



LifeLight

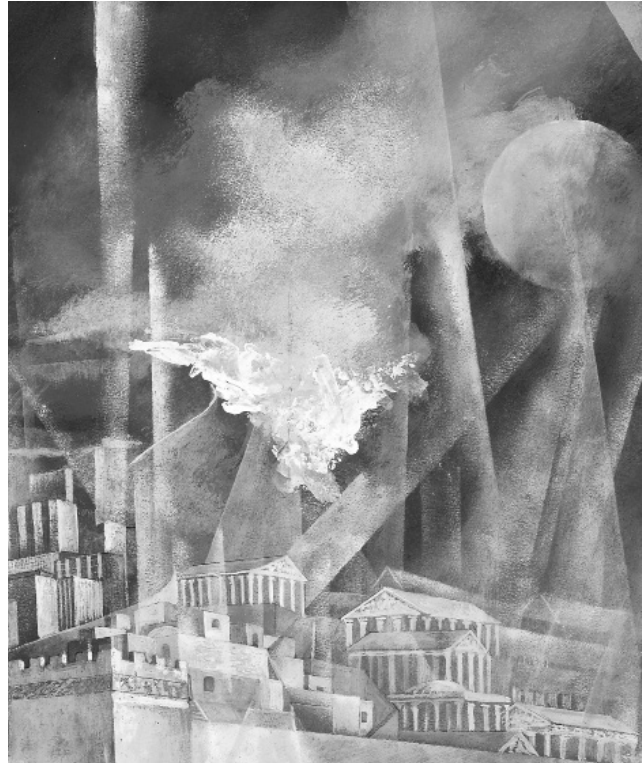
"In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." John 1:4

Heaven and Hell

LEADERS GUIDE

We will see that the word *heaven* hardly does justice to the glory of life in the age to come. Perhaps the voice that John heard from heaven says it best: "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" (Revelation 21:3). After the resurrection, believers will not be in heaven. Heaven will be with us.

Art excerpt from *John on Island of Patmos*
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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Contents

Introducing the LifeLight Program		5
Session 1—Lecture Leader	A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell Selected Passages	9
Session 2—Lecture Leader	“Daddy, What Happens When We Die?” Selected Passages	14
Session 3—Lecture Leader	The Justice of God and the Fate of the Wicked, Part 1 Selected Passages	19
Session 4—Lecture Leader	The Justice of God and the Fate of the Wicked, Part 2 Selected Passages	24
Session 5—Lecture Leader	The Mercy of God and the Fate of the Redeemed Selected Passages	29
Session 6—Lecture Leader	“Behold, the Dwelling Place of God Is with Man” Selected Passages	34
Session 7—Lecture Leader	“And They Will Be His People” Selected Passages	39
Session 8—Lecture Leader	“For the Healing of the Nations” Selected Passages	44
Session 9—Lecture Leader	Living Heavenward Selected Passages	49
.....		
Session 1—Small-Group Leader	A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell Daniel 12:1-3; 2 Peter 3:1-7; 2 Kings 2:1-12; 1 Kings 8:22-53; Deuteronomy 26:15	57
Session 2—Small-Group Leader	“Daddy, What Happens When We Die?” Matthew 27:45-50; John 19:28-30; 1 Peter 3:18-20; Psalm 49:13-15; 1 Corinthians 15:12-26; Matthew 22:23-33	59
Session 3—Small-Group Leader	The Justice of God and the Fate of the Wicked, Part 1 Daniel 12:1-3; Matthew 25:31-46; Mark 9:38-50; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Ephesians 2:1-10	61
Session 4—Small-Group Leader	The Justice of God and the Fate of the Wicked, Part 2 Isaiah 1:24-31; Micah 5; Revelation 21:1-8, 22-27; Joel 3:17-21; Daniel 12:1-3	63
Session 5—Small-Group Leader	The Mercy of God and the Fate of the Redeemed Revelation 20:11-15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:12-28, 35-58; Matthew 25:31-46	65
Session 6—Small-Group Leader	“Behold, the Dwelling Place of God Is with Man” 2 Peter 3:1-13; Revelation 21; Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 20:27-40; Revelation 21:1-8	67
Session 7—Small-Group Leader	“And They Will Be His People” Psalm 16; Romans 7:12-25; Isaiah 25:6-12; 60; Revelation 21:1-7	69
Session 8—Small-Group Leader	“For the Healing of the Nations” Genesis 4:1-16; 11:1-9; Matthew 8:5-13; Ephesians 2:11-16; Isaiah 2:2-5	71
Session 9—Small-Group Leader	Living Heavenward Genesis 1:26-31; Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15; 1 Peter 3:13-22; Luke 21:29-36; Revelation 22	73

Introduction

Welcome to LifeLight

A special pleasure is in store for you. You will be instrumental in leading your brothers and sisters in Christ closer to Him who is our life and light (John 1:4). You will have the pleasure of seeing fellow Christians discover new insights and rediscover old ones as they open the Scriptures and dig deep into them, perhaps deeper than they have ever dug before. More than that, you will have the pleasure of sharing in this wonderful study.

