

Answers From Beyond the Grave

Bible teacher Perry Stone tackles seven of the most common questions about heaven

For the living, the idea of dying may seem irrelevant at the moment. We all plan for the future and make every attempt to stretch the length of our days like a rubber band until suddenly, like the snap of broken rubber, life ceases and we lie limp in the place where our journey ended. Because death is a future and unknown experience, the thought of dying often breeds more questions than answers.

Christians wonder, *Can we remember earthly events in heaven?* Or they ponder, *Will my loved ones know me in the same manner as I knew them in this life?* There is also the question of remembering those who did not make heaven their eternal destiny. Will believers remember the unrighteous they knew on Earth after the believer is home with Christ, or will unbelievers' earthly association with us be erased from our memories when we arrive at the heavenly city?

The questions are endless, but the Bible is replete with answers to our most frequently asked questions about life beyond the grave.

Will I have a body in heaven if I'm cremated? About once a week I receive an e-mail or letter from a Christian family asking a question about cremation. The process of cremation is when heat reduces the bodily remains of an individual to gasses and bone fragments. The remains given to a family in an urn are not ashes, as some suggest, but are actual fragments of bones.

The question is: From the biblical and Christian perspective, is it ever wrong to cremate a fellow believer?

First, the entire Bible is clear on how the patriarchs, the

Hebrew people, and the New Testament believers buried their loved ones. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah and Leah were all buried in the same cave (see Gen. 25:9; 49:30; 50:13). Joseph was embalmed in the traditional Egyptian method, and his body was laid in a golden coffin and placed in a special vault in Egypt (see Gen. 50:26).

At the time of the Exodus, Moses entered the vault and removed the golden coffin with Joseph's bones, and they were transferred from Egypt to the Promised Land (see Ex. 13:19) and later buried by Joshua in the land of Joseph's inheritance (see Josh. 24:32).

Those who completely oppose cremation point out the following. In Joshua 7, after Achan sinned by stealing the gold and the garments from Jericho, his sin was exposed, and the people stoned him and burned his body, leaving a pile of stones as a reminder of God's anger being turned from Israel (see vv. 24-26).

There is no clear Scripture either promoting or discouraging cremation. This is actually a spiritual and moral issue with some, but it probably falls under the Scripture that teaches: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12, NKJV).

Consider the number of Christians who were unable to escape and have died in burning planes, homes or large buildings. Their departure from this life in a tragic fire will not impact their future with Christ because their souls and spirits are already with the Lord.

Will I know my loved ones? Someone asked, "If it's true that we will be known at the resurrection as we were before we died, then why didn't Mary recognize Christ after He was raised from the dead?" Christ had been dead only three days, so how could Mary, who was with Him throughout His ministry, not recognize Him?

Remember, she thought He was dead, and the corpse was missing; so she wasn't expecting this man to be Christ (see John 20:11-17). She also may not have known Him because of a change in His appearance. The shock of the crucifixion and the great mental pressure He endured may have changed certain features. After Jesus' resurrection, His hair was white (see Rev. 1:13-14). If a change in His physical appearance occurred within three days, then Mary wouldn't have immediately recognized Him.

It was also prior to the sun completely rising when she saw Him, which is the simplest explanation—it was still dark. Any of these factors could be why Mary didn't recognize Him until she heard His voice.

Stephen, however, immediately recognized the risen Christ. When he was being stoned, Stephen saw Jesus standing in heaven, and said: "Look! I see ... the Son of Man [Jesus] standing at the right hand of God!" (Acts 7:55–56). Stephen knew Christ on Earth and instantly recognized Him from His heavenly throne. Also, when Christ suddenly appeared after His resurrection to His disciples behind locked doors, they knew it was Him.

