

LCMS

Frequently Asked Questions

Doctrinal Issues – Heaven and Hell

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Heaven and Hell

What happens to people who have not heard the Gospel?

Q: *I recently attended a Bible study in which we discussed the fate of those who never had the chance to hear about God. What happens to such people?*

A: In his book *What's the Answer?* ([Concordia Publishing House](#), 1960), LCMS theologian Otto Sohn raises the question, "What stand does our church take regarding the heathen who have never had the opportunity to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and what is the individual's responsibility toward these people?" His answer follows:

Christ, the Savior of the world, answered the first question in this way: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16). The apostle Peter put it another way: "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The same truth is expressed in John 3:16; 18:36; Romans 2:12; Ephesians 2:11-13.

Though such people have not heard the Gospel, they are without excuse (Romans 1:19-23; 2:12). God has not left Himself without witness (Acts 14:17), but has revealed His existence by the works of nature and wants men to seek Him, if "haply they might feel after Him and find Him" (Acts 17:27). The Bible also reveals that people who knowingly and willfully reject the Gospel of Jesus will be more severely punished than those who never heard it (Luke 12:47, 48).

Because of the horrible doom awaiting all those who do not believe in Jesus, we should seek to reach as many as possible with our own fearless witness and ardently support the missionary endeavors of our church on behalf of those whom we cannot reach with our own voice. Nor must we forget our responsibility toward fellow Christians who are on the verge of erring from the truth, whether by word or deed (Galatians 6:1; James 5:19, 20). And lest we should preach to others, but ourselves become castaways, we should be earnestly concerned about our own salvation (Matthew 26:41; 1 Corinthians 10:12; Philippians 2:12).

Usage: We urge you to contact an LCMS pastor in your area for more in-depth discussion.

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What's the LCMS view on the Left Behind series?

Q: *Recently many people have been reading the Left Behind series of books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. While these are fiction books, they discuss the "end times" within a biblical context. What is the LCMS position on these books and their portrayal of the end times?*

A: The conceptual framework for the *Left Behind* series is the so-called "rapture," which is a central aspect of dispensational pre-millennial views of the end times. Such views conflict with the Lutheran position on what the Scriptures and the Lutheran confessional writings teach concerning the coming of Christ and the end of the world.

To assist readers in their evaluation of the *Left Behind* series, we recommend that they consult the 1989 report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations titled [The End Times: A Study of Eschatology and Millennialism](#). Included in this report is a discussion of current views of "the rapture" and helpful charts summarizing them. You also may wish to read an article that appeared in the March 2001 issue of *The Lutheran Witness* titled ["Will You Be Left Behind?"](#)

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Are there degrees or levels in heaven or hell?

Q: *In our Bible study today we discussed if there are degrees or levels in heaven and hell. It was also suggested that hell is not eternal. Are there scriptural references to support these points?*

A: In its report on [The End Times: A Study of Eschatology and Millennialism](#), the Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations says regarding hell: "In both "body and soul" unbelievers will suffer eternal separation and condemnation in hell (Matt 18:8; 25:46; Mark 9:43; John 3:36; 2 Thess. 1:9; Jude 13; Rev. 14:11).[40] Indescribable torment will be experienced consciously, the degree determined by the nature of the sins to be punished (Matt. 11:20-24; 23:15; Luke 12:47-48)."

Regarding heaven and "degrees of glory" the Commission says: "Eternal life is pictured in the Scriptures as a state of never-ending "blessedness." This means, on the one hand, that Christians will live forever in perfect freedom from sin, death, and every evil (Is. 25:8; 49:10; 1 Cor. 15:26, 55-57; Rev. 2:7, 11; 20:14; 21:4). At the same time, they will experience the unending joy of being with God in the new heavens and new earth (e.g., Revelation 21-22; Ps. 16:11). Forever eliminated is the possibility of falling away from God. This blessedness will bring with it the joy of being in eternal communion with fellow believers, whom we have reason to believe we shall recognize (cf. Matt. 17:3). And, there will be no limitations or degrees attached to the enjoyment of the happiness to be experienced, though there will be degrees of glory corresponding to differences of work and fidelity here on earth, producing praise to God but no envy (see 2 Cor. 9:6; Matt. 20:23)."

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Does the LCMS believe in the rapture?

Q: *Does The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believe in the rapture?*

A: The answer to your question depends on what you mean by "the rapture." The English word "rapture" is derived from the Latin translation of the verb "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17 (*rapiemur*). Lutherans certainly believe what Paul teaches in this passage, namely, that those who are still living on earth when Christ returns visibly on the last day "will be caught up" ("raptured") together with "the dead in Christ" to "meet the Lord in the air."

