

What Happens When We Die?

Series: AfterLife

Brad Bailey – April 27, 2014

Intro:

Here's a question to get us started in hearing God this morning... **Where are you going?** —not for lunch... not in your career ... I mean the “BIG going.” What awaits you when your bodily life comes to an end?

Today...we're going to begin a **series entitled, “AfterLife”**... looking at what the prophets...and Jesus...and Paul have said about eternal life.

Last week we gathered around the events which **pierced through human history** like nothing else...the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

> What was the purpose? To **exalt** and **extend**... to open the way back into eternal life.

He was the “**first fruits**.”

When he defeated death... **he left the door open**.

That empty tomb was meant to be entered.

The **stone wasn't rolled away** so that **Jesus could come out**. In his resurrected body he entered without using doors. The stone was rolled away so that the various disciples and all who came....**could go in**.

So what has God made known about life beyond this dimension? Simply a place of rest? (A nap may sound good to some...but a really long nap may not sound all that exciting.) Are we issued halos and harps? Is such a future merely a matter of consolation... conjecture?

My hope for you ...is that you will be able to **realize heaven** with **greater confidence**...greater **clarity** of what that means...and not just in your head...but **in your heart**.

Death is the tragedy of our separation. Death may be natural for these bodies...they grow weary.... But it's not our truest ultimate nature. There is a dimension without entropy and separation.

And God has planted such an “eternity in our hearts” ...in our longings.

Ecclesiastes 3:11, 14 (NLT / GW)

He has planted eternity in the human heart, but even so, people cannot see the whole scope of God's work from beginning to end. ... whatever God does will last forever. Nothing can be added to it, and nothing can be taken away from it.

God planted something in you...placed it there... he placed eternity “in our hearts”...longings.

There are longings for life beyond our current conditions.

- We long for **relationships without the end** of separation.
- We long for **justice**...knowing there are **some things that are just wrong**...and at some level there is a very real right.
- We long for **significance that transcends the futility of aging and death**.
- We long for the **beauty we now only catch in part**.

As C.S. LEWIS DESCRIBES

“We do not want merely to see beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words—to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why we have peopled air and earth and water with gods and goddesses and nymphs and elves—that, though we cannot, yet these projections can, enjoy in themselves that beauty, grace, and power of which Nature is the image. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul; but it can't... Or not yet. For if we take the imagery of Scripture seriously... then we may surmise that both the ancient myths and the modern poetry, so false as history, may be very near the truth as prophecy. At present we are on the outside of the world, the wrong side of the door. We discern the freshness and purity of morning, but they do not make us fresh and pure. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumour that it will not always be so. Some day, God willing, we shall get in.” C.S. Lewis [1]

We have a longing for home...a home beyond this home.[2]

Naturally...apart from the light of God... any variety of ideas will arise about what the afterlife.. Through the ages...every cultures emerges with certain myths and ideas.

In our modern western culture, that which has stirred the most current interest are Near Death Experiences.

There has been a **growing amount of books** sharing near death experiences that included what individuals believe are encounters with heaven. [3]

- Back in 1992...huge bestseller...**Embraced by the Light - Betty Eadie**
- **90 Minutes in Heaven by Don Piper** (2004)
- **Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife** (2012) by Eben Alexander
- **The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven** (June 28, 2011) by Kevin Malarkey
- **Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back** by Todd Burpo
#1 NY Times bestseller...sold over 8 million copies...and became a feature film starring Greg Kinnear that was released last week.

What are we to make of these “*Travelogues of heaven?*”

I believe that most of them are **certainly very real experiences** of some kind...and they offer some very **inspiring aspects**...usually **changing the person’s life**.

However...I am **not inclined to believe these are necessarily encounters** with the **actual eternal realm**.

They tend to be notably consistent with the personal experience and beliefs of the individuals that have had them...with images that are generally so different they cannot line up with others.

What else could they be if not real?

