

St. Mark Seeker's Study Guide

The Four Last Things – Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell



The Four Last Things, death, judgment, heaven and hell, are realities of human life. Although our end in this world is not the most attractive topic of conversation, Christians should understand that death is a passage to new life. The Communion of the Saints is the unity of baptized Christians with all who have gone before us in the oneness of God. As Christians, we don't just prepare for death, but we live that new life today in the sanctifying grace of our God. As we consider the Four Last things, we should do so in the context of faith.

Death *The Christian Life and Death:* The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. Assisted suicide or euthanasia are not a morally responsible use of life. The dying should be accompanied and supported. No one ought to feel that they are a burden to others. Part of the challenge of the spiritual life is to both learn to love and to

be loved.

Prayer for the Dying: The dying will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the Sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God" (CCC, no. 2299).

Death: The final article of the Creed proclaims our belief in everlasting life. At the Catholic Rite of Commendation of the Dying, sometimes prayed at the Anointing of the Sick, we sometimes hear this prayer: "Go forth, Christian soul, from this world.... May you live in peace this day, may your home be with God in Zion, may you see your redeemer face to face" (Prayer of Commendation of the Dying, no. 220). *Death, the Funeral and the Resurrection of our body*

Funeral and Burial: We do not like to think about death. There is much in our culture that distracts us from reflection about our final destiny. "The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and in the hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy [cf. Tb 1:16-18]; The rituals accompanying respect for the dead include the funeral vigil (wake), the funeral itself, and the burial of the body or the cremated remains of the deceased at the cemetery. Participation in these rites enables friends and others to demonstrate reverence for the deceased, to pray together for the eternal repose of the deceased, and to give the family of the deceased prayerful support. It is preferable that the

body be buried in a Catholic cemetery or columbarium (repository for cremated remains) consecrated for this purpose.

Judgment: Individual and General:



Individual Judgment: Immediately after death, each person comes before God and is judged individually (the particular judgment) and enters heaven, purgatory, or hell. Yet at the end of time, a final judgment will occur when all are assembled before God and their relationship to God is made public, which is the general judgment.

Last or General Judgment: The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. (CCC, no. 1040) Yet at the end of time when Christ returns in glory, a final judgment will occur when all are raised from the dead and assembled before God; then their

relationship to him is made public (the general judgment). (Mt 25:31-32).

Purgatory: “The Church gives the name Purgatory to [the] final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (CCC, no. 1031). Those who die in the state of friendship with God but who are not fully purified and perfected are assured of their eternal salvation. However, they must undergo a purification to obtain the perfection of love and holiness needed to enter heaven, where they have a heart that is totally open to him.

Heaven: Perfect love will make possible entrance into heaven, imperfect love will require purification, and a total lack of love will mean eternal separation from God. “Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC, no. 1024). This will be brought about by a perfect communion with the Holy Trinity, the Blessed Mother, the angels and saints. Jesus Christ opened heaven to us by his death and Resurrection. What is heaven like? Scripture uses a variety of pictures to help us understand heaven, such as a wedding party, a banquet, the Father’s house, a state of unending happiness. But the real heaven is beyond any picture we can paint of it. “What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Cor 2:9). Seeing God face to face in all his glory is the essential aspect of heaven. This is called the beatific vision. To make this possible God must reveal himself and give us the capacity to behold him.

Hell: Following the example of Christ, the Church warns the faithful of the sad reality of eternal death, also called hell, which is brought about by a person's free and permanent rejection of God and his love. "The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God" (CCC, no. 1035). It is impossible for us to be united with God if we refuse to love him. When we sin seriously against God, neighbor, or self, we have failed to love God. Persistence in a state of serious sin reflects a choice to reject God's love and an intention to separate ourselves from him. Freely chosen eternal separation from communion with God is called hell. (CCC, no. 1037). While images of fire have been used traditionally to picture hell, for example in the Scriptures, the reality exceeds our ability to describe the pain of isolation that comes from rejecting God's love. Scripture and the teaching of the Church regarding heaven and hell emphasize a call to personal responsibility by which we use our freedom, aided by divine grace, to respond completely to God's love. There is always an urgent call to conversion and repentance. "God predestines no one to go to hell"

FOR DISCUSSION

1. What experiences have you had that bring you to think about death?
2. How do the Church's teachings about eternal life help shape your thinking about death?
3. When you read the New Testament teachings about the Last Judgment, such as in the parable of the sheep and goats (Mt 25:31-46), what impact does this have on you?
4. What does the Church teach about Purgatory? What does purgatory share with purification in this life?
5. Why do we pray for the dead?
6. Why is the resurrection of our bodies important? Is there a sacramental meaning to our body?
7. What experiences of life after death have you had or heard from people you trust?
8. What is the beatific vision, if you remember? What do you think it would be like to see God as he is?
10. What does the Last Judgment call people to do with their life now?