LifeLight—An In-depth Study

LifeLight is a series of in-depth Bible studies. The goal of LifeLight is that through a regular program of in-depth personal and group study of Scripture, more and more Christian adults may grow in their personal faith in Jesus Christ, enjoy fellowship with the members of His body, and reach out in love to others in witness and service.

In-depth means that this Bible study includes the following four components: individual daily home study; discussion in a small group; a lecture presentation on the Scripture portion under study; and an enhancement of the week's material (through reading the enrichment magazine).

LifeLight Participants

LifeLight participants are adults who desire a deeper study of the Scriptures than is available in the typical Sunday morning adult Bible class. (Mid-to-older teens might also be LifeLight participants.) While LifeLight does not assume an existing knowledge of the Bible or special experience or skills in Bible study, it does assume a level of commitment that will bring participants to each of the nine weekly assemblies having read the assigned readings and attempted to answer the study questions. Daily reading and study will require from 15 to 30 minutes for the five days preceding the LifeLight assembly. The day following the assembly will be spent reviewing the previous week's study by going over the completed study leaflet and the enrichment magazine.

LifeLight Leadership

While the in-depth process used by LifeLight begins with individual study and cannot achieve its aims without this individual effort, it cannot be completed by individual study alone. Therefore, trained leaders are necessary. You fill one or perhaps more of the important roles described below.

The Director

This person oversees the LifeLight program in a local center (which may be a congregation or a center operated by several neighboring congregations). The director

- serves as the parish LifeLight overall coordinator and leader;
- coordinates the scheduling of the LifeLight program;
- orders materials;
- convenes LifeLight leadership-team meetings;
- develops publicity materials;
- recruits participants;
- maintains records and budgeting;
- assigns, with the leadership-team, participants to small discussion groups;
- makes arrangements for facilities;
- communicates outreach opportunities to small-group leaders and to congregational boards;
- follows up on participants who leave the program.

The Assistant Director (*optional*)

This person may assist the director. Duties listed for the director may be assigned to the assistant director as mutually agreeable.

The Lecture Leader

This person prepares and delivers the lecture at the weekly assembly. (**Lesson material for the lecture leader begins on p. 9.**) The lecture leader

- prepares and presents the Bible study lecture to the large group;

- prepares worship activities (devotional thought, hymn, prayer), using resources in the study leaflet and leaders guide and possibly other, outside sources;
- helps the small-group discussion leaders to grow in understanding the content of the lessons;
- encourages prayer at weekly leadership-team and discussion leaders meetings.

The Small-Group Coordinator (optional; the director may fill this role)

This person supervises and coordinates the work of the small-group discussion leaders. The small-group coordinator

- recruits with the leadership-team the small-group discussion leaders;
- trains or arranges for training of the discussion leaders;
- assists the director and discussion leaders in follow-up and outreach;
- encourages the discussion leaders to contact absent group members;
- participates in the weekly leadership-team and discussion-leaders equipping meetings;
- provides ongoing training and support as needed. **The Small-Group Discussion Leaders**

These people guide and facilitate discussion of LifeLight participants in the small groups. (**Lesson material for the small-group leaders begins on p. 57.**) There should be one discussion leader for every group of no more than twelve participants. The small-group discussion leaders are, perhaps, those individuals who are most important to the success of the program. They should, therefore, be chosen with special care and be equipped with skills needed to guide discussion and to foster a caring fellowship within the group. These discussion leaders

- prepare each week for the small-group discussion by using the study leaflet and small-group leaders guide section for that session (**see p. 57**);
- read the enrichment magazine as a study supplement;
- guide and facilitate discussion in their small group;

- encourage and assist the discussion group in prayer;
- foster fellowship and mutual care within the discussion group;
- attend weekly discussion leaders training meetings.

Leadership Training

LifeLight leaders will meet weekly to review the previous week's work and plan the coming week. At this session, leaders can address concerns and prepare for the coming session. LifeLight is a 1½-hour program with no possibility for it to be taught in the one hour typically available on Sunday mornings. Some congregations, however, may want to use the Sunday morning Bible study hour for LifeLight preparation and leadership training. In such a meeting, the lecture leader and/or small-group coordinator may lead the discussion leaders through the coming week's lesson, reserving 5 or 10 minutes for problem solving or other group concerns.

While it requires intense effort, LifeLight has proven to bring great benefit to LifeLight participants. The effort put into this program, both by leaders and by participants, will be rewarding and profitable.

The LifeLight Weekly Schedule

Here is how LifeLight will work week by week:

1. Before session 1, each participant will receive the study leaflet for session 1 and the enrichment magazine for the course. The study leaflet contains worship resources (for use both in individual daily study and at the opening of the following week's assembly) and readings and study questions for five days. Challenge questions will lead those participants who have the time and desire a greater challenge into even deeper levels of study.
2. After the five days of individual study at home, participants will gather for a weekly assembly of all LifeLight participants. The assembly will begin with a brief period of worship (5 minutes). Participants will then join their assigned small discussion groups (of twelve or fewer, who will remain the same throughout the course), where they will go over the week's study questions together (55 minutes). Assembling together once again, participants will listen to a lecture presentation on the readings they have studied in the previous week and discussed in their small groups (20 minutes). After the lecture presentation, the director or another leader will distribute the study leaflet for the following week.

