

# What happens to the dead?

What happens when we die? As we approach November, the month dedicated to prayer for the faithful departed, what happens to the departed faithful?

Studying the New Testament reveals an “evolution” of thought among the early writers. St. Paul in his early letters indicates the first Christian understanding of death. The first Christians thought Christ would return to earth very soon – perhaps in a year, a few years at most. As the first generation of believers were dying, disillusionment and disappointment set in. “Where is God?” “What happens to the dead?”

Haven’t a few of us asked similar questions? We can hold our catechisms and our Bibles, we can hold our beliefs, but they can be overwhelmed by our emotions when a baby, spouse, parent or loved one dies.

C.S. Lewis, the famous Catholic apologist, a defender of the doctrines of the church, married in his 60s. He wrote: “What God had denied me in my 20s he granted to me in my 60s”. Then, a few years into the marriage, she died of cancer. He wrote that his faith crumbled like a house of cards! After grieving, he would regain his faith. But he reveals the power that grief has over all of us.

To comfort the early Christians, St. Paul taught that those who died would have to lie in their graves until Christ would come again on the clouds of heaven. Luke, the author of the third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, further develops the idea. When St. Stephen is martyred, he is not just the first martyr, but also the first Christian to die. Stephen, while being stoned to death, sees “heaven opened” and commends his spirit into God’s hands.

For Luke, then, there is no waiting in the grave until Christ comes again. Instead, the Christian’s spirit goes directly to God.

From these two beliefs, the church developed what we call the “particular judgment” – the individual Christian meeting God at the moment of death – and the “general judgment,” when all the world will be raised from dead when Christ comes again – the General Judgment.

John, near the end of the 1st century, shows a further evolution in Christian thought. John teaches that what we await at the second coming, has already happened. John has Jesus say in his Gospel: "I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them, and you in me ... "

As Father Roger Karban, the fine scripture commentator, wrote: "Oneness with God is already here. We don't have to wait until we die to experience it." Theologians use a big term "realized eschatology." It means simply that what we thought we had to wait until death to experience, what we thought we had to wait until the end of time to experience, we experience right now!

Most of us still carry a grade school understanding of God. God is up there. We are down here. If we do good, we go up there. If we do bad, we go down there. While correct in a limited sense, that understanding keeps us from experiencing the fullness of joy in God's presence right now. St. Paul would later write: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." John would have Jesus say: "The Father and I will come and make our home in you." Beneath our limited thinking, the kingdom of God lives within us. Think of the minute-by-minute joy and peace and love we would live in, if we really believed that!

So what happens when we die? We become fully aware of who we are. What do our prayers do? Our prayers assist each other in the journey of life, and assist each other in the final journey through the darkness of death to new light and life.

In life, God disappears inside us. In death, we disappear inside God. Or, to put it in more familiar language, in receiving communion, the Body of Christ disappears inside us. In death we disappear inside the Body of Christ.