Some propose that they are a **demonic deception**... noting that the Scriptures tell us of Satan being an angel of light. I don’t tend to see that kind of darker element in these.

I am more inclined to see the possibility of physiological dynamics. such as ...

At this point there are some **wildly complicated new explorations**... There is a growing amount of science seeking to understand these **experiences of consciousness that claims to continue beyond physical brain activity**. Some posit that it is simply various forms of brain activity **caused by hypoxia** (lack of oxygen to the brain) ...or **trauma-induced hallucinations** ...some that it points to some of the new **theories in physics** that believe there is a **dimension outside of time and space as**

we know it.... although these have been found to have some limitations in explaining all the experiences.

So there is a caution here against such **human visions** and **conjecture** beyond what God has revealed. While God calls us to be cautious in our conjecture, what he reveals is confidence and comfort in his promise.[3b]

But that is not what prompted this series... more than just the **need to pierce current ideas** and common imagination. There is something deeply personal.

- In just this past 9 months...three lives in this community passed on...Hugh...Tom...Alison Both of my parents passed on. And this week I took their ashes to the cemetery which is the place of memorial for my grandparents.
- Many here who have had grandparents pass on...parents pass on...and some children. There is no experience that is more personal.

Every time we lose a parent, we lose a part of our past.
Every time we lose a child, we lose a part of our future.

*> We need more than speculation and sentimentality ...we need Revelation
As I noted last week...I find in the Scriptures a voice that is outside humanity
This we find in God's Word...in revelation...in the resurrection of Christ..*

Jesus said to his disciples, "Don't be worried! ...There are many rooms in my Father's house. I wouldn't tell you this, unless it was true. I am going there to prepare a place for each of you. After I have done this, I will come back and take you with me. Then we will be together. - John 14:1-3 [CEV]

Jesus wants you to know that your **whole life can be redefined**...that **where you see a period** at the end of your life, it's **really a comma**.

What does God make known of what awaits us ?

The clearest truth of all...is that there is an **immediate state** and an **ultimate state**.

As Wayne Grudem says,

“Christians often talk about living with God ‘in heaven’ forever. But in fact the biblical teaching is richer than that: it tells us that there will be new heavens and a new earth— an entirely renewed creation— and we will live with God there. . . . There will also be a new kind of unification of heaven and earth. . . . There will be a joining of heaven and earth in this new creation.” [4]

Revelation 21:1-3 (GW)

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, because the first heaven and earth had disappeared... Then I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, ... I heard a loud voice from the throne say, “God lives with humans! God will make his home with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God.

There is an ultimate merging of the eternal heavenly realm that is beyond us...and the created world we inhabit. As to whether there remains some element that is distinct between a new heaven and earth... or they are fully united...I don't think we can know. **What is emphasized** is that **God will live with those who are there**. (He will finally live forever with those he created.)

The ultimate re-created heaven and earth... is the real focus of what our future will be.
But there is an intermediate state... we might call the “first heaven” or the “intermediate heaven.”

So the first thing we should realize is that...

If we are united with Christ,

1. The heaven that awaits me is a prelude to a fully resurrected and recreated eternal existence.

Randy Alcorn suggests “an analogy to illustrate the difference between the present Heaven and the eternal Heaven. Suppose you lived in a homeless shelter in Miami. One day you inherit a beautiful house, fully furnished, on a gorgeous hillside overlooking Santa Barbara, California. With the home comes a wonderful job doing something you’ve always wanted to do. Not only that, but you’ll also be near close family members who moved from Miami many years ago. On your flight to Santa Barbara, you’ll change planes in Dallas, where you’ll spend an afternoon. Some other family members, whom you haven’t seen in years, will meet you at the Dallas airport and board the plane with you to Santa Barbara. You look forward to seeing them. Now, when the Miami ticket agent asks you, “Where are you headed?” would you say “Dallas”? No. You would say Santa Barbara, because that’s your final destination. If you mentioned Dallas at all, you would only say, “I’m going to Santa Barbara by way of Dallas.”