Closing announcements and other necessary business may take another five minutes before dismissal.

In some places some small groups will not join the weekly assembly because of scheduling or other reasons. Such groups may meet at another time and place (perhaps in the home of one of the small group's members). Those congregations may record the lecture given by the lecture leader at the weekly assembly and duplicate it for use by other groups meeting later in the week.

3. On the day following the assembly, participants will review the preceding week's work by rereading the study leaflet they completed (and that they perhaps supplemented or corrected during the discussion in their small group) and by reading appropriate articles in the enrichment magazine.

Then the LifeLight weekly study process will begin all over again!

Recommended Study Resources and Worship

The Lutheran Study Bible. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009. This resource contains more than 26,000 study and application notes, a most thorough reference guide (pp. lxx-cx), and over 90,000 cross-references, as well as a 31,000-entry concordance, maps, charts, and timelines.

Roehrs, Walter R., and Martin H. Franzmann. *Concordia Self-Study Commentary*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979. This one-volume commentary on the Bible contains 950 pages and is tailored for lay use.

The Concordia Organist is a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House (order no.99-2264). Use these CDs for worship hymn accompaniment.

A Guided Tour of Heaven and Hell

Selected Passages

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

By nature, each of us deserves eternal punishment for rejecting God and misusing His gifts. Thankfully, His Son, Jesus, opened the door to heaven through His death and resurrection, so that believers can live with Him forever.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God's Word, will

1. gain an overview of what happens to believers after death;
2. gain an overview of what happens to unbelievers after death; and
3. find comfort in God's gracious gift of heaven.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 57.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*, a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It's especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty, everlasting God, Your Son has assured forgiveness of sins and deliverance from eternal death. Strengthen us by Your Holy Spirit that our faith in Christ may increase daily and that we may hold fast to the hope that on the Last Day we shall be raised in glory to eternal life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*LSB Altar Book*, p. 453)

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

"Abandon all hope, all you who enter here." In the book-length poem *Inferno*, Italian poet Dante Alighieri describes how the Roman poet Virgil took him on a guided tour of hell. Dante sees these words inscribed above the gates of hell when they enter; as they work their way down the various levels of hell, they see horrible punishments meted out to sinners of every sort. Perhaps you have read the book, or at least heard of it. If not, don't worry. While the book and its sequels, *Purgatorio* and *Paradisio*, are classic literature, they are not the source of our true knowledge about heaven and hell. Our true knowledge about heaven and hell comes from a book you are more familiar with, and this LifeLight study will give you a guided tour of heaven and hell based on this book, the Bible.

Future sessions will examine various aspects of the doctrines of heaven and hell in depth—you can get an idea what topics will be covered by looking at the table of contents. For now, a quick tour of heaven and hell is in order, so that you can get a better picture of what the Bible says and how its various statements fit together. The fact is, heaven and hell are not simply places where people go, so to speak, depending on whether they believe in Jesus or not. Heaven and hell both have important places in God's plan of salvation. Heaven is His gift of grace to believers, where they will live forever in the presence of the One who has saved them, without any temptation or persecution by those who continue to reject God and His people. Hell is where those who do not look to God for salvation will get exactly what they

want—eternity without the triune God. In the words of Daniel, (12:2–3) “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky above; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.”

1 “In the Day That You Eat of It You Shall Surely Die”

Understanding heaven and hell requires that we first understand humanity, which in turn requires that we understand God. After all, (Genesis 1:27) “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” If we really are creatures—that is, created beings—then the God who created us has something to do with our fate. If, for example, the god who created us were a malicious god, he would simply hurt us in the worst possible way. That would be a god who would put everyone in hell simply for the sheer joy of it. Or, if the god who created us were an indifferent god, then he would leave us to our own devices. He might occasionally listen to our prayers and intervene to help us, but only if it suited his purposes. That would be a god who couldn’t care less about having us around. Thankfully, the God who created us is neither of those things but, rather, is “a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6). He holds us accountable for our sin, but through His Son, Jesus Christ, He also forgives our sin so that we can live in His presence forever.

Our God created us good. He blessed us and He gave us an entire earth to provide for us. When we fell into sin, He brought our sin to our attention, but He did so in order to point us to the promise of salvation through Him. To the serpent He said, (Genesis 3:15) “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.” Humanity fell to the power of the serpent, and unless someone more powerful than the serpent were to rescue us, we would remain under his power forever. Just after the fall, God promised a rescuer. He promised that one of Eve’s offspring would disarm the serpent and rescue us from his power. This person would be fully human (seed of Eve) and yet have divine power (the power to defeat the serpent). You and I know this person as Jesus Christ. In Christ Jesus, we see a heavenly Father who both calls us on

our sin and rescues us from our sin so that we can enjoy fellowship with Him. (1 John 1:8–9) “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

From this, we learn a great deal about us human beings as well. We were created in God’s image, and our ancestors Adam and Eve enjoyed an amazing fellowship with God at the beginning. God spoke with them. He walked in the garden with them. They lived in His presence. Then it all came apart. Eve ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and her husband, Adam, who was with her, ate of the fruit as well. Their intent was quite innocent at first. The serpent went on and on about knowledge and good and evil and being like God, but ultimately Eve’s motives were corrupted. (Genesis 3:6) “When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her.” In general, if you are going to choose the fruit of some tree to eat, you would choose the fruit that is good for food, just as Eve did. No problem there. Generally speaking, you will choose the fruit that looks good and ripe, just as Eve did. No problem there. And as for seeking wisdom, well, that is good too. No problem there. In these respects, Eve’s motives appear quite pure, according to the text. The problem was this: she disobeyed God. She ate of the fruit of the tree of which God had said, (Genesis 2:17) “You shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” Eve and her husband, Adam, had disobeyed God, and so they deserved death.

