

# What Happens After Death?



Basics of  
the Faith

S E R I E S

Richard D. Phillips



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## **Basics of the Faith**

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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The material presented here was originally published in *These Last Days: A Christian View of History*, edited by Richard D. Phillips and Gabriel N. E. Fluhrer (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011, p. 125–148). It has been revised for this booklet.

ISBN: 978-1-59638-404-0 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-823-9 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-59638-824-6 (Mobi)

*Page design by Tobias Design*

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Phillips, Richard D. (Richard Davis), 1960-  
What happens after death? / Richard D. Phillips.  
pages cm. -- (Basics of the faith)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59638-404-0 (pbk.)

1. Death--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Future life--Christianity.

I. Title.

BT825.P48 2013

236'.1--dc23

2012049748

## THE FINAL JUDGMENT

We should note, however, that *everyone* is going to be resurrected, not just believers. Unbelievers also will be resurrected to an eternal existence. For believers, this existence will be eternal life, but for unbelievers, resurrection is to eternal death.

The resurrection of all persons will occur immediately after Christ's second coming. Immediately after this resurrection comes the final judgment. Passages like Matthew 25:31 teach this clearly: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations" (see also John 5:28 and Acts 24:15).

What happens to believers after their bodies are raised and rejoined to their souls? The Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 38, answers, "At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and be perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity." At the resurrection, which takes place at the return of Christ, all who are in him will have their resurrected bodies united to their souls, subsequently to be glorified. Paul explores this in 1 Corinthians 15:42–46:

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is 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. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written,

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“The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual.

Our selfsame bodies will be raised and none other. Some of you have lost children or spouses. As a pastor, I have stood with parents over the bodies of dead children, with wives next to the body of their husbands and husbands with wives. In all such griefs, Christians will not “get over” their loss until the resurrection day, when those same beloved bodies are raised in glory and rejoined to the holy souls of our redeemed friends. I often have reminded grieving Christians over the bodies of loved ones who have died: “Those hands will hold your hands again! That dear voice will be heard again! This body in Christ will not be defeated but will have the victory in his resurrection! Death will not prevail, even over this mortal flesh!” In the great day of Christ’s glorious coming, “the mortal [will put] on immortality” (1 Cor. 15:54). What a hope Christians have in the resurrection of the body!

After our bodies are raised, believers will also be acknowledged by Christ. Matthew 25:34 teaches: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’” Isn’t this wonderful? Jesus will acknowledge us as belonging to him, as having a right to enter his kingdom and his glory. Notice as well that he brings us to himself—“Come, you who are blessed by my Father.” Christ is himself, together with the glory of the Father, the chief glory and blessing we receive at his return.

Having been acknowledged as his own, believers will also be acquitted by Christ. This is a controversial subject these days, when one hears about “a future justification according to works.” Advocates of a teaching known as the New Perspective on Paul (and others) teach that while we are justified by faith now, what really determines whether we “make it” in the end will be our works of obedience. They point to passages like Matthew 25 in an attempt to argue this view. But notice that when Jesus sits on his throne and separates the just and the unjust, they are already distinguished as “sheep and goats.” The “sheep” do not appear in order to be judged with the “goats” but are separated prior to the final judgment.

Believers appear at the final judgment as those already fully justified. Yes, they must be acquitted, but their acquittal is no more in doubt than the distinction between their status as sheep and the status of the unjust as goats. Moreover, we should realize that believers appear at the final judgment already having entered into the reward of justification and already having entered into glorification in the form of glorified resurrected bodies. This is why Paul refers to Christ’s coming as “our blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). Christians do not learn on the final day whether or not they will be justified based on their performance. Instead, the justification we have received by faith alone in this life is consummated in our resurrection and confirmed by our acceptance into Christ’s glory.

Moreover, having been acknowledged and acquitted by Christ, believers will experience the eternal enjoyment of God. John’s vision in Revelation 21:3–5 sums up what this will mean for all who belong to Christ:

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And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

And he who was seated on the throne said, "Behold, I am making all things new."

For believers, the future resurrection involves the raising and glorifying of our bodies as they are reunited with our souls, the open acknowledgment that we belong to Christ, our full and final acquittal in Christ, and our being brought into the eternal enjoyment of God. How much we have to look forward to after death and in the return of Jesus. No wonder David rejoiced: "You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever" (Ps. 23:5–6).

We should note a few more points about the final judgment. No one knows the day, but God has appointed it. "God has appointed a day," says the Westminster Confession, 33.1, "wherein he will judge the world in righteousness, by Jesus Christ, to whom all power and judgment is given of the Father." God will judge the earth in the person of the God-man, in the person of his Son, who is best fitted to render perfect judgment on mankind (see Acts 17:31 and John 5:27). The final judgment is, therefore, a fixed, appointed day, the timing of which is known only to God (Matt. 24:36).

“Pastor Phillips addresses contemporary issues while extending comfort. . . . This is a thoroughly biblical tool for the thorny work of leading congregants through the dying process or encouraging those left behind.”

■ **Howard A. Eyrich**, Briarwood Presbyterian Church

**D**eath is real, and its reality hurts us. Yet our journey does not end when we breathe our last on earth. How do we as Christians come to grips with death? What can we expect afterward?

An army officer turned pastor, Richard Phillips is familiar with death and able to tackle this difficult topic with clarity and care. After describing the proper response to death modeled by Jesus and noted Christians, he provides a biblically faithful explanation of what we can expect in the actual experience of death, the final judgment, and our eternal state.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

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ISBN 978-1-59638-404-0

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