The apostle Paul says this: "For now we see ... dimly, but then face to face. ... Then I shall know just as I also am known" (1 Cor. 13:12). When he said "then I shall know," he was alluding to the time when perfection comes and we are with Christ. In heaven I will recognize Paul, Moses and all my family members. Even at the Transfiguration, Peter knew—without being told—that the two men beside Jesus were Moses and Elijah (see Matt. 17:1–4).

What happens to the spirits of infants who die in the womb? In Genesis 25:21-22, Rebekah was pregnant with twin sons. As the little fellows wrestled in their mother's womb, Moses wrote: "The children struggled together within her" (v. 22). Between

the conception and the birth, these twins are being identified as “children.”

When a child dies in the womb due to what is termed a miscarriage, that child is still called a person (infant).

The word *infant* is the Hebrew word ‘owlel and always refers to a human being (see Ps. 8:2; Hos. 13:16). In Luke 1:43, Elizabeth was calling Mary the “mother of my Lord” nearly nine months before Christ’s birth. Even when the child is not yet born, the woman is called mother.

Also in Luke 1:41-44, when Elizabeth was speaking about her baby in her womb, she said, “The babe leaped in my womb for joy” (v. 44). The Greek word *babe* here is *brephos*, and it is the second most common word for *babe*.

Throughout the Scriptures God calls future children the “seed”—even before they are conceived in the womb. Abraham and his sons were circumcised in the flesh of their foreskins, and all Hebrew infant sons were to be circumcised on the eighth day after their birth as a sign of their covenant with God (see Gen. 17:1-14).

There are ample Bible references to prove that the eternal soul and spirit are a part of the development of the child in the womb of its mother. Thus, if an infant dies in the womb or shortly after birth, the eternal spirit returns to the Lord, and we will one day join that spirit in heaven!

Will my pet be in heaven? Several years ago a teaching emerged that said a person’s pet will join them in heaven. I was personally listening to a man I know and have always admired for his Bible knowledge as he explained to his audience that when the rapture occurs, Christians’ pets would be raised from the dead and would join them in heaven.

I had studied the Bible for more than 45,000 hours, and I never recalled reading any reference to animals in the rapture

or the resurrection.

Are there animals in heaven? The answer is that there are creatures in heaven that have the exact appearance of certain animals that God created on Earth. They appear in spirit form and are living creatures and various types of angels. In the temple of heaven are four living creatures, with the faces of a lion, an ox, an eagle and a man (see Rev. 4:7-8).

Everyone I have ever met—especially children—loves animals. I have a pocket parrot, my son and daughter both have cats, and we have fish. Pets are beneficial for children as fun friends and are especially important to those without children. They are also very popular with the elderly. Pets fill a void, which leads to the second observation.

On Earth we marry—as the Lord Himself said: “It is not good that man should be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Companions, friends and pets are needed on Earth for fun, fellowship and relationship. Heaven, however, is a different dimension of perfection that we have never experienced on Earth.

We are not married or given in marriage in heaven, and yet on Earth God ordained it for companionship and procreation. Elderly believers, whose families live in another state, need the warmth of a pet on Earth to fill the void.

However, in heaven, the perfection, the joy, the peace and the family of God united as one will fill every emotional need a person has.

Will people who have never heard the gospel be in heaven? The Bible indicates that in ancient times God once winked at men’s spiritual ignorance, but He no longer ignores men’s ignorance (see Acts 17:30, KJV). There are many people, perhaps primitive tribes in jungle regions and other remote areas, who have lived on the land and rivers for many generations yet have never heard a clear message of Christ’s power to redeem.

In light of this, it is written in 2 Peter 2:21: "For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them." If it is better to have never heard than to have heard and turned, then does this imply that those who never hear the gospel could automatically go to heaven?

Men, from all parts of the world, can see the magnificent creation of God—the sun, moon and stars; the rivers, mountains and trees; the animal kingdom—and come to a conclusion that there is a Creator behind this detailed creation. As these simple men see the creation, they will begin to ask questions in their hearts and search for the Creator.