That is who you and I are—children of Adam and Eve, people who deserve death for the mere fact that we do not obey God. Motives do not matter. Even a person with entirely pure motives can disobey God, and that disobedience merits death. We are now creatures (created beings) who have walked away from the living words of the God who gave us life. We are wandering children of a loving God. Because we have sinned, we will die, and it is the topic of death that leads our thoughts to the topics of heaven and hell.

2 Do Believers Go to Heaven after They Die?

We are so used to saying that believers who die “go to heaven” that it may come as a surprise that the Scriptures do not use the phrase. The closest they come is in

four places: 2 Kings 2:1; Matthew 11:23; Luke 10:15; and Revelation 11:12. In 2 Kings 2:1, the context is God's intent "to take Elijah up to heaven by a whirlwind." Of course, Elijah was not yet dead; the Lord had decided to take Elijah to heaven bodily. What exactly does the word *heaven* mean in the Old Testament? Throughout the Old Testament, the word *heaven* is used in two basic senses: (1) the sky (i.e., what we see when we look up, encompassing everything from flying birds to the clouds to the stars and planets) and (2) the place where God dwells. When we talk about a person's going to heaven, we are obviously interested in the second sense of the word.

Several passages shed light on what heaven in this sense means. Genesis 19:24, for example, tells us, "the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven." This is not simply fire from above; it is fire from the Lord out of heaven. In the same way, Genesis 21:17 tells us, "God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, 'What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.'" The angel of the Lord calls to Hagar from heaven. The Lord's instructions to the people in Deuteronomy 26:15 makes it clear that heaven is where God lives; He commands the people, when they bring their tithes, to pray, "Look down from Your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the ground that You have given us, as You swore to our fathers, a land flowing with milk and honey." Finally, Solomon's prayer of dedication for the temple calls again and again on the Lord to "hear in heaven" (1 Kings 8:32, 34, 36, 39). In other words, in the Old Testament, heaven is not so much a location where a person might arrive to find any number of other people coming or going. Heaven is, rather, where God lives. Heaven is less about a place and more about the person of God. When 2 Kings 2:1 says that God was preparing to take Elijah to heaven in a whirlwind, it is saying that God was preparing to take Elijah to Himself.

The New Testament understands heaven in the same way. Think about the introduction to the Lord's Prayer: "Our Father who art in heaven." Jesus refers to the Father in this way throughout the Gospel of Matthew: (5:16) "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." The Gospel of Luke is even more explicit. Speaking of the joy of the shepherd who finds the one sheep that went missing, Jesus says, (15:7) "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one

sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." In the following parable, Jesus speaks of the joy of a woman who finds her lost coin, and then He says, (Luke 15:10) "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Jesus' language here is careful. He does not say that the angels rejoice, but that there is more rejoicing "before the angels of God." Who could rejoice before the angels—that is, in the presence of the angels? None other than God Himself! So when Jesus says that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner that repents than over one lost sheep who has been found, He is saying that God in heaven rejoices over repentant sinners. Finally, the Book of Hebrews says it explicitly: (8:1) "We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven." And when Jesus was baptized, the Father's voice was heard "from heaven" (Matthew 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). Heaven is not a location on this earth to which you and I might journey. Heaven is where—or better said, wherever—God dwells. From heaven, He rules the heavens and the earth, sends punishments on the unrighteous, and calls sinners to Himself through His Son, Jesus Christ.

This sheds light on the other passages that speak of someone's going to heaven. Revelation 11 speaks of the two prophets of God who testify against the unrighteous servants of the beast and weigh out God's wrath on those who oppose them. However, at the end of a certain period of time, they are killed and their bodies lie in the streets for three-and-one-half days, at which time the Lord raises them from the dead. John writes, (v. 12) "Then they heard a loud voice from heaven saying to them, 'Come up here!' And they went up to heaven in a cloud, and their enemies watched them." This is not the story of a dead person who went to heaven. It is the story of two people who were killed *and then raised from the dead* who were then taken into heaven, much as Elijah was in 2 Kings 2:1. In other words, when this passage tells us that the two prophets went to heaven, it is not telling us what happens to people after they die.

