



What happens to those who die without Christ?

QUESTION: After 40 years as Jehovah's Witnesses, my wife and I are like new kids on the block. Belief in eternal hell was never accepted by the JW's and I certainly cannot accept it today. I would like to know what happens to all those who die and do not accept Christ?

RESPONSE: Among Christians, there is a range of views because the Bible does not give us a uniform answer. There are various images and symbols of the afterlife and human destiny that are difficult to harmonize. Jewish and Christian theologians have debated the question and responded with a host of theological opinions.

Fundamentalist Christianity has historically been dogmatic that its answers were the one and only correct position. But *the reality is that the afterlife is a mystery and we can only be sure of a few major points.*

First, the Bible acknowledges an afterlife, a resurrection, a final judgment and eternal life. Beyond that, scholars fall into three categories:

- **Option A: Infernalism** – Some believe those who die who have not accepted Christ will burn in hell for all eternity. Of these, some think it will be literal flames and others more of a spiritual experience. But these “infernalists” are convinced that it is eternal conscious torment (ECT) with no hope of a “second chance.” This has been the dominant view for a long time but all of us at PTM regard it as morally repulsive because ECT would require us to paint God as a monster unworthy of worship.

- **Option B: Conditionalism** – Others believe that those who die without responding to Christ simply perish into non-being. Another version of conditionalism says they will be resurrected, judged, thrown in the Lake of Fire and there be completely consumed. So in this case, they are destroyed or annihilated permanently, but at least they wouldn't continue on in an endless existence of unquenchable torture. These

positions are currently labeled 'conditionalism' because the condition for eternal life is a response to Christ in this life. It's also called 'annihilationism' because that is what is believed will happen to those who die prior to a faith response.

- **Option C: Ultimate Redemption** – A third group believes that those who die outside of faith will face the judgment seat of Christ and find that our Judge is infinitely merciful. Yes, they may even pass through a cleansing judgment (Malachi 3:1-4) but will ultimately be able to respond when they see Christ and for the first time, understand the gospel. So in this case, there is a judgment followed by mercy – restorative rather than retributive – and while a willing faith response to God's love is required, death no longer separates us from Christ's saving grace because he has conquered death. Yes, there will be tears at lives wasted but in the end, Christ will wipe away those tears in grace so that every knee will bow and tongue confess his Lordship.

When I review these options, I can find a significant array of Scriptures to support any of the three. But if we're going to cherry-pick Scripture, we ought to pick the best cherries that align most closely to the infinite love of God revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Over the years, this has led me personally from *option a* (terrible news) through *option b* (okay news) to a conviction that *option c* (wonderful news) resonates most clearly with the beautiful gospel I've come to see in Christ.

Yes, there are still those scary judgment passages, but they are penultimate (second last) while the passages that include everyone seem to be ultimate (the last word). Today, I lean hard on Jesus' words, “And if I am lifted up [speaking of the Cross], I will draw ALL people to myself.” What if he's right? What if it's true?

And if so, why share this good news? Because eternal life can start now ... and that life is knowing Jesus and the joy of life with him. □