

Journey of Faith



In Short:



- Heaven and hell are our only possible eternal destinies.
- Purgatory is a purification in preparation for heaven.
- Each of us will undergo both a personal judgment and the Final Judgment.

Life, Death, and Particular Judgment

Joe began his journey of faith at baptism. During his life, Joe had opportunities to respond to God's offer of mercy and receive the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. At times, he gave in to the temptation of sin, but Joe tried to follow Christ faithfully. Joe said yes to God's offer of love and redemption. When Joe dies, he immediately faces God's judgment. This is called the "particular judgment" because it's given to each individual.

Through his particular judgment upon his death, Joe will either:

1. be granted immediate entrance into heaven;
2. be purified in purgatory before entering heaven;
3. be condemned to hell.

Eschatology: The "Last Things"

Considering our own mortality and what happens after death can be unnerving, scary, and confusing. We only have slivers of understanding about what happens next. But as Christians, we find comfort and hope in our belief that Jesus has conquered death, granted us eternal life, and promised to come again in final triumph over evil. Church teaching on these "last things" is called eschatology.

Eschatology deals with what comes:

- at the end of a person's life.
- at the end of human history and creation.
- at the Second Coming of Christ.

Let's explore the life and afterlife of "Joe" all the way to the Second Coming. Joe's experiences will help us better understand the general eschatology of all humanity and creation.

"For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be."

Luke 12:34

What if Joe Hadn't Heard the Gospel or Been Baptized?

God desires the salvation of everyone and provides for the salvation of the whole world through Christ's death and resurrection (the paschal mystery). When those who are ignorant of Christ respond to God's will, they're responding to Christ. God gives every person the opportunity to say yes to his mercy and salvation.

"The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers...of the Paschal mystery. Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved." CCC 1260

Jesus revealed God's great love for us. It's how well Joe loved that will determine what happens at the end of his life. Did Joe repent, accept the love of God, and respond by loving God and others? Or did he refuse to do so?

"God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a willing turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end."

CCC 1037

Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory?

"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."

United States Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 153

Heaven

If Joe dies "in God's grace and friendship...perfectly purified," his soul will go straight to heaven (CCC 1023). **Heaven** is a place of joy in communion with the Trinity, Mary, the angels, and all the blessed; "the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness" (CCC 1024).

Scripture uses many images to describe heaven—a heavenly city (Revelation 21:10), an eternal dwelling (2 Corinthians 5:1), a glorious wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1–14)—pointing toward supreme happiness that's beyond human understanding.

Purgatory

If Joe responds to God's mercy but isn't free from all attachments to sin, he can be "assured of...eternal salvation" but must go through "purification" after death to "achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (CCC 1030). This final purification is **purgatory**, which involves a "purifying fire" but is "entirely different from the punishment of the damned" (CCC 1031). How long this takes likely depends on how much purification Joe needs to be ready to meet God face to face in heaven.

Scripture encourages us to pray for the dead (see 2 Maccabees 12:44). The living members of the Church on earth, the saints in heaven, and the souls in purgatory are united as one Mystical Body in Christ, the communion of saints, and help one another through mutual prayer (CCC 954–959).

Praying for the Dead

Praying for our loved ones who have died can bring us comfort. Try praying this prayer for someone you love who has died:

Eternal rest grant unto [name] O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon [him/her]. And may the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

• What do you imagine heaven will be like?



Hell

If Joe has rejected God's love and mercy, he will end up in **hell**, which is "eternal separation from God" (CCC 1035). This is possible because God loves everyone, but he gives us **free will**, the freedom to receive or reject his love. Each individual has the choice of their ultimate destiny. Finally and definitively choosing to reject God leads to eternal separation from God in hell.

The Second Coming of Christ

In the Nicene Creed, Catholics confess that Christ "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." Having defeated evil by his death and resurrection and having ascended to heaven, Christ rules in glory as king. His kingdom is already present on earth as a seed; however, the Church on earth and all

of creation anticipate the perfection of Christ's kingdom upon his return, when sin and death will be no more.

With a partner or as a group, look up ways that Jesus describes God's kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew. Share what you find.

The kingdom of God is like...

Matthew 13:24–30 Matthew 13:31–32

Matthew 13:33 Matthew 13:44

Matthew 13:45–46 Matthew 13:47–50

- Based on these parables, what do you think the kingdom of God will be like?



What Is the Rapture?

Some Christians expect the **Second Coming** to occur in two phases:

1. a rapture (or catching up) of all Christians to heaven, followed by
2. a time of tribulation on earth until Christ finally comes again.

This is not the teaching of the Catholic Church. Scripture teaches that the living will meet the Lord "in the clouds" as he descends to earth. This catching up of the faithful and Christ's Second Coming are not two distinct events but one (see 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17). Some Christians also expect an earthly thousand-year reign of Christ after his Second Coming. This is based on a literal interpretation of Revelation 20, which the Catholic Church rejects.

The Resurrection of the Body

In the Nicene Creed, we profess that we "look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." When Christ comes again, he will raise the dead. Joe's soul will be reunited to his body, which will be miraculously transformed by God's infinite power.

Christians believe that the power of death over humanity has been conquered by Jesus' resurrection. Consequently, the human person (body and soul) will be restored for eternal life. We will live forever with God in some beautiful form that will never age, decay, or suffer. Christ's transfiguration and post-resurrection appearances, as well as his presence in the Eucharist, give us a glimpse of this. Mary's assumption, body and soul, into heaven upon her death serves as a promise of our future.

"Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. And he was transfigured before them; his face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light."

Matthew 17:1–2

- How do you envision your resurrected body? How does this change how you feel about your current body?



The Final Judgment

After the resurrection of the dead, "In the presence of Christ...the truth of man's relationship with God will be laid bare" (CCC 1039). Joe's particular judgment determines his eternal destiny and won't change. In the Final Judgment, all our actions and their consequences will be known, and their ultimate meaning within the context of God's saving work throughout the ages will be revealed to all. Christ will pronounce judgment on every evil act and reward every good deed with the honor it deserves (see John 5:21–29).

The Kingdom of God

If Joe chose God with his life, he'll enjoy eternal life in the kingdom of God. Humanity, the entire universe, and all creation will be redeemed—transformed in some marvelous manner to share in eternal life.

Waiting for this end shouldn't remove our motivation to improve this present world. On the contrary, faith and hope motivates us to serve others and work for the world's renewal here and now as a sign and beginning of its perfection through Christ (CCC 1049, 2820).



What are three things you can do now to prepare yourself for your particular judgment and the Final Judgment?

Journey of Faith for Adults: Inquiry, Q16 (826252)

Imprimi Potest: Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSsR, Provincial, Denver Province, the Redemptorists.

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Printed in the United States of America.
20 19 18 17 16 / 5 4 3 2 1. Third Edition.