The only other places that speak of people going to heaven are Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15. Since Luke 10:15 has the same words as Matthew 11:23 in a different context, we will look only at Matthew, where Jesus is dealing with opposition to His ministry. He points out that people were not willing to accept John the Baptist, who separated himself from the normal social rituals surrounding eating and drinking, but people were also

not willing to accept Jesus, because He was involved in the normal social rituals of eating and drinking. (Matthew 11:20) “Then He began to denounce the cities where most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent.” Matthew 11:23 is His denunciation of Capernaum: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.” Several clues tell us that this passage is not about the fate of believers after they die. First, the passage refers to an entire city rather than an individual. Second, it does not mention dying. Third, the context makes clear that Jesus is speaking about the Day of Judgment, when He will return to judge the living and the dead. Matthew 11:24 reads, “But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Oddly enough, then, the Bible does not explicitly say that believers go to heaven when they die. Neither does it say that unbelievers go to hell when they die. That is not to say that you have to give up everything you ever believed—far from it. The ideas conveyed by the words “Grandpa is in heaven now” may well be in line with what the Bible says. However, exploring what the Bible says in more detail and depth may give us even more comfort than our everyday ideas give us. So, what *does* happen to us after we die?

3 The Brief Guided Tour

In the Apostles’ Creed, we confess, “I believe in . . . Jesus Christ, . . . who . . . suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended into hell. The third day He rose again from the dead. . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit, . . . the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” These words, carefully crafted to convey the truths of the Scriptures, give us a pattern for the doctrines of heaven and hell. Because of our sin, we human beings die. Death, however, is not the end. Both believers and unbelievers continue on in the state of death until Jesus comes again, when He will raise both believers and unbelievers from the dead. Unbelievers He will send away to hell. Believers, on the other hand, He will take to heaven—that is, to the kingdom God prepared for them before the world was created, the New Jerusalem.

In speaking of heaven and hell, then, we should really distinguish among three time frames: the days of a

person’s life here on earth, the time between a person’s death and the second coming of our Lord, and the time (or, rather, eternity) after Jesus’ second coming. Because something important and decisive happens on the day when Jesus comes again, we should be careful not to skip over that day when we talk about heaven and hell. The state of human beings—dead and alive—before that day will be radically different than their state after that day.

Before Judgment Day, believers who have died will be with Christ. As we saw earlier in this lecture, our traditional words “in heaven” are used in the Bible to reflect the presence of God. We are therefore right to say that believers who have died are in heaven, so long as we understand that heaven is not simply a holding place for the dead or a location like any other. Heaven is where God dwells, and believers who have died rest from their labors in the presence of God. The important part here is not where (some place called heaven) but with whom (with Christ). Moreover, believers who have died and are with Christ in heaven are not yet what they will be. Their souls and spirits have separated from their bodies, and their souls and spirits have gone to the Lord in heaven, but they are still dead. They are safe from harm, and they can no longer sin, but neither are they physically alive. It is not until Jesus returns that they will then receive their bodies and enter the age to come.

Unbelievers who have died, on the other hand, are not with Christ. They went without Christ in life, and so they go without Christ in death. It is still true to say that their souls and spirits separate from their bodies, and it is still true to say that they are not yet what they will be. They, too, will be raised on the Last Day. Until then, however, their bodies return to the dust of this creation, and their souls and spirits are kept in a place called Sheol until the Day of Judgment. We will learn more about Sheol in the next session, but the upshot is that it is a place of darkness and weakness, and it is without God’s gracious presence.

Sheol is not what we typically think of as hell, however. Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Revelation to St. John make clear that unbelievers will be sent away from God to a place of terrible, bodily torment after the resurrection of the dead. That is hell. Hell is terrible, because there “their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48). Skin burns and blisters, but the nerves never lose their ability to feel the pain. Worms eat at the inside, but they never go so far as to finish a person off. Dante’s claim that there are different levels

of hell is fanciful imagination without any real basis in Scripture; in fact, the medieval picture of demons and devils tormenting unbelievers is probably also far from the truth, because the lake of fire is meant for the devil and his angels. They too will suffer in their own way for their disobedience against God.

Thankfully, our gracious God made a way out for us sinful human beings. Because His Son rose from the dead and is now glorified at His right hand, believers will also be glorified in the resurrection. We will receive back our bodies, but the bodies we receive back will be glorified. Moreover, we will no longer suffer any kind of hunger, pain, loss, disease, or sickness. Just as God walked with Adam and Eve in the beginning, so will it be in the end. Of that time, God declares, (Revelation 21:3) "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." Heaven will be a place of utter joy, where our bodies work the way they were meant to and where we have the intimate communion with God that He intended for us.

Conclusion

Naturally, we will get into details in the coming sessions. In the next session, we will look more closely at the so-called interim state, that is, the state of believers and unbelievers between death and the second coming of Jesus. The following two sessions will explore what the Old and New Testaments have to say about hell. We will look specifically at questions about God's justice and the important role of hell in giving comfort to persecuted Christians. Then we will turn our eyes to the doctrine of heaven, spending three sessions getting a glimpse of the eternal joys prepared for us at God's right hand. Finally, we will finish the Bible study with a session about living heavenward.

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 2.

“Daddy, What Happens When We Die?”

Selected Passages

Preparing for the Session

Central Focus

The Bible has many ways of referring to death, all of which point to our true comfort as Christians: that those who die in the faith rest from their labors in this world and remain safe with Christ until He raises them from the dead to live with Him forever.