Some Christians teach, however, that the "rapture" will take place not on the last day but in connection with an "invisible" coming of Christ occurring before a seven-year period of "tribulation" on earth, allowing Christians to "escape" this tribulation and then later return to earth for a literal "1,000 year reign of Christ."

Lutherans do not believe that these teachings are based on a proper understanding of Scripture. Scripture teaches that all Christians will endure varying degrees of "tribulation" until the last day, that Christ will return only once (visibly) to "catch up" ("rapture") all believers, living and dead, into heaven, and that all believers will reign forever with him in heaven. Lutherans understand the "1000 years" of Rev. 20:11-15 to be a figurative reference to Christ's reign here and now in the hearts and lives of believers, which will culminate in our reigning with Christ forever in heaven following his return on the last day.

For more information, you may want to read the Synod's theological commission report titled [*The End Times: A Study of Eschatology and Millennialism*](#).

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Can you sin in heaven?

Q: *Can you sin in heaven? My first thought is that one cannot. But then I wonder if God takes away our free will when we get to heaven? I can't imagine why we would want to sin in heaven--we'll be perfect and the place we are will be perfect. But then I think of Adam and Eve before the fall--they were perfect, made in God's image, and they lived in a perfect place. Yet they had free will and sinned.*

A: Your first thought, from your knowledge of the Bible, is correct beyond all doubt. There is no sin in heaven, because it is the place where the sinless God dwells. Those who have been cleansed in the blood of the Lamb have been cleansed forever. There is no more death in heaven, the result of sin. We die once and then the judgment. Our death ends sin, the Scripture says.

Just as the good angels are fixed in their sinless state now, so also we shall be. We will serve God forever willingly, but it will be impossible for us to will to sin as did our first parents. In heaven it will not be like in the beginning of our human history. Old things have passed away, the new has come (Rev. 21:4). There will be only life, eternal life, and where there is eternal life there is eternal sinlessness. Rest your soul on that and praise God for His great goodness in giving us a sinless Savior.

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What happens when people die?

Q: *What happens when we die? Are we judged immediately and our soul sent to Heaven or Hell or what?*

A: Lutherans believe that Scripture teaches that at the moment of death the souls of believers enter the joy of heaven (Luke 23:43; Acts 7:59; Rev. 19:13; Phil. 1:23-24), while the souls of unbelievers at death are consigned to "the prison" of everlasting judgment in hell (1 Peter 3:19-20; Acts 1:25). The departed souls remain in heaven or hell until the Day of Judgment, when they shall be reunited with their own bodies (Matt. 10:28; John 5:28-29; John 11:24; Job 19:26).

Therefore, "The Last Judgment is the grand finale of this present world, in which the sentence pronounced in death over the individual will be publicly confirmed and extended to the body, which till then has returned to the dust, from whence it came. He who continues in the faith unto the end has nothing to fear for his soul after death or for his body and soul on the Day of Judgment (Rev. 2:10; 14:13)" (Edward Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, St. Louis: Concordia, 1939).

You may also want to read the Frequently Asked Question, Asleep Until the End of the World. (See page 8.)

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Are my family members with God or are they asleep until the end of the world?

Q: *Recently, both my sister and father have died (separately). While I truly believe that Jesus died for our sins, those who accept Him as their personal Savior, I have been troubled as to where my sister and father are now. Are they asleep until the end of the world? Are their bodies asleep, but their souls with God? Or, are they in Heaven with God now?*

A: What Scripture teaches concerning the death of the Christian is summarized as follows by Lutheran theologian Edward Koehler in his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*:

In the moment of death the souls of the believers enter the joy of heaven. Jesus said to the malefactor: "Today shalt thou be with Me in paradise" (Luke 23:43). Stephen said in the hour of death: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59). Whoever dies in the Lord is blessed "from henceforth" (Rev. 14:13). Paul desires "to be with Christ," and adds that this is "far better" for him than to continue in the flesh (Phil. 1:23, 24). For this reason we pray that finally, when our last hour has come, God would grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven.

On the day of the final judgment, the redeemed souls in heaven will be reunited with their own (now glorified) bodies, and will begin to enjoy the bliss of heaven in both body and soul (John 5:28-29; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Cor. 15). The Lutheran church has always rejected as unscriptural the idea that the soul "sleeps" between death and Judgment Day in such a way that it is not conscious of heavenly bliss.

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