Section: Doctrine of the Last Things and Eternity (Eschatology)

Lesson 89: Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Q115. Beyond this life, are there other opportunities to be redeemed from guilt and reconciled to God?

Q116. What happens to people when they physically die?

Teacher: Justin Ader

**TEACHING NOTES**

**Greeting:**

Well good evening! My name is Justin Ader and I have the privilege of serving here amongst this church body as one of the deacons, the youth director, and a member of the teaching team. If we have not personally met, it would be my joy to do so, so please feel free to come up after the lesson and introduce yourself. I am thankful to be here with you all tonight right before we break from Midweek for Holy Week. Tonight, I get the privilege of sharing God’s good word as we look to our next two questions and answers in the Word of Truth Catechism. I pray that these two questions and answers will be a blessing to us all as we seek to know and understand God.

**Introduction:**

This evening we will start the final part of the Word of Truth Catechism, Part 11: Doctrine of the Last Things and Eternity (Eschatology), as we study Q115 and Q116. Before we jump into our questions and answers, I want to spend some time introducing this doctrine. Some of you may have heard the word eschatology before. Maybe it was in different Christian circles amongst friends and family, or maybe it was here at Disciples, or maybe it was at a different church. The word eschatology comes from two Greek words:

 1. ἔσχατος (eschatos) – meaning “last” or “final.” And…

 2. λόγος (logos) – meaning “word,” “study,” or “discourse.”

Together, eschatology literally means “the study of the last things” or “the study of the end.” You may have heard it spoken as “the study of end times.” So what exactly is eschatology? Eschatology has often been debated within Christian theology. It deals with topics like the return of Christ, the final judgment, the resurrection of the dead, and the nature of the eternal state, which have been interpreted differently among different traditions and denominations. These different interpretations have sparked intense debates among Christians over the years. Here at Disciples Church, we hold close to the historic Baptist confession of 1689. The confession teaches us what Particular (or Reformed) Baptists have taught regarding eschatology according to Scripture in chapter 31 and 32 of the confession. I want to take a moment to read these two chapters to us. By the way, you can find the confession in the back of your Word of Truth Catechism along with proof texts from Scripture which back the statements made in the confession. I am going to read these two chapters for us in modern English to help us better understand. This will lay a big foundation for us in our lesson tonight. So let’s dive in.

**Chapter 31. Of the State of Man after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead**

Paragraph 1: The bodies of people who have died return to dust and undergo decay.However, their souls, which neither die nor sleep and have an immortal nature, immediately return to God, who gave souls.The souls of the righteous, which are then made perfect in holiness, are received into heaven, where they are with Christ and behold the face of God in light and glory. There, they wait for the full redemption of their bodies.The souls of the wicked are cast into Hades, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved for the judgment of the great day.The Bible does not teach any other place besides these two places where souls are separated from their bodies.

Paragraph 2: At the last day, saints who are still alive will not sleep, but will be changed.Also, all the dead will be raised up with their own bodies, and not any other body,although these bodies will have different qualities. These bodies will be united again to their souls forever.

Paragraph 3: The bodies of the unjust will be raised to dishonor by the power of Christ. The bodies of the just will be raised to honor by his Spirit and be conformed to Christ's own glorious body.

**Chapter 32. Of the Last Judgment**

Paragraph 1: God has appointed a day when he will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ.Jesus is given all power and judgment by the Father. On this day, not only will the apostate angels be judged,but all people who have ever lived on the earth will appear before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds. They will receive according to what they have done in the body, whether good or evil.

Paragraph 2: The purpose for God appointing this day of judgment is to display the glory of his mercy in the eternal salvation of the elect and to display the glory of his justice in the eternal damnation of the reprobate, who are wicked and disobedient.On this day, the righteous will enter into everlasting life and receive fullness of joy and glory with everlasting rewards in the presence of the Lord. But, the wicked, who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ, will be thrown into everlasting tormentsand punished with everlasting destruction. They will be separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.

