



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 20 Number 4
January 22, 2025

The Common Denominator - Part 1

By Tal Davis

What do the following famous TV and movie stars all have in common?

John Wayne; Steve McQueen; Marilyn Monroe; Bob Newhart; Johnny Carson; Lucille Ball; Mary Tyler Moore; Don Knotts; Doris Day; Paul Walker; Carrie Fisher; Suzanne Somers; Roy Scheider; Heath Ledger; Elvis Presley; Peter Boyle; Brittany Murphy; Leonard Nimoy; Burt Reynolds; Penny Marshall; Doris Roberts; Nichelle Nichols; Kelly Preston; Sean Connery; Luke Perry; Bob Saget; Betty White; Peter Scolari; Angela Lansbury; William Hurt; Anne Heche; Kirstie Alley; and Ronald Reagan.

So what did you think? They are all from the same state? No. They were all born in the same month? No. They are all Republicans? No. They were all born in America? No. They are all members of the same religion? No. If you haven't figured it out yet, it is actually pretty obvious. Think about it. The common denominator of all the above celebrities is that they are all dead. That's right, every one of those famous people who you probably still see quite often on TV and in old movies are no longer alive. You probably were not even aware some of them had died.

But this illustrates one inevitable fact, death is the common denominator for all human beings! Every one of us is on a clear path to die. The question is not "if?", but "when?" and "how?" It is a fact each person should contemplate carefully. Most people, especially while they are young, unless they are in a war or other life threatening situation, probably choose simply not to think about it. In this two part series we will review how people contemplate death, and then examine what the Bible teaches about the issue.

First let's review how other worldviews approach the question of death.

The Naturalist worldview, of course, just says that death is the cessation of all organic biological functions. The body ceases to sustain physical life, all organs shut down, and that is all there is to it. Death is the end of all human existence. When the brain dies, then all consciousness ceases and what we call the mind is extinguished. No conscious life after death exists since life is totally limited to the material dimension.

The Animistic worldview sees death as a transition from this material existence to a vague more spiritual one in which the spirits of the dead may interact with other spirit beings and people still living.

The Far Eastern Thought worldview sees death as a transition to another form of life in a cycle of deaths and rebirths (reincarnation). The kind of reincarnation one may receive depends on the quality of karma one has accumulated during his or her various lifetimes. If one has accumulated positive karma then he or she may be reincarnated to a higher level of life or caste. Negative karma may result in a demotion so to speak. The ultimate goal is eventually to achieve oneness with the impersonal life-force that encompasses all of the universe and to cease the reincarnation cycle.

The Theistic worldview basically affirms that one God exists, and that a person's ultimate goal in life is to continue conscious life in one form or another after death. What that post-mortem life will be and how one attains it varies according to the theistic religious system's doctrinal perspective as given in its revealed scriptures. For example, Islam teaches that

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Allah (God) may allow a Muslim to enter Paradise after death if they have been faithful to the practices of that faith. So, good Muslims, if Allah wills (and that's not guaranteed), will have a happy afterlife. The only way to be sure is to die as a martyr in jihad (holy war). All unfaithful Muslims and non-Muslims will spend eternity in a fiery hell.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormons) believe that at death baptized Mormons go to a place called the Spirit World to await the resurrection at the end of the world. Non-Mormons go to a place called Spirit Prison where deceased LDS missionaries will preach to them the Mormon gospel so they can become members of the LDS church after death. That is, only if a good living Mormon goes to the temple to be baptized on their behalf. After the resurrection of all people will be the judgment. Good moral Mormons who have done all their prescribed temple works and have a good family, can attain the highest level of glory in the Celestial Kingdom. There they will live with their Heavenly Father God, and may even become gods themselves. Other less faithful Mormons and righteous non-Mormons will go to a lower level of glory called the Terrestrial Kingdom. All wicked people will go to the lowest level called the Telestial Kingdom.

How Does the Bible deal with Death?

Of course neither of those scenarios corresponds to what the Bible teaches. They are the products of the minds of two false prophets: Muhammad and Joseph Smith, Jr. What, then, does the Bible actually say about what happens when we die? Unfortunately there is a lot of misunderstanding, even among Christians. Let's look at some basic teachings from Scripture about what happens at death.

The Bible clearly teaches that people live on after this life. This

belief is not based on speculation, mysticism, philosophy, or some so-called prophet's word. Rather, it is grounded in history. The basis for the Christian view of death is the historic bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. This involves several lines of virtually indisputable evidence. (1) Jesus Christ was crucified, was dead, and was buried. (2) His tomb was found empty on the first day of the week when examined by both friends and enemies. (3) More than 500 people were convinced they saw the risen Jesus after His resurrection. (4) The New Testament church was absolutely convinced the resurrection was true, and no other reason can explain why it grew so rapidly in and around Jerusalem in just a few years (see: Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20-21; Acts 1; 1 Corinthians 15).

Therefore, historical evidence supports the Christian belief in life after death. But what will it be like for us? And will everyone experience it the same? The Bible provides the information we need to know what to expect.

According to the Bible, after death, all people will exist consciously in a disembodied interim state waiting for a bodily resurrection. When a person's body dies, his or her immortal spirit continues to live on. Believers are taken spiritually into the presence of Jesus where they will stay to await the final resurrection at the end of time. This interim state has several joyous qualities for the Christian.

First, it will be in the presence of God. (see: Ecclesiastes 12:7; Luke 16:22; 23:43; 2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:23; and 1 Thessalonians 4:14).

Then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:7 NASB)

Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's arms; and the rich man also died and was buried. (Luke 16:22 NASB)

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And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43 NASB)

But we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2 Corinthians 5:8 NASB)

Second, it will be in a heaven like place called Paradise (see Luke 23:43; 2 Corinthians 12:2-4; Revelation 2:7).

And He said to him, "Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43 NASB)

I know a man in Christ, who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven. And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak. (2 Corinthians 12:2-4 NASB)

Third, the believer will be completely awake, will be fully conscious, and communicative (see Matthew 22:31-32; Luke 16:22-23; John 11:26; and Philippians 1:23).

Finally, it will be a state of blessed rest (see Revelation 14:13).

Thus, it will be a blessed, but incomplete, state of existence for the believer.

Unbelievers, likewise, will be in a conscious state at death. However,

this interim state is not pleasant for the unbeliever. As with the believer, the unbeliever will be fully awake, conscious, and communicative (see Luke 16:23-26). However, It will be a place of separation from God (see Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 16:23-26). Also, it will a place of torment for the lost, but not their final state of existence (see Luke 16:23-26; 2 Peter 2:9). That will be determined at the final judgment.

In both cases, for the believer and the unbeliever, these interim states are temporary. Life after death has its fulfillment in a bodily resurrection and final judgment where all people will be consigned either to eternal life in heaven or eternal separation from God in hell. The difference will be determined not by how good or bad one has been. We are all sinners and can never be good enough. Rather, it is a matter of whether we put our faith in the saving work of Jesus who died on

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the cross as an substitutionary atonement for our sins and rose again in victory over death. That is the deciding issue.

Yes, everyone must die. It is indeed the common denominator. Of that there is no question. But what happens when we do?

In this Part 1 of this two part series, we have examined what the Bible says believers and unbelievers can expect at the moment of their deaths. In Part 2 we look at the longer range of what the Bible says will be the ultimate eternal fates of both the saved and unsaved as they face the final judgment.