Objectives

That participants, led by the Holy Spirit working through God’s Word, will

1. understand the distinction between the interim state and the resurrection;
2. explain what Jesus means by referring to death as “sleeping”;
3. give a biblical explanation of the interim state of the righteous and the unrighteous; and
4. find comfort in the rest enjoyed by those who die in the faith.

Note for the small-group leaders: Lesson notes and other materials you will need begin on page 59.

For the Lecture Leader

Session Plan

Worship

Begin the session with the hymn printed in the study leaflet. Accompaniments are available in denominational hymnals, such as *Lutheran Service Book* or *Lutheran Worship* (refer to hymnal index). (Note: Concordia Publishing House has available *The Concordia Organist*, a 31-CD collection of pipe organ accompaniments for all the hymns and liturgical music in *Lutheran Service Book*. All the initial worship hymns in the LifeLight courses are included in this resource. It’s especially helpful for mission congregations and small parishes. See the list of study resources on p. 7.) Follow with this prayer:

Prayer

Almighty God, grant Your unworthy servants Your grace, that in the hour of our death the adversary may not prevail against us, but that we may be found worthy of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*LSB Altar Book*, p. 453)

Lecture Presentation

Introduction

The coffin stands at the front of the room. People have come to pay their last respects. They look at the pictures set up near the coffin, laugh over good memories, and then take a few moments to view the body. After they file past the coffin, they offer their condolences to the family of the deceased. Suddenly, a little child in the line turns to his father and asks, “Daddy, what happens when we die?” Our basic, traditional answer is that the believer who dies goes to heaven, and the unbeliever goes to hell. Our slightly more sophisticated, traditional answer is that the soul and body of the individual separate at death. The body remains here on earth, and the soul of the deceased goes to heaven if he is a believer or to hell if he is an unbeliever. On the Last Day, soul and body are reunited in the resurrection; Christians go to heaven, and non-Christians go to hell.

As we saw in the first session, the Bible does not use the phrase “go to heaven” to describe what happens to believers after they die. In the remainder of this session, we will see what the Bible *does* say about the state of believers and unbelievers who die. Theologians refer to the state between death and the resurrection as “the interim state.” As the word *interim* implies, this is an in-between state. The dead in Christ have not yet received the full glory that will be theirs in the resurrection, and dead unbelievers have not yet been consigned to their eternal punishment. Nevertheless, the dead in Christ rest from their labors in this world and remain safe with Christ until He raises them from the dead to enjoy life in the age to come.

1 What Happens When We Die

We know from experience that the body stops functioning when a person dies. In fact, we often equate death with the cessation of bodily function. One or more organs begin to fail for whatever reason, and after a time they can no longer sustain all the processes that keep the body going. When those processes stop, the person has died. However, if you have ever been present when another person has died, you may have felt that something more was going on. In fact, Lutheran pastor and ethicist Gilbert Meilaender has argued that the respect we show to the corpse of a dead person proves we believe death is not simply the end of a biological process. Something mysterious, even transcendent, occurs at death.

While the Scriptures do not give us a detailed account of dying, they do help us understand what that mysterious, even transcendent element of death is. In mundane terms, the soul and the spirit separate from the body. The Scriptures use both words: *soul* and *spirit*. Genesis describes the death of Rachel by saying that she named her newborn son Ben-oni “as her soul was departing (for she was dying)” (35:18). Likewise, in describing the death of a wealthy man in one of His parables, Jesus has God say, “Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” (Luke 12:20). In yet another example, when the son of the widow of Zarephath became ill and died, Elijah “stretched himself upon the child three times and cried to the LORD, ‘O LORD my God, let this child’s life come into him again!’” (1 Kings 17:21). The word here translated as “life” is the same word translated “soul” in Genesis 35:18. On the other hand, Matthew describes the death of Jesus by saying that He “yielded up His spirit” (27:50), and John writes similarly that Jesus “gave up His spirit” (19:30). (The two evangelists use slightly different verbs, but the meaning is the same.) Luke recounts how “Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit!’” (23:46), and he further writes in the Book of Acts that Stephen called out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59) as he was being stoned to death. Ecclesiastes encourages us to remember the Creator in the days of our youth, before “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7)—that is, before we die. In other words, the Scriptures bear witness that we are more than simply biological beings, and that death is more than simply the end of a biological process.

Life involves body, soul, and spirit, and “the body apart from the spirit is dead” (James 2:26). When we die, soul and spirit separate from the body.

However, that does not answer the child’s question. If soul and spirit separate from the body when we die, where do they go? What happens to the soul and spirit of the believer after death, and what happens to the soul and spirit of the unbeliever after death? For the remainder of this session, we look at each of these questions in turn, before dispelling a few myths about those who have died.