When you talk to your friends in Miami about where you’re going to live, would you focus on Dallas? No. You might not even mention Dallas, even though you will be a Dallas-dweller for several hours. Even if you spent a week in Dallas, it wouldn’t be your focus. Dallas is just a stop along the way. Your true destination— your new permanent home— is Santa Barbara. Similarly, the Heaven we will go to when we die, the present Heaven, is a temporary dwelling place, a stop along the way to our final destination: the New Earth. [5]

The point is not to disregard the significance of what happens immediately after one dies who is united with Christ...but rather to realize that it is only the temporary state...and that the greater emphasis is on a more ultimate future.

It is vital to **break down our focus on an eternal future without bodies and activity in a way we can imagine. The ultimate eternal life is a new heaven and new earth that is re-created that unites God’s presence and all that is good...including activity that is truly full in it’s dignity and satisfaction. Far from eternal life disregarding the physical world...it affirms it by restoring it. We will look at that next week.**

Today... the point is to realize that what happens immediately after one dies who is united with Christ is a prelude.

If we are united with Christ,

2. The heaven that awaits me is prompt...without delay. We will never be separated from God.

One of the most natural questions regarding heaven is will I go directly there? If a resurrection of bodies is something that takes place in the future...what type of existence will I have?

there is a later resurrection? How are we to understand what awaits us and our loved ones immediately at death.

What about the idea of Purgatory?...

- Purgatory is the idea that since we are not yet perfected, we must go through a purging...in which we pay the consequences of our sins...and emerge pure. This is the belief traditionally held by Catholic tradition. [6]
- The assumption is that if heaven is a pure place...we must suffer temporal punishment for our sins...be "purged." It's a reasonable idea...we may all wonder how our imperfection can enter a realm of perfection?
- The analogy is given that if one steals something from a friend and goes to that friend seeking forgiveness, that friend might indeed forgive him. But, just as your human friend might expect you to return to him what was stolen, there may likewise be some act that you must do in cooperation with God's grace after confessing and forgiveness. The assumption is that "if after the Judgment, any imperfections, punishments and disordered attachments remain in you that you have not overcome in this life, you will be purified of them in the life to come. This purification is what Catholics call Purgatory.
- It is an idea that is found nowhere in Scripture, but rather is the result of other Catholic doctrine regarding salvation. While respecting the Catholic Church as a whole, we believe Scripture clearly teaches there is no need for purgatory in the future because purgatory is past. > In **Hebrews 1:3**, we are told that Christ "**brought about the purgation of sins.** (NEB) The verb "purge" is aorist tense = one action and, unrepeatable.

I join those who simply don't see a station of purgatory being reflected in the Scriptures not in a way that would seem possible to me.

What about the idea "SOUL SLEEP?"

Many believe in what could be referred to as "souls sleep" which is that at death, when the body dies, the soul is "rests" in some way that could be called sleep. We lie in a resting place waiting to be awakened...at the resurrection of our bodies in the future. [7]

It should be noted that many believe it is not really a "sleep" like we think of. For the soul does not "rest" like the body. And many note that time doesn't have the same meaning in eternity...so rather than implying what we may think of as a long sleep...it may be a timeless transition.

If you have read the Scriptures...it may sound like at least a familiar idea or term.

In ancient times, including the Old Testament... it was not an uncommon reflection of the limited light of early Jewish understanding...involving Sheol...later Greek, Hades...= abode of the souls of the dead. In the N.T. those who died in Christ are referred to as "asleep." The apostle Paul spoke of those "who are asleep."

However...most believe that Paul is simply using this as a euphemism...because in fact while the body had died...the soul had not...so one cannot be referred to as simply dead.

Only the body is put to rest, never the soul.

Many note the rather dramatic statement of Jesus to the thief who is crucified next to him...and calls on Jesus to show him mercy...to which Jesus says...