Paragraph 3: Christ wants us to be confidently persuaded that there will be a day of judgment, both to deter people from sinand to comfort the godly in their adversity.To accomplish this, he keeps the day secret, to help them be rid of fleshly security and to be constantly watchful, since they do not know at what hour the Lord will come.Thus, they can constantly be prepared to say, "Come Lord Jesus. Come quickly."Amen.

This is all that the confession speaks to regarding the study of last things, eschatology. Notice that we did not see any mention of a certain date where Christ will return as some have tried to predict, notice that we did not see any mention of the nation Israel, notice that we did not see any mention of a false teaching known as purgatory (which I will address later), and notice that what we DID see was the emphasis on the finality of Christ’s judgment and the eternal hope of the saints. The Particular Baptist’s (who published the confession) viewed eschatology through the lens of Scripture’s covenantal and redemptive framework, emphasizing God’s sovereign plan in history. We see a Christ-centered focus, Christ’s second coming, final judgment, and the renewal of creation where believers will dwell with God in glorified bodies in a restored new heavens and new earth. One point I want to stress is that as we go about our days and think about these things, we need to keep our minds focused on Christ and what He has commissioned us to do while here on earth, and that is to make disciples of all nations while loving God first and loving our neighbor. Sometimes people become so wrapped up in eschatology that they spend their days watching the news looking for signs, or they miss out on the blessing of corporate worship in order to spend a Sunday morning talking about the nation of Israel and the wars they are in. These types of things are not how we should worship our good God. So let’s jump in tonight and learn what God has taught us from His word in our first two questions and answers of this doctrine and get a right understanding. Before we do this…

Let’s go to the Lord in prayer. Pray with me.

**Q115. Beyond this life, are there other opportunities to be redeemed from guilt and reconciled to God?**

No. Beyond this one life, there are no additional chances to repent and trust in Jesus alone.

This answer seems pretty cut and dry. There are no second chances to repent and trust in Jesus after we physically die. This understanding of no second chances after this life is a biblical view, but why? Let’s explore this deeper.

Hebrews 9:27 And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.

This short verse teaches us a few things. First, it teaches us that death is certain. Physical death is inevitable for all humans. Second, it teaches that after death, each person will face judgment. This judgment is the evaluation of their life and actions before God, determining their eternity with God or away from God. Third, the phrase “die once” denies any other religion or ideology that states or believes that people can be reincarnated. It supports a biblical view that each person has a single earthly life, followed by judgment. I bring this point up because throughout my life I have heard things when a person dies such as, “I saw a butterfly today and I know it was her that was with us.” There are religions today that teach that we are reincarnated, whether as another person or as animals, etc. Lastly, this verse teaches us that we are to live a life with eternity in view, pointing toward the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation because there are no second chances to repent after we die. The next passage I want to look at doesn’t directly teach us that there is no second chance to repent after death, but it does reinforce the biblical theme that repentance is urgent and must occur before death.

Luke 13:1-5 [This passage in our ESV Bibles is titled “Repent or Perish] 1 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

In this passage, Jesus addresses the themes of repentance and divine judgment in response to two tragic events, the Galileans Pilate killed and the tower in Siloam. Jesus makes it clear. Unless you repent, you will perish. This suggests to us that if we don’t repent while physically here, we will perish and have no second chance to repent when we face judgment. He tells the crowd that they are all condemned already, destined for physical and eternal spiritual death. They must turn from their sin. The urgency of Christ’s command here is meant to drive the hearer to repentance before they perish in sin. Let’s look at the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Turn in your Bibles to:

Luke 16:19-31 19 “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 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.’ 25 But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 26 And besides all this, 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.’ 27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

If we look at what the parable teaches, we see that it confirms our catechism's answer: there was no ability for the rich man to repent while in Hades. In the parable, the rich man, after dying, finds himself in torment in Hades. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus to relieve his suffering, but Abraham tells him that a “great chasm” has been fixed between them, making it impossible for anyone to cross from one side to the other. This strongly implies that one’s eternal fate is sealed at death, with no possibility of repentance or a second chance. The rich man realizes that his situation is irreversible and asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his living brothers so that they might repent before they die. Abraham responds that they have Moses and the Prophets, meaning that they have Scripture, and if they do not listen to Scripture, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead. I believe this emphasizes that repentance must occur during life, through faith in God’s revealed word, not after death. Church, repentance and faith must happen during a person’s lifetime. After death, judgment follows (as we saw in Hebrews 9:27), and there are no second chances.