2 Unbelievers after Death

If the Bible says little about the state of believers between death and the resurrection of the dead, then it says even less about the state of unbelievers during that time. The New Testament has one straightforward passage: 1 Peter 3:19, which explains that Christ “went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison” after His death (what the Apostles’ Creed calls His descent into hell). These are the spirits who “formerly did not obey, when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared” (1 Peter 3:20). A second passage also gives us hints of the state of unbelievers after death; although there is debate among interpreters whether this account is a parable or a realistic situation. Jesus tells the story of a rich man who died, and (Luke 16:23–24) “in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’” If this account gives us a description of the state of believers and unbelievers after death, then we should expect that unbelievers are already suffering from unquenchable fire (a theme to which we return in the next session). Moreover, there is no escape; as Abraham says to the rich man in the parable, (Luke 16:26) “between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.” Other passages in the New Testament that describe the fate of unbelievers either definitively refer to them after the resurrection of the dead at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ or are vague as to whether they refer to the state of dead unbelievers prior to the resurrection or after it.

The Old Testament, however, has a bit more to say about the state of unbelievers after death. Psalm 9:17 says, “The wicked shall return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.” Generally speaking, the Old Testament uses the word *Sheol* to describe where unbelievers go after they die. Proverbs 5:5, for example, says that an adulteress’s “feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.” What is more, even believers who are experiencing sorrow and suffering often speak as if they will end up in Sheol. Psalm 88:3 gives voice to this sentiment. The psalmist cries out to God to hear him, saying, “for my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol.” The patriarch Jacob likewise expressed his sorrow this way when he heard that his son Joseph had (supposedly) died. (Genesis 37:35) “All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father wept for him.” Jacob seems to be saying, “Joseph met a terrible end, and because his life ended with sorrow and suffering, he will see Sheol, and I will too because of my sorrow and suffering.”

For the sake of clarity, you should know that the Old Testament sometimes uses the word *Sheol* in a more neutral sense, as the resting place of all the dead, righteous and unrighteous alike. In fact, the word has been interpreted in different ways, even among Lutheran theologians. However, all Lutheran theologians agree that those who die without faith do not enter the presence of God, while those who do die in faith enjoy God’s presence in between death and the resurrection. The details of how we interpret the word *Sheol* do not lead to differences in doctrine among Lutherans.

What is Sheol like? It is a place of weakness (Isaiah 14:9–11). It is a place of darkness (Psalm 49:13–20). God’s wrath against idolatry reaches even into Sheol (Deuteronomy 32:22). People in Sheol do not praise God (Psalm 6:5). Despite our curiosity, the Scriptures do not give us much information about Sheol or about the state of unbelievers between death and the resurrection of the dead. This much, however, we do know. Those who by God’s grace believe in God’s promise of salvation through Jesus Christ enjoy a different state after death, because the Lord has redeemed us.

3 Believers after Death

Psalm 49 stands as a stark admonition to us human beings to remain humble before God. (vv. 13–15) “This is the path of those who have foolish confidence; yet after them people approve of their boasts. Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for He will receive me.” The Old Testament is clear: if Sheol refers to the state of unbelievers after death, then believers have a different fate, because the Lord purchases us from Sheol. We can choose to walk in the ways of the adulteress, but “her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death” (Proverbs 7:27). However, “the path of life leads upward for the prudent, that he may turn away from Sheol beneath” (Proverbs 15:24). Our gracious God does not want any of His creatures to go down to Sheol. He therefore instructs us with His Word, which shows us our Savior, Jesus, who by His blood redeemed us. Those who have faith in Him will not join unbelievers in Sheol. In the beautiful words of King David, (Psalm 86:13) “Great is Your steadfast love toward me; You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.”

The Scriptures use a variety of imagery to refer to the death of believers. The Old Testament says of the patriarchs that they were gathered to their people (Genesis 25:8; 49:33; Numbers 20:26; 31:2; Deuteronomy 32:50). The Books of Judges, Kings, and Chronicles speak of being gathered to one’s fathers and being gathered to the grave (Judges 2:10; 2 Chronicles 34:28—parallel to 2 Kings 22:20). Psalm 73:24 even refers to dying as being received into glory: “You guide me with Your counsel, and afterward You will receive me to glory.” What all these images have in common is an emphasis on community. Believers who die are not isolated from those who went before them in the faith, and they are not isolated from our gracious Father in heaven. On the contrary, believers who die have only been transferred from the Church Militant (the communion of God’s people still struggling against the devil, the world, and our own sinful human nature) to the Church Triumphant (the communion of God’s people who rest from their labors). Dead believers are still part of the Holy Christian Church that we confess in the Apostles’ Creed.

Other passages in the Old Testament, and many in the New Testament, refer to death as sleep. Examples include Psalm 13:3, "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death"; Daniel 12:2, speaking of the resurrection of the dead, "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake"; 1 Kings 1:21, where Bathsheba refers to David's impending death by saying, "when my lord the king sleeps with his fathers"; Matthew 9:24, where Jesus says of a girl who has died, "Go away, for the girl is not dead but sleeping"; and 1 Corinthians 15:6 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14, where Paul refers to the dead as those who "have fallen asleep." Sleep as an image for death is particularly comforting. It implies rest from the wearisome troubles of the day as well as a time when those sleeping will wake up refreshed. We do not normally fear sleep, and if death is akin to sleep, then we have no need to fear death either. In the words of the hymn "All Praise to Thee, My God, This Night" (*LSB* 883:3), "Teach me to live that I may dread the grave as little as my bed." When our Lord Jesus comes again, we will be awakened to meet Him face-to-face.

