

Journey of Faith



In Short:

- The difference between heaven and hell
- What it means to be in purgatory
- How particular judgment and Final Judgment differ



Let's follow the story of "Joe" and explore his life and afterlife all the way to the Second Coming of Christ. Then we'll look at how Joe's experiences help us better understand the general eschatology of all humanity and creation.

Death and Particular Judgment

Before we can really follow Joe's experience through the "last things," we should know a little about him. Joe was baptized Catholic and thus began his journey of faith. People who knew Joe knew he was Catholic, but he wasn't world-renowned as a saint or a great theologian. In fact, if you ran into Joe on the street you'd think he was pretty average, if you noticed him at all. Joe struggled to faithfully follow Christ to his dying day. Sometimes he stumbled, sometimes he succeeded. But Joe always trusted in Jesus, he celebrated the sacraments, and he did small acts of service in his family and out in the world whenever he could. By earthly means, Joe didn't live a remarkable life, but by trying to live a Christian life and trusting in his faith, Joe was saying "yes" to God every day.

Eschatology: the "Last Things"

- *Do you ever worry about your future?*
- *What happens after we die?*



Jesus tells his disciples not to worry about their lives or the future (Matthew 6:25–34; Luke 12:22–34) and most Christian martyrs have demonstrated their faith in these words. Our faith in Christ's death and rising assures us of what comes after our death and at the end of the world. We believe Jesus has conquered death, has granted us eternal life, and has promised to come again in a final triumph over all the powers of evil.

Eschatology is the part of theology concerned with death, judgment, and the final destiny of the soul of humankind.

Eschatology deals with what comes:

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

What about those who didn't have the chance to hear the gospel or be baptized? The Catholic Church teaches us that God desires the salvation of everyone and has provided for the salvation of the whole world through the death and resurrection of Jesus:

"The Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partakers, in a way known to God, 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).

This life, and its opportunity to receive salvation, eventually comes to an end. "Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ" (CCC 1021). When Joe dies, he immediately faces divine judgment. "Just as it is appointed that human beings die once, and after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). This is called the "particular judgment" because it is given to each individual person.

There are three possible outcomes of Joe's judgment:

1. He could be granted immediate entrance into the joy of heaven.
2. He could enter heaven after going through a final purification in purgatory.
3. He could be condemned to hell.

The basis of Joe's judgment is love. Did Joe repent and accept the love of God and respond by loving God and others? Did he accept God's mercy and grace, or did he refuse it?

- How would you explain the particular judgment to someone else?
- What does the Catholic Church teach about God and salvation?



Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory?

Heaven

Heaven: "the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness" (CCC 1024).

If Joe dies "in God's grace and friendship...perfectly purified," his soul goes straight to heaven (CCC 1023). Heaven is a place of joy because we see the beauty of God. In heaven, we experience the fullness of communion with the Holy Trinity, Mary, the saints, our departed loved ones, and all the citizens of heaven. Scripture and tradition use all kinds of images to describe it—a heavenly city, a glorious wedding banquet, a beautiful paradise—but these images can only point toward that supreme happiness which is beyond human understanding.

- What do you imagine heaven will be like?



Hell

If Joe had rejected God's mercy and died in mortal sin without repenting, he would separate himself from God eternally and end up in **hell**. How, and why, is this even possible? God loves everyone, but he also gives us the freedom to receive or reject his love. This means each individual has the ultimate choice. Finally and definitively choosing to reject God leads to eternal separation from God: hell. "God predestines no one to go to hell; for this a willing turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary" (CCC 1037).

Purgatory

What if Joe has responded to God's mercy but at death was not completely free from all attachments to sin? What if Joe was still imperfect when he died? 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 called **purgatory**. From the day of our baptism forward, God is working in our lives to "purge" us from sin. If that process is not complete by the time of our death, God completes it after we die.

Scripture encourages us to pray for the dead, and this includes the souls in purgatory (2 Maccabees 12:44). We believe that 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, and we help one another through mutual prayer (CCC 954–959).

Praying for the Dead

There is a great comfort in praying for our loved ones who have died. Try praying this prayer for someone you know and 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.*

The Second Coming of Christ

In the Nicene Creed, Catholics confess that Christ “will come again in glory.” Having defeated evil by his death and resurrection and having ascended to heaven, Christ already rules in glory as king. His reign is budding forth, and “God’s plan has entered into its fulfillment” (CCC 670). However, the Church on earth, and creation itself, awaits its full redemption. We still anticipate the complete perfection of Christ’s kingdom when he returns, and sin and death will be no more.