Now, many of us come from different backgrounds. Some of us may have grown up in the Roman Catholic tradition and learned of a place called purgatory. So I want to take some time to address this false belief so that we weed out these teachings from our minds if they were indeed embedded in us while in the Roman Catholic tradition, and so that we can minister to others in that tradition. So, what is purgatory? Purgatory, in Roman Catholic theology, is understood as a temporary state of purification for souls who have died in a state of grace but still need to be purified before entering heaven. It is not a place of punishment, but rather a process of cleansing, where individuals are made fully prepared to enjoy the presence of God. The concept is based on the idea that while these souls are assured of eventual salvation, they must undergo purification to remove the residual effects of sin. Why is this a false teaching? First, it goes against the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement. The Bible teaches that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was fully sufficient to cover all the sins of believers, past, present, and future.

Hebrews 10:14 14 For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

John 19:30 30 When Jesus had received the sour wine, he said, “It is finished [The Greek word here for it is finished is Tetelestai which means paid in full],” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

These passages tell us that Jesus’ work on the cross was complete and final. The idea of purgatory suggests that further purification is necessary, which contradicts the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement. Second, the Bible teaches that after death, individuals face immediate judgment, and there is no mention of a temporary state of purification as we saw in Hebrews 9:27. Jesus also mentions in Luke 23:43 that the repentant thief on the cross would be with Him in paradise that very day, indicating an immediate transition without the need for purification. Jesus didn’t tell him that he would need some cleansing first, and then enter paradise later. Third, the concept of purgatory is not directly mentioned in the 66 books of the Bible. The Roman Catholic traditions teaching on this place is based on an interpretation of certain passages in extra-biblical books, and a misinterpretation of passages like 1 Corinthians 3:15 which says:

1 Corinthians 3:15 15 If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The context of this passage is that Paul is explaining that each person’s work in ministry will be tested by fire, a metaphor for God’s judgment. If someone’s work is built on the foundation of Christ and is of good quality, it will endure. If it is bad, it will be burned up. This has nothing to do with purification after death. Fourth, the Bible teaches that there are only two eternal destinations after death, heaven or hell.

Matthew 25:46 46 And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

Lastly, the Bible teaches us that salvation is entirely by grace alone through faith alone. No work or purification after death cleanses you from sin, only Jesus’ work on the cross, His blood, cleanses us from sin. What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. He paid for your sin in full at the cross if you belong to Him. Now, let’s turn our attention to our second question and answer tonight to further study what happens to us when we die.

**Q116. What happens to people when they physically die?**

The bodies of those who have died return to dust and decay; however, their souls neither die nor sleep, because they have an immortal character. At death, the souls of the righteous are made perfect in holiness and are received into paradise, where they are with Christ and enjoy God’s glory while they wait for the full redemption of their bodies. The souls of the wicked are sent by God to Hades, where they remain in torment and utter darkness awaiting the final judgment.

This question is one that is often spoken about in a person’s life. I am sure most of us have asked ourselves this question at least once in our lifetime, especially when a loved one passes away. I remember asking myself this question when I was an 8 year old boy looking into the casket of my deceased grandpa who I was very close to. I wondered if he was just dead and that was it, or if he was somewhere else. This question and curiosity about death and life thereafter has led to a lot of differing views throughout human history. What is interesting is that quite a few of them have little snippets of being biblical, while others have no support other than speculation. However, the answer that we have in our Word of Truth Catechism comes from God’s Word, which is our ultimate standard and source for truth. So what I want to do is break down our answer, which is quite long, into smaller sections and work through them so that we get a right understanding of what God’s Word teaches us. Before I do, I’d like to pause for a minute and go to the Lord in prayer again because this topic of death can be hard for some, especially if we just lost someone close to us.