- "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise." Luke 23:43

Now some have noted that in the construction of that statement, the word “today” could grammatically be read as meaning. “Today” I tell you...not that today is the day of entering such paradise. It’s also notable that Jesus did not rise for 3 days...so he could not have meant that they would be in paradise that actual day.

That single statement isn’t what seems so clear...it is the consistent declarations.

- “I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death.” John 8:51
- “We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” 2 Corinthians 5:8
- Similarly Philip. 1:23... “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”

...This is not a death wish...it reflects a fulfilled life...who rightly left death in the hands of God.

- Peter even describes a grand welcome.“...and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” 2 Peter 1:11

So I believe if we are united with Christ....we are united IN the presence of God.

Which leads to third point....

If we are united with Christ,

3. The heaven that awaits me is a place

As Jesus described in assuring those who follow him, he has gone to “**prepare a PLACE**.”

While far more is said about the nature of a future heaven...new heaven and earth...the present heaven that awaits us is a place at least in some meaningful way. Perhaps not a place in the same physical form we know. [8]

Consider the **basic fact** that God **created the heavens**...even as he will recreate them. **Creation has form.**

- How does the Lord’s prayer begin? “**Our Father in Heaven!**”
- When Stephen, a disciple of Christ is stoned for his faith, (Acts 7) **He saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God**.
- ...Jesus ascended in a resurrected body to a place.

While we **can’t presume to know the substance** of the heavenly realm that awaits, we can see it as a place of form and space; likely existing independently of the created universe we now see.

Some physicists suggest that such a realm may be a dimension different in space and time that is not a place far away but rather a dimension that is perpendicular to this temporal dimension. [9]

...and what of this place?

If we are united with Christ,

4. The heaven that awaits me bears the central source of all pleasure

As Jesus described to the thief...we will be in “paradise”.

Same word used by Paul when he had a spiritual vision of heaven. (2 Cor. 2:4)

Strangely enough, many of us have a hard time imagining heaven as even preferable...let alone paradise, because we imagine being without the many elements of our earthly life from which we find pleasure. We do well to listen to....

- Psalmist in 16:11 “You will fill me with joy in your presence with eternal pleasure at your right hand.” **He will fill us with joy**...we will discover eternal pleasure.

- Paul too, though fully committed to the life God gave him, said to be with the Lord is “far better”.
- If the richest pleasures of earth were created by God, how much more pleasure awaits us in heaven?
- If there is pleasure in the love we can experience now with those made in God’s image...how much more the love experienced by those completed in his image...and with God the ultimate source of all love. Indeed what awaits will be paradise!

...which leads to final point:

If we are united with Christ,

5. The heaven that awaits me maintains some form of recognizable personal identity.

Some today promote the idea of **uniting with an impersonal cosmic energy**...we will be like a **drop of water** losing its individual distinctiveness as it **returns to the grand ocean** from which it came.

What makes such an idea initially appealing is that by denying a personal creator...we deny any personal responsibility in life...we answer to no one.

But to deny a personal creator is to deny any personal nature to life.

The truth is, real relationship and recognition are clearly a part of our eternal life because they are a real part of God.

Relationship exists eternally in the relationship of **God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**.

And so it will be into eternity....

1 Corinthians 13:12.

“Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”

As C.S. Lewis describes,

“Your soul has a curious shape because it is a hollow made to fit a particular swelling in the infinite contours of the divine substance, or a key to unlock one of the doors in the house with many mansions. For it is not humanity in the abstract that is to be saved, but you - you, the individual reader...Blessed and fortunate creature, your eyes shall behold Him and not another's. Your place in Heaven will seem to be made for you and you alone, because you were made for it.” [10]

We were created to fit... in a way we never may have felt we fit in this world.

Conclusion: What happens when we die? What’s up when we go down?

If we are united with Christ, then we are joined in God’s presence....

There is another dimension that awaits... and it welcomes a “you”...not defined by the condition of your current body.