What Is the Rapture?

Some Christians expect the Second Coming to come 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

When Christ comes again, he will raise the dead. Joe’s soul will be reunited to his body, which will be miraculously raised and transformed by God’s infinite power. Many religions and philosophies believe that some spiritual part of the human being will survive after death. The Christian faith goes further and proclaims that the power of death over humanity has been conquered by the resurrection of Jesus. Consequently, the whole 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. This belief is beyond human understanding, but Christ’s transfiguration and post-resurrection appearances, as well as his presence in the Eucharist, give us a glimpse.

- How do you envision your resurrected body? Does this knowledge change the way you feel about your current body?



The Final Judgment

The Final Judgment comes after the resurrection of the dead. “In the presence of Christ, who is Truth itself, the truth of man’s relationship with God will be laid bare” (CCC 1039). Joe’s particular judgment determined his eternal destiny and will not change. But 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 humankind. Christ will pronounce judgment on every evil act and reward every good deed with the honor it deserves (see John 5:21–29).

- When you think about the Final Judgment, does it motivate you to change anything about the way you live your life now?



The End

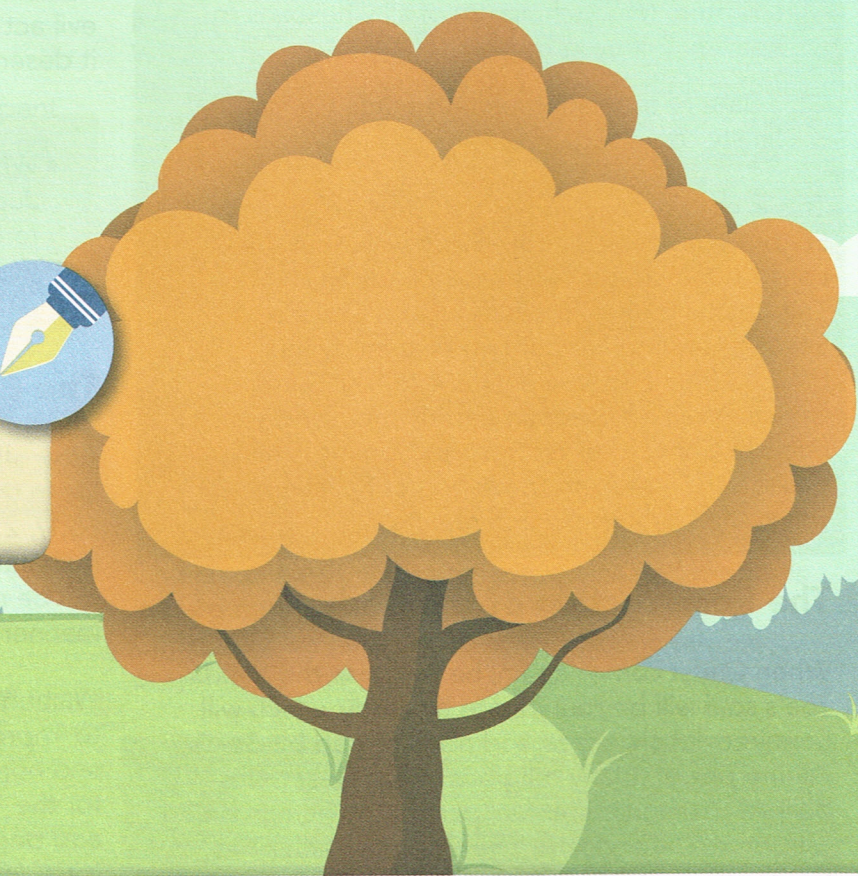
After all this, at the very end, Joe will enjoy eternal life in the new heaven and a new earth (see Isaiah 65:17, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1). Not only humanity but also the entire universe and all creation will be redeemed—transformed in some marvelous manner to share in eternal life.

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).

With a partner or as a group, try to find references to God’s kingdom in the Bible.

Share what you find. Based on these examples, what do you think the kingdom of God will look like?

Think of three things you can do to prepare yourself and others for death, judgment, and the coming of Christ.



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