Pray with me.

Our catechism question here is answered post-ascension. What I mean is that it teaches us where people go when they physically die now, and ever since Jesus Christ ascended into Heaven after His resurrection almost 2,000 years ago. So where did people go before Christ’s ascension? Before Christ died, resurrected and ascended, Heaven and Hell were not places of human occupancy. All deceased humans went to what Scripture calls Sheol. And Sheol had two compartments, one for God’s elect and one for the reprobate. The first is called the blessed place in Sheol. This was referenced in an earlier passage as “Abraham’s Side”, historically this has been called Abraham’s Bosom and/or Paradise. The second place meant for the reprobate is a place of suffering called Hades. Abraham’s bosom is now vacant as all who died prior to Christ’s ascension are now with Him in Heaven. It’s also important to note that Paradise can also be used to refer to Heaven and Abraham’s Bosom—the blessed place in Sheol.

Alright, let’s start working through our answer. The first section of our answer says: “The bodies of those who have died return to dust and decay.” The Bible teaches that death is the result of sin. When we physically die, our bodies decay and return to the ground. This is a consequence of the curse God pronounced after Adam’s fall.

Genesis 3:19 19 By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Ecclesiastes 12:7 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

When a person dies, their body goes through several stages of biological and chemical changes. We know that when a person dies, their heart stops beating and they stop breathing. Unfortunately, in my life thus far, I've had to watch my 35 year old sister and my 59 year old step dad pass away when taken off a ventilator. My sister was most recent this past October, and I remember thinking that she had passed when I saw her chest stop rising and the monitor flat lined. But the nurse did not declare her deceased until the respirations on the monitor reached zero. Without oxygen, the cells begin to die. The skin becomes pale as blood flow stops. Within hours after death, the body begins to cool at a rate of 1.5 degrees per hour until it reaches room temperature. After a few hours the body muscles stiffen, known as rigor mortis, and this is due to chemical changes and lasts for 1-2 days. Then the body relaxes and starts to decompose. Cells start to break down and bacteria in the body starts breaking it down. This process just continues and continues over time until the body becomes a skeleton. This is what happens to our bodies when they die. This process of physical death reminds us of the reality of sin and our need for redemption. I want to take a moment now and look quickly at what we do with those who pass away—burial versus cremation. When a person dies, usually they are picked up by funeral home staff to prepare for the funeral and/or burial or cremation. The reason I want to bring this up is because questions of should I be buried or cremated have come up. Maybe you are pondering this question lately or have in the past. What is burial versus cremation? Burial is simply putting the body into the ground or in a tomb. Cremation is a process that reduces a body to bone within hours through intense heat, then the bones are crushed into what we call ashes and are placed in an urn. When we consider burial versus cremation, just like anything else, we need to ask ourselves what the Bible teaches. So let’s ask, does the Bible teach whether or not we should be buried or cremated? Here is the answer: The Bible does not explicitly command burial or forbid cremation. So there is Christian liberty when it comes to this decision. I can tell you this though, throughout church history Christians have generally favored burial over cremation. The reason for this is not because the Bible forbids cremation, but for reasons of preference and/or symbolism. For me personally, I would like to be buried in the ground to symbolize the hope of being raised in glory on the last day and for the reason of returning to dust within creation. That is my preference and liberty, which can differ from others. Again, I do not believe that cremation is sinful or prohibited. Also, God’s power to resurrect is not limited by the condition of the body whether it is buried and a skeleton, it is cremated and ashes, or it is lost at sea. God created out of nothing, He can raise us out of nothing!

Let’s look at the next section of our answer: “However, their souls neither die nor sleep, because they have an immortal character.” We must ask the question, what is the soul? Human beings are created by God as both body and soul. The soul is the immaterial part of a person, which is distinct from the physical body but intimately connected to it.

Herman Bavinck, a Reformed theologian from the late 19th century, said this of the soul: “The soul is the very essence of the human personality. It is not an organ or part of man, but his center, his core…The soul is not subject to death but survives because of its spiritual nature, created in the image of the eternal God.”