It is meant for you... more fully known than you can even imagine

Not some form of absorption - like a drop into the eternal ocean of being.

Not simply some contribution to human progress - to ongoing progress of humanity.

Not sentimental immortality-simply living in the hearts of those we love.

Closing story [the Fork]...

There was a woman who had been diagnosed with cancer and had been given three months to live. Her doctor told her to start making preparations to die -- something we all should be doing all of the time.

So she contacted her pastor and had him come to her house to discuss certain aspects of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at the service, what scriptures she would like read, and what she wanted to be wearing.

The woman also told her pastor that she wanted to be buried with her favorite Bible. Everything was in order and the pastor was preparing to leave when the woman suddenly remembered something very important to her. "There's one more thing," she said excitedly.

"What's that?" came the pastor's reply.

"This is very important." The woman continued, "I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand."

The pastor stood looking at the woman not knowing quite what to say.

"That shocks you, doesn't it?" the woman asked.

Well, to be honest, I'm puzzled by the request," said the pastor.

The woman explained. "In all my years of attending church socials and functions where food was involved, and let's be honest, food is an important part of any church event, spiritual or otherwise, my favorite part was when whoever was clearing away the dishes of the main course would lean over and say 'you can keep your fork.' It was my favorite part because I knew that something better was coming. When they told me to keep my fork, I knew that something great was about to be given to me. It wasn't Jell-O or pudding. It was cake or pie - something with substance. So I just want people to see me there in that casket with a fork in my hand and I want them to wonder, 'What's with the fork?' Then I want you to tell them, 'Something better is coming, so keep your fork too.'"

The pastor's eyes were welled up with tears of joy as he hugged the woman good-bye. He knew this would be one of the last times he would see her before her death. But he also knew that that woman had a better grasp of heaven than he did. She KNEW that something better was coming.

At the funeral people were walking by the woman's casket and they saw the pretty dress she was wearing and her favorite Bible and the fork placed in her right hand. Over and over the pastor heard the question, "What's with the fork?"

And over and over he smiled. During his message, the pastor told the people of the conversation he had with the woman shortly before she died. He also told them about the fork and about what it symbolized to her. The pastor told the people how he could not stop thinking about the fork and told them that they probably would not be able to stop thinking about it either. He was right.

So the next time you reach down for your fork, let it remind you oh so gently -- that there is something better coming

Notes:

1. From "The Weight of Glory," p. 16-17

2. Regarding the longings that reflect "eternity in our hearts"...consider also...

Larry Crabb—"Ever since God expelled Adam and Eve from the garden, we have lived in an unnatural environment, a world in which we were not designed to live. We were built to enjoy a garden without weeds, relationships without friction, fellowship without distance. But something is

wrong, and we know it, both within our world and within ourselves. Deep inside we sense we're out of the nest, always ending the day in a motel room, never at home."

Malcom Muggeridge—"For me there has always been—and I count it the greatest of all blessings—a window never finally blacked out, a light never finally extinguished. I had a sense, sometimes enormously vivid, that I was a stranger in a strange land; a visitor, not a native, a displaced person. The feeling, I was surprised to find, gave me a great sense of satisfaction, almost of ecstasy. The only ultimate disaster that can befall us, I have come to realize, is to feel ourselves at home here on earth. As long as we are aliens, we cannot forget our true homeland."

3. Some of the popular books about dying and experiencing the afterlife.

90 Minutes in Heaven by Don Piper (2004)

Don Piper, a Baptist preacher, together with Cecil Murphey, details the 90 minutes following a car accident in which he is pronounced dead at the scene. In this true story, Piper recalls hearing beautiful music, seeing people who made an impact in his life, and experiencing an incredible sense of peace. He also recalls the prayer that "brought him back."

Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife (2012) by Eben Alexander
<http://www.amazon.com/Proof-Heaven-Neurosurgeons-Journey-Afterlife/dp/1451695195>

A neurosurgeon's first-person account of his near-death experience after an E. coli meningitis-related seizure and seven-day coma will reassure afterlife believers, though it is unlikely to convince skeptics. Alexander's credentials are impressive: medical school at Duke and 15 years at Harvard-affiliated hospitals. Before he underwent his journey, he could not reconcile his knowledge of neuroscience with any belief in heaven, God, or the soul. Today Alexander is a doctor who believes that true health can be achieved only when we realize that God and the soul are real and that death is not the end of personal existence but only a transition.

The Boy Who Came Back from Heaven (June 28, 2011) by Kevin Malarkey

In 2004, Kevin Malarkey and his six-year-old son, Alex, suffered an horrific car accident. The impact from the crash paralyzed Alex—and medically speaking, it was unlikely that he could survive. Alex awoke from a coma with an incredible story to share. Of events at the accident scene and in the hospital while he was unconscious. Of the angels that took him through the gates of heaven itself. Of the unearthly music that sounded just terrible to a six-year-old. And, most amazing of all . . . Of meeting and talking to Jesus.

Heaven is for Real: A Little Boy's Astounding Story of His Trip to Heaven and Back
 by Todd Burpo

3b. The Scriptures suggest that the idea of really knowing what God has in store is limited . . . which challenges the tone of many who following a near death experience claim to be presenters of the details of heaven. Consider:

1 Corinthians 2:9

As it is written "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

1 John 3:2

"Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is."

4. Wayne A. Grudem - Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine

5. Alcorn, Randy (2011-12-08). Heaven (Alcorn, Randy) (Kindle Locations 967-979). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.

6. The analogy regarding purgatory is from The Integrated Catholic Life

<http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2012/09/deacon-bickerstaff-four-last-things-heaven-and-hell/>

For more regarding purgatory, Catholic Answers” provides a good and fair presentation of the Catholic belief at - <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/purgatory>

And also: <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2011/04/bickerstaff-purgatory-made-simple/>

7. More about the belief in “soul sleep” or “mortalism.

The idea of “soul sleep” has been held throughout all of the history of Judaism and Christianity. It was referred to by different terms including “mortalism” because the basis was that the soul itself was not immortal. However, the most traditional of Judaism believed in immediate reward or punishment, the Catholic church officially held to immediate heaven, and such has been the view of many since. During the Reformation, there was a natural strengthening of promoting “soul sleep” (or “mortalism”) in part to confront the Catholic churches veneration of saints. Calvin was against “soul sleep” while Luther was for it. Luther stated:

“As soon as thy eyes have closed shalt thou be woken, a thousand years shall be as if thou hadst slept but a little half hour. Just as at night we hear the clock strike and know not how long we have slept, so too, and how much more, are in death a thousand years soon past. Before a man should turn round, he is already a fair angel.”[Luther, Martin, WA, 37.191.]

Present-day defenders of mortalism include many, such as Nicky Gumbel, some Lutherans, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church,

Jehovah's Witnesses also teach a form of mortalism but represent a special case. They believe that 144,000 believers began to be raised from the dead in October 1914 to receive immortality in heaven, but all other believers will be raised from the dead on Judgment Day to receive eternal life on earth. (From Wikipedia)

N.T. Wright's view. In his book, *Surprised by Hope*, he states:

I therefore arrive, fourthly, at this view: that all the Christian departed are in substantially the same state, that of restful happiness. Though this is sometimes described as 'sleep', we shouldn't take this to mean that it is a state of unconsciousness. Had Paul thought that, I very much doubt that he would have described life immediately after death as 'being with Christ, which is far better'. Rather, 'sleep' here means that the body is 'asleep' in the sense of 'dead', while the real person - however we want to describe him or her - continues.