Other passages in the New Testament speak of death as departing in peace or departing to be with Christ. The peace of which Simeon sings in Luke 2:29 is the peace of a believer who has seen the promises of God fulfilled in his life. The Lord had promised Simeon he would see the Christ, and when Simeon held Jesus, he knew God had kept His promise. Simeon could depart this life in peace because God, who had kept the promise of the Messiah, would keep all of His promises. Paul, on the other hand, writes in Philippians 1:23, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ." His point is that he is not afraid to die for preaching Christ crucified, and in fact he would prefer to die rather than to continue suffering the hardships of his ministry, because after death he would be with Christ. Paul does not mean that Christ is not with us now, because Jesus promised, (Matthew 28:20) "I am with you always, to the end of the age." However, "now we see in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Christ is with us, but we experience Him through means rather than directly. After death, Christians are with Christ in a new way. As Jesus said to the thief on the cross, (Luke 23:43) "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." Because Jesus Christ gave His life on the cross for us and rose from the dead as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20), death no longer means separation from God but rather the enjoyment of God's presence in Christ.

Just as important, death means rest. The apostle John relates, (Revelation 14:13) "I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Blessed indeed,' says the Spirit, 'that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!'" Christians who die no longer struggle against the devil, because they are beyond temptation. They no longer struggle against the world, because they have departed the world to be with Christ. They no longer struggle against their own sinful natures, because their sinful natures have met their ultimate demise, begun in the waters of Baptism and consummated in the death of the body. They no longer suffer, and they no longer worry, and they no longer sin. Their labors are done. (Hebrews 4:9–10) "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from His."

To be sure, death remains God's just judgment against our sin, for "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). Yet, Jesus took this judgment on Himself in our place, and He rose from the dead. (Romans 6:10) "The death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God." Paul can therefore exult, (1 Corinthians 15:55–57) "'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." Christians need not fear death, because our Savior, Jesus, transformed it into the gateway to eternal life. Death is the final defeat of our own sinful natures, and when we die, our Savior, Jesus, receives us into His glory to rest from all our labors until He comes again to raise us to everlasting life. The intimate communion Christ shares with believers here continues on after death.

4 So Grandpa's Looking Down on Me?

Before we move on to the next session, we need to address a couple of myths about the dead. The first myth is that the dead become angels. They do not. Angels are beings created by God as spirits. They do not by nature have physical, fleshly bodies the way you and I do. An angel without a body is an angel, but a human being without a body is, well, dead. An angel is not simply a disembodied soul but a unique creature with its own mode of existence. People who die do not suddenly turn into a different sort of being; rather, people who die remain dead until the Lord raises them—and us all—from the dead on the Last Day. Unfortunately, some people support this myth by referring to Matthew

22:30, where Jesus says, “in the resurrection they [those who are raised to eternal life] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” Two points are worth noting about this passage. First, Jesus is referring to the resurrection—that is, to the state of believers after Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. He is not describing the state of people between death and the resurrection. Second, Jesus does not say that believers will be angels after the resurrection; instead, He says that they will be like angels in one respect—that they will not marry. Believers will be risen, glorified human beings, not angels.

The second myth we must address is that the dead look down on this world and have specific knowledge of our particular lives. I suspect you have heard people give voice to this opinion; you may even have expressed it yourself. While the sentiment can be comforting in some ways, it does not square with what the Scriptures say. In sleep, we become more or less oblivious to the world around us, and death is like sleep in that way. The dead are certainly safe with our Savior, Jesus, and they enjoy the presence of Christ (Philippians 1:23; Luke 16:19–31; Revelation 14:13). A few passages in Revelation (e.g., 6:10) portray the martyrs (those who died for the sake of the faith) calling out to God in the words of the Psalms, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before You will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (E.g., Psalms 13:1–2; 35:17; 74:10). Nothing in the Bible, however, suggests that the dead are able to keep track of what is going on in our lives. While it may be comforting to feel as though they are sharing our joys (and sorrows) from heaven, we should draw our true comfort from the fact that they are experiencing the joys of God’s glory, and that God Himself keeps watch over us.

Conclusion

We cannot talk about heaven and hell without also understanding what the Bible says about death. Thankfully, the Bible does not give us a clinical, theoretical explanation of death. Instead, God’s Word comforts Christians in the face of this great enemy of ours by reminding us that Jesus Himself has experienced it and defeated it. Paul writes, (1 Thessalonians 4:13) “We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.” We confess that Jesus Christ died and rose from the dead, so we also confess that Jesus has defeated death for us. For Christians, death is therefore the final judgment on the sinful nature, which was sentenced to death in Baptism, and it is a departure from this world of struggle to the glories of Christ’s presence in heaven. The psalmist writes, (116:15) “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of His saints.” What amazing power our Lord wields, to take the judgment against our sin and turn it into the gateway to eternal communion with God. (Revelation 14:13) “‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Blessed indeed,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors’”

Concluding Activities

Speak a closing prayer, make any necessary announcements, and distribute study leaflet 3.