I am not speaking here of those who are following a false religion and worshipping demons and idols, but of individuals in remote areas of the world where there is no printed page, no television, radio, shortwave, satellites and computers. There are many people who have not heard the gospel yet because not enough people are going to where they live to minister to them.

However, after a person hears a clear message of the gospel, then that person is responsible for the truth he has heard. Those who have never heard the gospel still have within them a special pull that causes them to question where they are from and what their life is about.

Will a Christian who takes his own life be in heaven? First of all, let's discuss *why* a person who is a devout believer would do such a thing. The Bible says, "Hope deferred makes the heart sick" (Prov. 13:12, NKJV). Hope is the positive expectation that something good will occur and the belief that bad things will not always be as they are.

For example, Job became so despondent that he cursed the day he was born (see Job 3:1-11). However, he also looked forward

and held on to his trust in God, who eventually blessed him with twice as much in the end (see Job 42:10). A person can also experience weak faith, as did the disciples on occasions (see Matt. 8:26).

However, when hope is delayed, then the heart begins to feel sick. A sense of doom and despair will take root. Some see taking their life as a form of escape from the pressure they are feeling. As believers, we must never lose hope. We must surround ourselves with praying individuals during our weak moments, knowing that our trials have value (see 1 Pet. 1:7).

In the Bible there are three examples of people who took their own lives: King Saul (see 1 Sam. 31:4), Ahithopel (see 2 Sam. 17:23) and Judas Iscariot (see Matt. 27:5). In all three instances these men were not believers but were in complete rebellion against God and spiritual leadership. These examples are not the same as a person who loves the Lord yet has fought a hopeless spirit.

In some instances there have been Christian people who were on a very high level of medication that actually caused severe confusion and depression in their minds. If a person had no clue what he or she was doing because of legal medication that somehow clashed with their thinking, then God will judge according to each circumstance.

It is very important for us never to take the risk of what lies beyond if we take our own life. It is the unknown that often forms a restraint in the hearts of those who battle depression and anxiety. The thought of the judgment or perhaps not being a part of the eternal kingdom restrains a believer from saying, "I am finished with life."

Hold on to your hope. Bad things today are changeable tomorrow, and the Lord said He would go with you even to the end of the world.

How will God judge soldiers who had to kill during

wartime? First of all, there are two distinct Hebrew words translated in the English Bible for *kill*. The word used in the commandment "Thou shall not kill" (Ex. 20:13, KJV) is the Hebrew word *ratsach*, meaning, "to dash in pieces or *commit murder*." It deals with the premeditated slaying of an innocent person.

A man who would rob a home and kill the owner, kill a woman by raping her or a child by abusing him, then take his life, is a murderer. There is a difference between this immoral action and the action required to protect innocent people from a demonically controlled dictator. Had the Allies not entered Europe and fought against the Nazis during World War II, few Jews would have existed in the world today.

War is not the best choice, but at times war becomes necessary for the greater cause of humanity. In war, a soldier understands that when he is confronted with an armed enemy, it will be either his life or the life of his enemy. It is a matter of survival. In the case of a soldier who takes the life of an enemy, it would have been in self-defense and for the freedom of innocent people who were suffering in that nation.

Because America was founded on high spiritual and moral principles, our men and women enter war with certain convictions, mixed with their determination to defeat the enemy. At times these convictions, especially spiritual ones, can clash with the necessity of taking the life of an enemy geared toward the destruction of our troops and the people of their own nation.

Also there is nothing wrong with a man defending himself. Christ told His disciples that if possible, the one who had no sword should sell his garment and purchase one (see Luke 22:36). The only need for a sword would be for personal protection. If you were to come across an armed gang that stopped your car, would you allow them to beat your family and

leave you in the road if you had a way to protect your loved ones? There are times when a person must protect himself, which is both a natural instinct and permitted in Scripture.

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Find the answers to other tough questions about heaven at