This state is not, clearly, the final destiny for which the Christian dead are bound, which is as we have seen the bodily resurrection. But it is a state in which the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ, while they await that day. There is no reason why this state should not be called 'heaven', though we must note once more how interesting it is that the New Testament routinely doesn't call it that, and uses the word 'heaven' in other ways. (In his sub-section on Paradise in chapter 11)

In an TIME interview article, Wright shares more (TIME: Christians Wrong About Heaven, Says Bishop (Wright), Feb. 2008)

TIME: Is there anything more in the Bible about the period between death and the resurrection of the dead?

Wright: We know that we will be with God and with Christ, resting and being refreshed. Paul writes that it will be conscious, but compared with being bodily alive, it will be like being asleep. The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jewish text from about the same time as Jesus, says "the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God," and that seems like a poetic way to put the Christian understanding, as well.

TIME: That is rather different from the common understanding. Did some Biblical verse contribute to our confusion?

Wright: There is Luke 23, where Jesus says to the good thief on the cross, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." But in Luke, we know first of all that Christ himself will not be resurrected for three days, so "paradise" cannot be a resurrection. It has to be an intermediate state. And chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation, where there is a vision of worship in heaven that people imagine describes our worship at the end of time. In fact it's describing the worship that's going on right now. If you read the book through, you see that at the end we don't have a description of heaven, but, as I said, of the new heavens and the new earth joined together.

In response to the idea of "soul sleep" or mortalism... we are told that Christ died in the flesh but was alive in the spirit...before he rose again. This would seem to imply the same potential when we die.

"For Christ also died for sins... being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey"... -1 Peter 3:18-20

Other passages that would suggest we are immediately present with God (adapted from Brian Leicht):

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:6–8, emphasis added)

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (Philippians 1:21–24)

And Jesus, crying out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit." Having said this, He breathed His last. (Luke 23:46) Jesus, as God's Son, knew He would be spiritually present in the Father's "hands" at the very moment of His death, not asleep in the grave.

The stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:54–59)

The transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:1–8; Luke 9:28–36)

Rachel's soul departing when she died (Genesis 35:18)

John 11:23–27: Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to Him, "Yes, Lord; I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world." Notice Jesus corrected Martha's belief that her brother would only "live" in the resurrection. In contrast, Jesus revealed that believers will live even if they die, and in fact, they will never die in the way that our bodies do.

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. (1 Peter 3:18) Believers, at the moment of salvation, are "crucified with Christ," and yet they live (Galatians 2:20).

When the earthly body of the believer dies, he or she lives on spiritually. Through faith in Christ, believers have been made alive in the spirit just as Jesus lives in the spirit. We who profess Christ are not destined for soul sleep or the grave! We can resolve many of the interpretation conflicts that surround the issue of death by simply keeping the earthly physical body's inanimate state after death completely separate from the soul's spiritual life and location apart from the body.

8. Heaven is always described as the gathering of distinct lives, not an impersonal uniting of energy or drops of water in an ocean.

Hebrews 12:22-23

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect.”

Consider the distinction by which you were formed.

Jeremiah 1:5 “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart.”

9. Director of the Institute of Nuclear Studies at Oak Ridge, Tennessee, physicist William G. Pollard, proposed that in a space of higher dimension reality is less restricted. He wrote: ‘In that event the supernatural domains of heaven and hell, which have been so universally acknowledged in human experience, have as much claim on reality as does the restricted spacio temporal boundary between the natural and super natural is then rather differently drawn, and in a manner much more agreeable to modern views of the natural universe. Heaven, instead of being above us in ordinary space, is perpendicular to ordinary space, and the eternal is perpendicular to the temporal dimension. The transcendent and super natural, instead of being pushed farther away from us with each new advance in astronomy, are again everywhere in immediate contact with us, just as the dimension, perpendicular to a plane surface is everywhere in contact with it, though transcendent of it.’

10. "The Problem of Pain," p. 147-148

Similarly, Henri Nouwen said: “Heaven will be like returning from a trip on an airplane and as you enter the terminal you will see all those faces staring...trying to recognize you again...and God will be there, and he will recognize you.” (Probing Heaven, p. 331, Gilmore)