Though the body dies and is buried or cremated, the soul is immortal. This means that the soul of a person does not cease to exist, nor does it enter a state of unconscious sleep but continues in a conscious state. Where does the Bible speak of our souls?

Genesis 2:7 KJV 7 And the LORD God formed the man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Psalm 23:3 3 He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Matthew 10:28 28 And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. One more…

Revelation 6:9-10 9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. 10 They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

Let’s now look at the next section which tells us where the Christian soul goes after the body dies: “At death, the souls of the righteous are made perfect in holiness and are received into paradise, where they are with Christ and enjoy God’s glory while they wait for the full redemption of their bodies.”

The souls of believers are made perfect in holiness and immediately enter into the presence of Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:8 8 Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

John Calvin said of this passage: “To be absent from the body is not to be lost, but to be with Christ, and this is the end for which we were created. We live to see Him, and death is but the passage to that sight.”

Luke 23:43 43 And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.” Jesus said this while hanging from the cross and speaking to a thief hanging next to him on a cross who had shown repentance. The man and Jesus were about to die and Jesus tells him that they will be together in paradise that very day, even while their bodies lay in tombs.

Philippians 1:23 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. Here Paul tells us that he wants to depart from this life in his body and join Christ in paradise. How can he join Jesus if he is dead? Because even though the body dies, the soul lives. Paul says it is far better to be absent from the body and to be with Christ. Where Christ dwells is a place of joy and communion with Him as believers await the resurrection of their bodies. We will learn about this resurrection of our bodies in the coming weeks.

Let's now look at what happens to the souls of those who do not profess Christ and who are not saved: “The souls of the wicked are sent by God to Hades, where they remain in torment and utter darkness awaiting the final judgment.” Those who reject God are sent to Hades, a place of torment and utter darkness, as they await final judgment. We have already talked about what and where Hades is, but you may be wondering what the difference is between Hades and Hell. We will learn more about this in later lessons, but I will quickly mention this: Hades is an intermediate state or temporary place where the souls of the unrighteous go after death, awaiting final judgment. Hell is the final, eternal state of punishment for the wicked after the final judgment. Right now, those who physically die while dead in sin, their souls are sent to Hades awaiting the final judgment. When the final judgement comes, their souls will be united forever with their bodies, and upon their final judgment, they will be thrown into hell and punished by God’s wrath forever because of their guilt.

This leads us into a time of application as Christians. First, we need to see an urgency for the gospel to be shared with those around us who reject God. The reality of Hades and final judgment for the wicked should motivate us as believers to share the gospel with urgency to our families, friends, and co-workers. The next millisecond of our lives is not promised as God could withdraw His sustaining of us at any time. I know for some people sharing the gospel can be intimidating. Maybe it is because we are afraid of public speaking, maybe it is because we feel like we have to be theologians to share the gospel, or maybe it is because we are afraid of rejection. But let me encourage us with God’s powerful words:

2 Timothy 1:7 for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

Matthew 28:20 [Jesus says]…I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Next point of application for us Christians is having hope in death for believers. Death is not the end but an instant transition to being with Christ. Because of this, we should not fear death, but embrace it and face it with confidence. Remember what Paul said in Philippians 1:23 …to depart and be with Christ … is far better.

Lastly, as a point of application for us, we should live our lives in view of eternity. We should look onward and upward to Christ as we pursue our days on this earth. We need to prioritize eternal treasures over temporary treasures.

Matthew 6:19-21 19 “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, 20 but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

The Bible teaches us that death is not the end of our existence brothers and sisters, but the beginning of eternity. For the righteous who profess Christ and who are truly saved, this means an entrance into paradise with Jesus our Lord and Savior. For the unrighteous who reject Christ, this means an entrance into a state of torment as they await final judgment. So let me close with this question: Are you living with eternity in view, knowing that your soul is immortal and will one day stand before God?

Brothers and sisters, go forth today and beyond walking with the King and being a blessing to others by sharing the gospel with urgency, and a blessing to yourself by living in light of eternity.

Let’s Pray.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. (2 Cor. 13:14). You are dismissed to groups.