reunited) at the second coming of Christ. During this intermediate state a person is conscious and is not asleep or unconscious (as some people falsely teach).

The condition of the person in this intermediate state is a result of what might be called the first judgment. Here a person experiences a foretaste of eternity, either in the blessedness of the saints or in the grief of the wicked. But as it is prior to the final resurrection they do not yet experience the full reality of the Kingdom of God, whether of Heaven or Hell. That experience of the reality of the Kingdom as whole persons (i.e. in glorified bodies) comes following the final judgment.

Science can describe the medical and physical reality of death: for example, that the heart quits beating, circulation ends, oxygen does not go to the brain, etc. But the spiritual reality of death and what follows cannot be described by science because science, a method for exploring and describing the material world, does not have the proper tools to examine spiritual realities. This is not a criticism of science, just a recognition of its limits.

The scriptures, when speaking about death and the judgement, use metaphors and images drawn from the present world to describe these spiritual realities. This is because, quite simply, in our present life in this world most of us are unable to understand spiritually the realities of the Kingdom of God. God, the uncreated One, cannot be explained or described adequately with language drawn from the material, created world. And as long as we have what St Paul terms a fleshly or sensuous mind (Col. 2.18) we will not be able to discern spiritual realities. But God wishes to reach out to us, to communicate to us, and to draw us into the Divine life. Therefore He uses the language of this world -- full of images and metaphors drawn from this world -- to slowly raise us up from a sensual/fleshly level of existence to a spiritual level of existence. This is not unlike (to use just such a metaphor) a parent talking simply to a child in language they can grasp about a complex subject so that, eventually, their mind will mature and they will be able to “get it.”

Now here is what we must realize if we wish to have a more spiritual and less sensual understanding of death and the judgment: all of the words and metaphors and images that are used by the scriptures to describe death and the judgement -- fire, pain, a pit; or light, bliss, a garden -- are attempts to put into words the spiritual experience of God. In this life, in this world, we can evade God, ignore Him, pretend like He isn't real, mock Him, etc. But after death this will not be possible. After death everyone will experience God because this is what the Kingdom of God *is*: when God will be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15.28). For the righteous this experience beyond words will be what we can best describe as light, joy, peace, bliss, etc. For

the wicked this experience beyond words will be what we can best describe as fire, pain, agony, suffering, etc. The point is, the judgment is how we will experience God based on what we have become in this life.

Or, as one modern Orthodox writer has stated it, “You can’t go to Heaven; you have to become Heaven.”